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How to Survive Internet Infidelity

I am a Clinical Psychologist and have been practicing since 1986. Most of this time has been spent in private practice. I have listened to countless intimate details of people's lives. While university taught me how to research and how to learn, my clients have been my greatest educators. They have taught me about every aspect of life, and I feel privileged to have been able to enter into the experiences of so many people. Amongst others I have sat with grieving mothers, suicidal people, victims of horrific abuse, and have also helped others to confront and work through the various challenges that many of us face at some or other time in our lives.

Infidelity is as old as the hills but recently its face has changed. There is a new wave, a new phenomenon, and psychologists are confronted with an emerging trend, which will be referred to as *Internet infidelity* throughout the course of this book. The social network revolution is filtering through to all aspects and relationships in our lives and has impacted upon our communication on all levels. I often chuckle when I see teenagers parallel engaging! They sit together but each is busy interacting with others via their phone. Just the other day a teenage girl told me how angry she was when she was sitting in the movie theatre with her boyfriend and he was communicating with his ex-girlfriend via Facebook. It has become commonplace even in therapy for clients to show me pictures or important texts or emails. It is not unusual for a client to pick up their phone to read me a Facebook status or a comment that has somehow been meaningful to them. Clients have even recorded episodes of self-harm, children's tantrums or panic attacks, to cite a few, to show me.

I have recently had a number of clients confronted with the consequences of Internet infidelity, and colleagues who I have spoken to, have found the same trend developing. Some clients have been betrayed, others have been unfaithful. Sometimes both the unfaithful and betrayed come to see me together for couples counseling. Some of the social network relationships have been text-based, others have been over Skype or Facebook.

This book is not an academic/statistic report and is not based on any literature or scientific evidence. It is based purely on my personal clinical experience with clients from all walks of life. I will draw from descriptions of the lived experience of Internet infidelity to describe this phenomenon and to outline management strategies as well as the stumbling blocks to resolution. The illustrative examples that I will use throughout this book are based on actual clinical cases, and in the interests of preserving confidentiality, names and other details have been changed. I will include all forms of social networking when I refer to the Internet. Although I have no statistical evidence at hand I could confidently state that the majority of my clients are female. I state this in case my stories seem gender biased.

Infidelity is very complex and there are many different types, so when I speak about managing Internet infidelity, I will draw from my work with infidelity in general, as this work and experience has guided me in managing this new complex phenomenon. Due to its nature, however, Internet infidelity requires special attention to boundary setting during the healing and restoration of the relationship.

When people talk about online infidelity the debate inevitably arises as to whether these Internet contacts constitute cheating or not. Regardless of whether or not there is intimate physical contact, I have noticed that those at the receiving end feel as hurt, anguished, angered and betrayed as those who have had to face the challenge of a full blown physical cheating relationship and/or encounter. The victims of Internet infidelity also find that trust diminishes and they end up feeling lost, rejected, angry, worthless and intensely hurt. The pain they describe resembles the descriptions of those before the Internet explosion. It would seem that most would agree that any emotional and or physical investment in a third person would constitute infidelity.

The Internet has opened up the world for us and has exposed us to endless possibilities in terms of meeting other people, and communicating with them intimately even from the comfort of our homes or offices. Skype has enabled people to have explicit sexual contact, even with others overseas. I recently had a client in Australia who sustained a relationship with someone in the UK. The client would make sure she was available to "wake" her lover up with intimate and naked poses. He was married and she was in an intimate relationship with someone else. They would both have their computers on as often as possible to share as much of their lives as they could. They had what one

could refer to as *virtual sex*, where they would masturbate over Skype. The man overseas, however, had more than one Internet lover and my client was devastated when she learned of his extra-infidelity.

