



Healthy relationships

Surviving the ups & downs



Introduction

Relationships are a key aspect of our lives, from family, to friends, to spouse, all of our social connections have the ability to shape who we are. Whatever our age, fulfilling relationships accentuate our best qualities and allow personal growth, but take commitment, understanding and compromise to uphold. Healthy relationships can be enormously beneficial to both your health and life satisfaction and can result in:

- Better health and increased happiness
- Reduced depression and cognitive decline
- Reduced stress, a condition that can harm the heart's arteries, gut function, insulin regulation and immune system
- Improved self-esteem and cooperation with others
- A decreased risk of drug and alcohol abuse
- A longer life.

In adulthood, romantic relationships often become the most valuable, providing love, security and passion. However, this intense relationship can turn volatile and problems are often ignored until things become critical.

Common relationship problems

Infidelity

If a partner is unfaithful it puts a great deal of strain on the relationship and causes distress to both parties. The trust that is essential to a healthy relationship has been broken and is often left beyond repair. However, many couples do try and move past infidelity and with the right support from friends, family and perhaps a professional they can emerge as a stronger unit.



What is infidelity?

Infidelity (also known as cheating, adultery or having an affair) is when a partner(s) breaks the expectations of exclusivity upheld by the relationship. However, what constitutes 'cheating' varies between cultures and types of relationship and is not necessarily physical.

A physical affair would involve a partner(s) having sexual relations with someone outside the relationship. This can lead to feelings of distrust, disloyalty and anger.

An emotional affair is often more complicated as the partner may not realise they have breached the boundaries of friendship. Generally, if your partner would not want to see or hear these interactions then you have crossed the line towards infidelity. Advances in technology mean we can communicate with others behind a 'screen' making flirting or inappropriate behaviour seem innocent. However, your partner may view such interactions as a betrayal. Redirecting time, attention and love to somebody other than your partner causes a great deal of hurt and can often lead to a physical affair.

What causes infidelity?

The evolutionist, Charles Darwin would lead us to believe that affairs are the result of our natural instinct to reproduce and increase the quality of our offspring. However, there are a number of factors that contribute to infidelity that are perhaps more complicated than an intrinsic desire to mate. In identifying the cause of the affair it is often better to look at the relationship rather than the adulterer.

- **Lack of intimacy** - Intimacy bonds two individuals together emotionally, sexually and spiritually, but if one partner is directing their energy elsewhere (e.g. children, job, etc) or if the intimacy has simply disappeared it may leave one spouse looking to emotionally connect with someone else.

- **Boredom** - In long-term relationships it is sometimes inevitable to develop a routine and to stop growing as

individuals, which can often lead to dissatisfaction and boredom. Many seek to escape and relish the thrill of an affair.

- **Communication problems** - We are sociable beings and enjoy talking about our feelings, hopes and aspirations but if our partner is unwilling to listen or share their own thoughts it can lead one partner to seek conversation elsewhere and this could result in an affair.

- **Superiority/inferiority** - When one partner views themselves as superior to the other, either physically or intellectually, they often feel they have more 'leeway' to act inappropriately and have a cause to cheat. On the other hand, partners who feel they are inferior to their spouse may seek to punish themselves by seeking out someone who they feel they are more deserving of. If they get caught they have fulfilled their own belief that they are not good enough for their original partner.

- **Jealousy** - If one partner is paying a lot of attention to something other than their relationship (i.e. career) it might cause jealousy. In this situation, an affair might be tempting in order to get revenge on your partner. On the other hand, someone with a jealous partner who is always being accused of infidelity might act out in a self-fulfilling prophecy.

- **Extrication** - An affair can sometimes be an opportunity to 'escape' a relationship. If a partner feels they have outgrown their spouse they may opt to avoid initiating the break-up and instead hope, perhaps subconsciously, to get caught.

- **Genetics** - studies suggest that some people are genetically programmed to be more promiscuous.

- **Personality** - Loud, enthusiastic and assertive people tend to have more sexual partners and could be more likely to cheat.



Dealing with infidelity

- **Don't blame yourself.** If your partner has been unfaithful it is not a reflection on you. Problems in the relationship may be the cause of the infidelity but it was the adulterer who chose to betray the expectations of exclusivity.
- **Avoid blaming the third party.** It is understandable to feel anger towards them but they did not hold a loyalty to you.
- **Set boundaries.** If you have chosen to continue your relationship, the unfaithful partner must make it clear to the third party that their relationship is over.
- **Be honest.** If you are the adulterer, be honest about your reasons and actions. Let your partner know if there is a risk of a sexually transmitted disease or pregnancy.
- **Be patient.** Understand that rebuilding a relationship after an affair takes time and commitment. A relationship counsellor can help you understand the cause of the affair and support you in conquering these issues.

Signs of infidelity

Despite their best efforts, an adulterer can elicit certain behaviours and signals that can help identify their infidelity. However, exhibiting these signals is not necessarily evidence that someone is being unfaithful. There may be other reasons. On the other hand, a partner may not exhibit any of the following signals, but could be engaging in an affair.

- **Emotional disengagement** - we do not have enough emotional resources to invest in an affair without having to withdraw some investment from our home life.
- **Changes in routine** - longer working hours or more business trips could actually be time spent with another partner.
- **Increased attention to appearance** - aiming to impress new partner.
- **Spending more time online** - could be communicating with others and engaging in an emotional affair.
- **Inability to account for time.**
- **Unexpected and expensive gifts** - if a partner is feeling guilty they may try and ease their conscience by giving presents to their spouse.
- **Becoming angry, critical and even cruel** - engaging in a 'double-life' can be demanding and the adulterer may direct their stress at their partner.
- **Issue of control** - if a partner complains of feeling 'trapped' or 'controlled' they are more vulnerable to infidelity as a means of escape.

Gender and infidelity

Some psychologists believe men tend to engage in extramarital affairs more often than women and evolutionary psychologists say this stems from our animal instincts where a male's reproductive success depends on the quantity of mates whereas a female's depends on quality.

They believe men and women cheat for different reasons with sex being the primary motivator for men (75-80% of males who have cheated admitted that sex was the main appeal compared to only 20% of women). Males may desire more sexual variety and a need to reaffirm their sexuality more than females who cite their main reason for cheating as a need to fill unmet emotional needs or dissatisfaction in their relationship.