

Marital Infidelity: Risk Factors

Family of Origin

- Parents divorced or history of infidelity in the family system
- What time of life (internal age) do you revert to when dealing with stress or seeking affirmation and acceptance?
- Projection of losses/needs from family of origin (still felt as personal/marital deficits) onto the spouse (unmet needs) and the extra-marital partner (hope to find what one needs)

Triggers: Times of Stress and Loss

- Pregnancy/birth of a child
- Illness/Death of a parent or other family member
- Losing oneself in the needs of caring for multiple children
- Transition/dislocation due to moving for professional reasons (loss of former family/friendship network; often relocating to a larger city and a larger, more anonymous church setting)
- Pursuing a graduate professional degree associated with a high-income profession

Catalyst: Intimacy Emerges in a Task-Based Relationship

- Work/volunteer involvement increases time of contact with sympathetic person with similar values
- One discloses to the other hurts/losses and eventually struggles in the marriage/dissatisfaction with home life
- Relationship initially appears platonic and in some way meets unmet needs of both persons
- More unstructured time spent in personal conversation in settings unrelated to work/volunteer service
- Increasing desire to be with the other person, need the attention/understanding/comfort the other provides
- Comparisons made of other (positive) with one's spouse (negative)
- Fantasize about being with the other person (inserting yourself into their life/marriage with a view to finding/creating fulfillment)
- Internet/electronic media used for private communication
- Shares feeling of attraction with other person (leading to mutual acknowledgement of attraction, which becomes a contract for a new sexualized relationship)
- Did not consciously intend to develop a sexual relationship with the other person, so
 - feelings of ambivalence and guilt accompany the increasing time spent together/more intimate involvement.
 - recognition that the relationship rests on some kind of compulsivity/clinging to each other in unhealthy ways/sexual relationship as an artificial closeness
 - This periodic realization ends up destabilizing both the marriage and the competing relationship.

What Is Necessary to Rebuild the Relationship?

It's helpful to work with a counselor on

- ways of disclosing the affair to one's spouse
- scripting apologies
 - "I was wrong when I..."
 - "I know you must have felt..."
 - "After listening to you, I can see through your eyes the pain I've caused"
 - "I'm sorry...Will you forgive me?"
- processing the raw, violent emotions unleashed in the spouse, using emotionally-focused therapy
 - the counselor is not to be the arbiter of blame or take sides (helping one or both spouses to punish the other as each strives to gain the upper hand)
- rebuilding verbal/emotional communication (perhaps for the first time in the marriage)
 - recognizing and addressing patterns of
 - withdrawal/sulking/being the heroic martyr
 - criticizing/expressing disappointment with spouse to friends, family members, colleagues at work
 - negative contrasting of spouse with oneself or others (often using totalizing language that assumes the spouse is always like this, this comes from the spouse's flawed character, and it is unlikely/impossible the spouse could ever be different)
- confronting and replacing passive, defeatist language ("He is just too caught up in...to care...It's just hopeless to...") with an active commitment to work on the marriage
 - Learning to say no to intrusions on marriage/anything that competes with marital relationship
- looking at whether previous gender-based ways of doing things (and the power dynamics they implied) were unhealthy and need to be re-examined

The discovery of infidelity points out the weakness in the pre-existing relationship, but it can also be an opportunity for transformation and rebuilding,

- sorting out family of origin junk (leaving→"must leave his father and mother and cling to his wife")
- address dissatisfaction/hurts within marriage, rather than using infidelity to distract and divert oneself from the real issues