Other social network relationships may seem more benign. I have had a number of clients who have sustained relationships with text and email, therefore no visual stimulation. Even so, the conversations have been intimate, distracting, and fuelled with emotion. A client who I will call Tess was in an incessant texting relationship with a man who lived inter-state. She would anxiously wait for the afternoon to arrive, which was the time she would walk her dog. She would then call this man for a chat. The rest of the time they would be texting. There were romantic good night and good morning texts, sometimes while Tess' husband was in the shower but no explicit sexual contact. Tess knew that this relationship would not go anywhere and she had no intention of leaving her marriage. She was, however, very reluctant to stop the texting because it gave her a sense of excitement having this person involved in every aspect of her life everyday. She was ambivalent about the secrecy, as she felt guilty on the one hand but excited on the other. In her telling it was evident to me that Tess believed that she was being unfaithful even though there was no physical contact.

There are also the instances when a person enters chat rooms to have intimate written or even verbal (voice) sexual contact with others. The person or people at the other end could be anonymous and probably using false names. Mostly, there would not be romantic feelings directed at any specific person. Whether this constitutes cheating or infidelity could quite possibly be seen in the same light as a person who visits a prostitute for mere sexual gratification. I have seen clients at the receiving end of both of these situations and their devastation seems no less than when there is an intimate emotional connection with a specific person.

In short, Internet infidelity is a complex phenomenon because of the different types and the different needs that it serves. This is not the regular office romance and the availability and easy access make it possible for more and more people to be unfaithful with a diverse range of people, even across continents. Social networking has also enabled people to discover infidelity. People often get caught out when spouses or

partners find telephone bills or when they read the others' texts. In as much as third parties are available by texting, emailing and other forms of social networking, these vehicles have also made it possible for infidelity to be revealed and exposed.

Why?

“I guess it is a rush...scary and exciting at the same time. Maybe it was the secrecy...”

The reasons for infidelity are complex and people often debate about whether this represents a problem in the relationship or not. This is a difficult issue to tease out, but it is rather important to understand how much ownership of the infidelity should be shared and this will be discussed in a later section. There are various reasons that people offer for infidelity. These include:

- Dissatisfaction with the sexual relationship, particularly not enough sex.
- “Falling out of love”
- Falling in love with someone else
- Sexual gratification with another partner
- General dissatisfaction with the spousal relationship
- Boredom
- Need for distraction
- Need to enhance self-esteem and self-worth.

Some people describe their Internet infidelity as an addiction. Other clients have taught me that the non-visual contacts enable them to remain anonymous and invisible, wherein they can create a different reality where they feel special and desired. People tell me that they find it easier to be sexually explicit when they are writing. This enables them to explore their sexuality and, as they are not face-to-face, they are able to enter into another world and find it easier to write things that they would never usually say. I recall a married client telling me how she would go into chat rooms while her husband was at work and write to various men to entertain their sexual desires. She explained to me how depraved the content was and believed that this gave her the opportunity to confirm her derogatory core beliefs and to express her self-loathing after suffering a history of sexual abuse. She remained anonymous at all times. Another client told me how she had read Internet messages her husband had written as part of his chat room involvement. She believed that he was expressing sexual desires, such as bondage and anal sex, which she had known nothing about. This left her feeling like she was not sure if she really knew the man she was married to.

Facebook represents a different situation where a person can rekindle contact with someone from the past. This represents a situation where the person is not anonymous but where the current situation is. A client I worked with recently portrayed this beautifully. Let's call her Lisa. She knew this gentleman from school days, when they had a "fling". Lisa was overweight, in fact obese. She had had bariatric surgery and was relapsing, burdened by the demands of motherhood, and hounded by negative thoughts and low self-esteem. Lisa found this past love, who lived in Canada, on Facebook and started an email relationship with him. The contents of these emails reflected erotic desire for each other (but based on past perceptions of each other). Lisa told me how she could hide from her negative self beliefs and shame in this dream world that she built. She felt "beautiful", "stunning", "desirable", and "like a princess". At the same time she felt ashamed of this dream world she was creating and this fuelled her eating problem. She found herself trapped in a vicious cycle. Her husband discovered her secret and Lisa disclosed to me his painful reaction to her infidelity.

Infidelity is complex in terms of type and also in terms of what causes or contributes to it. Internet infidelity adds a dimension that has its own motivators. It extends beyond romance to include fantasy worlds and expression of deeper lying issues pertaining to one's insecurities and, or sexuality.

Surviving Internet infidelity.

So how do people survive this trauma? I have, through my experience with clients, formulated a step-by-step approach to managing the aftermath and to restoring the relationship. Through my years of counseling these steps have emerged. They are not closed off entities but are fluid, which means that one may pass back and forth between them.

Infidelity is a painful experience that rocks the very foundations of one's existence. The consequences are far-reaching and often long-standing. Like loss, it never really goes away and I have had clients, who after twenty years, still talk about it. As infidelity is so profound, counseling would be a positive step in the right direction. For those who choose to work at it on their own these steps may be helpful in understanding the process of recovery. These steps may also validate their good judgment about appropriate boundary setting. I believe that people are resilient and have the capacity to heal. Counseling does, however, provide a safe environment where people can be validated and where perspectives can be shared and challenged, and where progress can be monitored and consolidated.

Who do I tell?

This is an important first step, deciding who to tell, and who you choose to support you through this difficult time. When people describe their reaction to infidelity the feelings are very intense. Some attempt to compare it with loss through death. I have heard many people talking about how they wondered if death would not have been easier for them. Obviously there is no way to compare trauma but these descriptions make us aware of how much impact infidelity makes on a person's life. When someone does pass away there is at least initially a great deal of support, and death is never kept a secret. With infidelity there is the option to not tell others and the betrayer often expects his or her indiscretion to be shrouded in secrecy. This is not fair to the hurt party. In this situation the person suffering from the consequences of infidelity should be able to seek appropriate support. However, I always caution them against telling too many people. People all offer different perspectives and advice and this can become confusing. If you choose to tell no one you deprive yourself of the support you so badly need, and your feelings of isolation and abandonment may grow.

I recall a client, Heather, who in her shock at her discovery of her husband's Internet infidelity impulsively told all of her friends. She also disclosed her trauma to many of the other mothers at her children's school. She also asked her husband to leave the family home, and her friends supported her with this decision. A few days later Heather, to the dismay of her circle of friends, chose to reunite with her husband. Although it was her decision, she lost some of her friends because she had disclosed a great deal about her husband's Internet involvement, and her friends were not able to comprehend her decision.

Not everyone's friends would be as harsh but I have learnt that one should be cautious when disclosing to family. If you choose to tell a parent about a partner's infidelity, they may not find it so easy to forgive and to move on. They may support your decision, but they may at times inadvertently remind you of the infidelity. If a friend were to do this you could distance yourself from the friendship but this is harder with family members.

I normally suggest telling one or two good and trustworthy friends as a start. I definitely suggest avoiding discussing it at your child's school, as your problem could become gossip. Be cautious about discussing your dilemma at any groups, gatherings or clubs. Be aware that if you discuss the issue with someone who has also been through it you will certainly gain the understanding, but that person may expect you to handle it in the same way they did.

Terminating the cheating relationship.

If one is to work on the relationship the infidelity needs to stop. This is essential and there can be no healing or restoration if the affair is ongoing. I have had couples come and see me where the other person is still in contact with the third party. Sometimes there is a "competition" going on where the unfaithful becomes the object of desire between his or her partner and the third party. Therapy *cannot* proceed in this way, and I normally then advise that he or she attend individual counseling to work through their issues and to determine their commitment to the relationship.

As the infidelity is ceased, the unfaithful party has to manage their *grief*. They may mourn the loss of the relationship for quite some time, and the betrayed person would understandably not have much understanding or empathy. Quite often the hurt person has the expectation that the unfaithful has made his or her mind up and does not contemplate the significance of the loss for the other person. It is as if they expect that he or she joins their contempt of the third party. I remember sitting with a client called Robert who was voicing his grief pertaining to the loss of his mistress. He so badly wanted to tell his wife that Melissa (mistress) was actually a good person. I had to explain to him that it would be unreasonable, especially in the early stages to expect her to understand that.

It would be painful to admit that your partner was missing the other person. I advise that this mourning occur privately. It does not need to be displayed or shared. If the victim of the infidelity asks if anything is wrong, the answer needs to be honest but without anger and without unnecessary display of emotion. The unfaithful mourning the loss of the third party would understandably feel isolated with his or her grief. The spouse is obviously not available for consolation and other loved ones and friends would not understand the meaning of this loss. They would often also feel hurt and betrayed.

Again, the Internet adds another dimension. When people have cheated online the involvement has usually been very intense. This is due to the ease and availability of access. You can, for example, sit alongside your spouse and text others. The infidelity is therefore not only stolen moments, but can extend into many hours of the day. Due to the intensity of this involvement the grief may be harder to deal with. The incessant texting and/or emailing may have taken up a great deal of time and the person may be left with a void. The computer and mobile phone is always there and it takes a concerted effort and commitment to cease the contact. The unfaithful, who offers addiction as a reason for the cheating, may find it very difficult to resist the temptation of going online. His or her grief may be the void rather than the loss of emotional attachment to another person. Lisa, the example cited earlier, found the loss of her fantasy world more difficult to deal with than the loss of the other person. To save her marriage she ceased all internet/e-mail contact with the man overseas but at the same time had to relinquish her fantasy world wherein she felt so uplifted. Tess, the other example cited above knew that she would need to end the texting relationship but she could not bear the thought of the emptiness that she would

feel. This again demonstrates how the grief may not be related to a person but to one's loss of upliftment, distraction, self-esteem and excitement to mention only a few instances of loss.

Acknowledging the infidelity.

Once the infidelity has ended and the decision has been made to turn your attentions exclusively to the relationship the infidelity then needs to be acknowledged by both parties. This is often contentious if there has been no physical relationship, and if the person does not see it as being unfaithful. If an individual does not acknowledge the infidelity, then he or she will not validate their partner's pain and feelings about it, and probably *won't stop*. When I have discussed this with couples there is a realization on some level that it is wrong, even if there has not been a physical relationship. It is the denial of infidelity that prevents them from committing to change. The unfaithful partner needs to take *full ownership* of his or her infidelity before any healing and positive change can occur. Once the infidelity is acknowledged the unfaithful may show remorse, and this is an important step towards healing. Quite often the person who has cheated blames the relationship or the other person. Although he or she may have good reason to feel this way I suggest that they first take full ownership to validate the person who is hurting. I always tell people that there is no excuse for infidelity and that once ownership has been taken then one could explore the weaknesses in the relationship that may have contributed to or sustained the infidelity.

Committing to change.

The unfaithful person needs to commit to change and to working through the infidelity, otherwise the next steps are fruitless and demeaning to the betrayed. Any reoccurrence of the infidelity needs to be seen as a "deal-breaker". When you commit to working through the infidelity you agree to take partial responsibility for the other person's adjustment. I say partial because at the end of the day each person needs to work at his or her own happiness as well. The commitment to change also needs to be made by the person who is hurt. The betrayed has the option to leave the relationship so the commitment to change and the working through are collaborative. It would be detrimental

to both people if the betrayed stayed in the relationship but retained profound feelings of resentment, and if he or she continued to “punish” the other person.

The couples need to agree on how they plan to work through the infidelity. A tangible plan needs to be put in place. It is often at this point that the couple may agree that counseling would be the way to go. If you decide to work on it on your own as a couple you would need to agree to work on establishing trust and putting boundaries in place. Hopefully the steps outlined here will assist with that process.

Establishing communication.

The next step would be establishing communication. There needs to be a readiness to engage. The unfaithful needs to demonstrate a willingness to talk about the infidelity. This is a difficult step. Sometimes the offended party wants intricate detail, and ends up getting very hurt. The one who is deprived of detail on the other hand could experience anxiety, not having any information to process, and with the imagination running wild as to what may have taken place. One of my clients, as an example (even though it was not an internet affair) returned home from a holiday to discover a condom under the bed in the guest bedroom. Her husband admitted that he had had sex with someone else while she was away. He told his wife that he had met this person at work and that they had been texting and emailing each other and that he had invited her to the house while she was on holiday. He refused to give any further information and told his wife she should just forget all about it and move on, as that was what he had intended on doing. The client was very distressed and felt further rejection and humiliation at these remarks and expectations. She also felt at a loss not having anything to work with. As she was not able to understand why the infidelity had taken place she was not able to work at putting strategies in place to prevent a reoccurrence.

After many years of counseling people I cannot say that I have attained full closure on the issue of how much to disclose. I tend to not be black and white on this issue and prefer to strive for the happy medium. It is my opinion that the grieving party has the right to know about the full extent of the disclosure. I do not believe that disclosure of intricate detail is necessarily helpful. I have noticed that women tend to want more detail about the

infidelity than men do. Men tend to express anger and women tend to ruminate about the intimate details.

In counseling sessions I try to find the balance between reducing anxiety by dignifying the grieving party with disclosure about the extent of infidelity but not overwhelming them with graphic detail. With Internet infidelity the aggrieved party has often discovered the cheating by reading texts or emails. They were therefore not able to shield themselves from the painful material. I recall a client who learned of her husband's affair via his iPhone. This is not really a case of Internet infidelity but how she discovered it through social networking. I will refer to her as Tina. Her son was using his father's iPhone to track an ebay purchase when Tina gathered that something was wrong. She removed the phone and to her horror watched a video of her husband having sex with a friend of theirs. Up to this point Tina had been unsuspecting and she was not at all prepared for what she saw. She also had no choice in the matter as to whether she wished to view it or not. You can just imagine how difficult it would be to live with that, and how these memories could hamper the recovery of the relationship. That is why I believe that only the extent of the infidelity should be revealed. I also recommend that a point be reached where both parties agree that this aspect of the work is over. The hurt party needs to understand that he or she now has all the information that is necessary to move forward. If this is not "sealed" then the betrayer lives with the uncertainty that the problem will ever be resolved. This would enhance his or her feelings of helplessness and discouragement that he or she will ever be forgiven. When I am doing therapy I will schedule an appointment and tell the couple that this will be the last time that any details about the level or extent of disclosure will be discussed. I encourage the hurt person to go and think about anything else that they need to know. I also encourage the betrayer to think about what else they feel the other person should know or will need to know in the future. Again I remind them that this is about the level and extent of disclosure and not about details of the infidelity.

Disclosure about what actually happened is one aspect of the communication. Another facet is uncovering and exploring the reasons for the infidelity. I have noticed in my work that some couples really indulge in this step. I have worked with couples that have spent hours discussing this and growing very close. It is almost like a flight into health. They find a great deal of comfort in this step and these are the ones who would say

things like, "we are better than we've ever been", "it's actually a good thing that happened, it's going to help us". There seems to be an intense bond that forms but the problem occurs when this intense level of communication cannot be sustained. Over the years I have formed the opinion that when couples over indulge in this way, the injured party is comforted and distracted. He or she is not left alone with their thoughts. When however the partner needs to return to work, or gets back to previous activities, he or she is then left alone with their thoughts and preoccupations about the infidelity. Because the betrayer is away the doubt sets in and the rejection is triggered. When he or she then returns and discovers that their partner's mood has shifted and once the doubts and insecurities are revealed the betrayer may react with feelings of helplessness and sometimes anger. This is a difficult phase to work through and I try as early on as possible in counseling sessions to prepare couples for this shift.

Another interesting phenomenon that I've noticed is the grieving party's willingness to initially take ownership of the infidelity. The reason for this that I have formulated is that it gives them a sense of control. I have heard women suggesting that if they changed the things that the husband offered as reasons or excuses for the infidelity that it wouldn't happen again. This somehow gives them a sense of comfort and security believing that because they are changing the things that led their partner astray it won't happen again. This gives them a sense of control, and because they take ownership and "understand" why it happened, the anger and resentment diminish. I said above that there was sometimes an initial willingness to take ownership because I have noticed with some people that this shifts. In time, the grieving party is able to grow stronger and they sometimes choose to relinquish the ownership. I have noticed that the anger then surfaces but if this is used constructively it assists with the next phase when boundaries are established.

Exploring the reasons for the infidelity forms an important part of therapy. As explained in a previous paragraph, this is not about imparting blame, but rather about trying to understand if there is a weakness or frailty in the relationship that may have fuelled the infidelity. This is a collaborative step, and it is important to recognize that even though the unfaithful takes responsibility for the infidelity both parties take responsibility for restoring the relationship. Lisa's infidelity discussed above is a good example. She had

issues with low self-esteem, depression, eating problems and obesity. She took full responsibility for her cheating and for the fantasy world she created. It was, however, important to look at ways her husband could support her in establishing better self-esteem, without giving him the responsibility for the abuse. In this particular case I suggested individual work with Lisa first and her therapy is ongoing. In the meantime she has ceased all forms of Internet contact with the other person overseas.

I have learned that the reasons that people offer and the deeper underlying reasons are often two different things. It is particularly hurtful to the betrayed partner when the unfaithful offers reasons that are not genuine but rather excuses to justify the infidelity. I recall a friend whose husband had cheated and one of the reasons he offered was that she never wore perfume! What enraged her particularly was that as a couple they had few financial resources, so perfume would have been a rare indulgence. I guess that on a deeper level he may have wished for her to be more romantic or more glamorous.

I am wary when the reason offered is addiction and I see this more as an individual problem. I immediately question the chances of recovery. Addiction is very difficult to overcome at the best of times and I believe that in this case, individual therapy is recommended and management strategy of choice.

Addiction is also particularly difficult to manage when it involves Internet infidelity, as the Internet is so easily accessible. I imagine it would be like an alcoholic trying to overcome his addiction while working in a bottle shop! The Internet is so enabling and is a constant threat and source of anxiety for the betrayed party. As soon as one person in the couple talks of addiction, I recommend individual counseling as a start.

Over the years I have known people who have been unfaithful, who have suffered enormously from the pain they have inflicted on others. They are often the ones who would tell you that they would NEVER EVER do anything like that again. Then there are those who are unfaithful who continue to betray loved ones. This again alerts one to the fact that the infidelity is an individual, rather than a relationship, issue.

The reasons for the infidelity are complex but important when it comes to determining the *prognosis*. Once it can be ascertained that the reason reflects a frailty in

the relationship then the chances of recovery elevate versus if the reason were more individual, such as with an addiction or with repeated infidelity.

Restoring trust.

The next step would be to put strategies in place to work at restoring trust. This is a crucial step. Couples often talk about trust as though it is an agreed upon entity. People have told me, for example, how after Internet infidelity, their partner has found them checking their computer or mobile phone. The partner then says something like, "So you don't trust me!" I suggest they say something like, "Hell no!" But often they're left feeling like they're doing something wrong, and they often end up defending themselves. This then further enhances their feeling of defectiveness, and empowers the betrayer.

So what are these strategies? Put quite simply the unfaithful has to become the proverbial "open book". He or she has to do it with the utmost respect, without doing it in a way that makes the other person feel like he or she is petty. The integrity of the betrayed person needs to be upheld. The power balance needs to shift, and the equality in the relationship needs to return. The victim needs to start feeling valued, and this is a crucial step in establishing that.

What does the "open book" entail? Quite literally the betrayer needs to have his or her passwords removed or revealed. The victim needs to have the freedom to access the Inbox of mobile phone and email, Facebook accounts and other social network devices, at his or her discretion without feeling sneaky, petty, or distrustful. Telephone bills and credit card statements should also be transparent because this is also a way of tracking a person's texting and spending. Due to the mistrust resulting from the infidelity the betrayer's spouse should have every right to utilize these measures. Obviously the cooperation of the betrayer is essential, which is why you will not be able to get to this step until the acknowledgement, validation and commitment to the healing process has taken place. If you browse the Internet you will notice that there is software that you can install that can assist with tracing and scanning activity on the net. It is my opinion that this be transparent, as secrecy from both parties needs to be avoided. This is the contract that is established and both parties should agree that these strategies be used. If there is secrecy

then suspicion is aroused. The betrayer's secret actions can trigger his or her own insecurities.

The nature of Internet infidelity elicits a great deal of anxiety. Years ago when your partner was at home with you, you knew where they were. There were few external distractions. The only form of contact with the outside world was the landline, so as long as that was quiet everything was good. Internet and mobile phones have changed all of this, so even a partner heading off to another room or outside for a walk could trigger an anxious reaction. I recall a client telling me how anxious she got when her husband, after his infidelity was revealed, said he needed to go out for a walk, especially when he took his mobile phone with him

Establishing boundaries is crucial to the restoration of trust. These need to be articulated, agreed upon, and revised from time to time. The hurt party needs to put forward their expected boundaries without shame, and these need to be mediated, and made tangible. The boundaries must be clear and concise. Couples often sweep over these details, and talk about "earning trust" without any clear formulation of how this will be done. They need to detail how this will be achieved. Again the integrity of the hurt party needs to be cherished and they should not be made to feel that they are being trivial. The use of the Internet needs to be discussed and agreed upon. As an example, both parties may agree that the Internet will not be utilized after the other one has gone to bed. Both may agree to use software to assist with tracking.

Self-care.

This is an important step towards recovery, and it is this step that infiltrates all the others. As infidelity shatters confidence and self-esteem, you are the first person who needs to start to mend this.

It would not be unusual to experience depression after infidelity. Once the shock has subsided, and when the anger has worn off, one may be left feeling depressed. As mentioned in an earlier paragraph when things get back to "normal" one may be left feeling alone and isolated. People often tell me that they do not wish to keep burdening their

friends and family. I have noticed this with loss through death as well. People are reluctant to reveal that they are not doing well and that they are still suffering sometime after the loss, especially if friends thought that they were coping. Counseling would be beneficial when these feelings creep in. Speaking to your GP or visiting a Psychologist/Counselor is a good step towards self-care.

An exercise regime would be good and this would help to counteract the depressed and anxious feelings. Exercise also enhances feelings of well being, and feeling fit and healthy build confidence.

Try to get out a bit more and mix with friends. This is a good source of distraction and good friends help you to not only define yourself in terms of the infidelity.

I have known people who, after suffering the consequences of infidelity, believe that they need to be there for the other person one hundred percent. It is as if they continue to take ownership and it is as if they are afraid that if they're not there all the time it will happen again. This total self-sacrifice is not healthy as no one should feel that it is their primary role to service all the needs of someone else. This creates an inequality in the relationship that fuels feelings of inferiority. When this starts to happen you should try and have your own life by doing things that you enjoy, either on your own or with friends. Work, and especially a good career, is a good avenue to building self-worth and self-esteem in terms of defining yourself.

Be good to yourself. Treat yourself to pampering activities.

Work on your assertiveness. By strengthening your boundaries all round, you will feel more in control of your life. You will also feel stronger and more capable of looking after yourself. These are good feelings to foster after the shattering consequences of infidelity.

Moving forward.

Aside from working through the infidelity, couples need to take positive steps towards building on their relationship. They need to start spending more time together.

Again this should be structured so that they don't neglect to make determined and necessary steps to improving the quality of their relationship. I usually recommend a date night once or twice a month. This is, however, not enough and other everyday activities, such as walking, having an evening drink together or even watching a television program are recommended. A colleague of mine has been known to say that what predicts whether couples will be together in two years time is not finances, not sex, not anything but coupling activities. In moving forward there are two critical aspects pertaining to future communication around the infidelity.

Past transgressions should not become weapons. Couples often comment on how the infidelity is brought up when there is conflict. It is important that the commitment be there that it will not be used as a weapon. I have noticed how couples could be arguing about something unrelated, and that when the aggrieved party is losing ground, their helplessness is triggered. This then takes them back to earlier instances of feeling this way and they then bring in the infidelity. The person responsible for the past infidelity could then react in different ways. People tend to get angry, but some who have unresolved guilt then back off and relinquish the argument or give in and acknowledge defeat feeling that they have no right to be assertive. This is not fair if both parties have agreed to work on the relationship, and it is not fair to keep punishing the betrayer in this way, particularly if they have worked hard at establishing trust and at repairing the relationship. This could also contribute to a build-up of resentment.

Keeping up meaningful communication. Not allowing past infidelity to be used as a weapon does not mean that it is not discussed again. In my work with couples we try to agree that if the hurt party needs to discuss the infidelity they should, but not during or as part of a conflict situation.

It has worked well in my sessions with couples when we have agreed that if one of the parties has been thinking about it a great deal, or if they wish to discuss the impact of the infidelity, that they be given the time and opportunity. The discussion is also not a rehashing of details of what happened, but rather on how they are travelling. Sometimes

one of the parties wishes to reformulate the boundaries, and the topic should then be approached with sensitivity and respect.

Couples need to agree to remind each other when one starts to feel that the other is not engaging or is not working sufficiently on the relationship. One of you may start to feel insecure about the transparency, for example you may notice that your partner appears secretive. When this happens you may feel you are being petty when you raise the issue and that is why it is important to agree early on that this may happen and that it would need to be addressed.

When the memories haunt you. When you move forward and even after you've worked through the steps outlined above you may notice that memories of the infidelity continue to haunt you. Clients have told me how television triggers their painful memories. One client told me how *The Good Wife* would trigger her husband's infidelity. She could not watch this program without her thoughts going back to her pain and without memories of the infidelity being ignited. Other clients have told me how articles in magazines reminded them of their trauma. People are often surprised by just how many triggers there are, and people tell me time and time again that these were always unnoticed until they faced infidelity themselves.

I would not recommend that every trigger be discussed with your partner. I would suggest that you try to manage these on your own first. If, for example, you are watching a movie or something that elicits painful memories and if your partner has watched it as well then by all means mention it. A client told me once that she was watching something with her husband and she sensed that he was getting uncomfortable with the content. She then asked him if he was thinking about the infidelity and he said yes. They then both acknowledged how unfortunate it was that it had happened and he apologized. This was positive and the discomfort and tension were eased.

I mentioned above that you try to manage the regular triggers on your own. Clients often ask me how to do this. Obviously it is not easy. I suggest a strategy that I call *packaging*. When you find that you are ruminating and especially if you find that you are

rehashing the things you've already dealt with, you need to manage this on two levels. Firstly you need to ascertain why you have been thinking about the infidelity. If it's a movie or story you've been watching then the answer is obvious. If you just find you're thinking about it for no apparent reason you may realize that something else has been bothering you. Perhaps you've been stressed about something else. It could be that you're tired. It could even be something that someone said.

Secondly, you need to imagine taking everything you've already discussed and packaging it. This is why it is important earlier in the recovery, as discussed in an earlier section, that one reaches a stage of closure. It will then be easier to attain this point at which you *pack*. The package is then wrapped with a tie/bow/string, which is your summary of events. The summary would include an acknowledgement of the events, the fact that they are over, that these have already been dealt with, and that no further exploration would change anything or would be helpful at all. So you acknowledge your feelings, you are entitled to feel the way you do because of what happened. Stay with the feelings for a while but without ruminating about the details of what happened. These events have been packaged, so once you've acknowledged the feelings you challenge them. Challenge would involve a self-care activity or a form of distraction. Initially the distraction may be something quite profound, like going to a movie or catching up with a friend. We hope that in time the distraction may be something smaller like a brisk walk, or like merely carrying on with another activity. You will get better at doing this. Initially it may be very difficult, but in time it will get easier. People find that they have good days and bad. When you've endured trauma feeling good does not come naturally and because you're working at it, things tend to catch up every so often. As you're working on survival you have fewer emotional resources available to contain the other everyday stresses. You can become fatigued and it doesn't take much to tip you over the edge. I recall reading or hearing something along the lines of, "It's a relapse, not a total collapse!"

This occurs with loss through death as well. Initially that's all you think about so it stays with you all of the time. Once you start catching up with other things and get distracted you may find that it hits you again. Remember that a "relapse" means that you have in fact progressed! It doesn't mean that you are back to where you started.

Conclusion

Suffering the consequences of infidelity is a very painful process. Infidelity is multi-faceted and the recent surge in social networking has complicated it further. The Internet provides more people more opportunity to engage other people and to express and externalize sexual desires. Managing the consequences of infidelity is a process that requires meaningful and intimate communication that is ongoing.

People who are hurt through the unfaithful actions of the other person need to consider carefully who they will share their experience with. Too much disclosure can hamper your attempts to forgive and to work through.

The unfaithful needs to acknowledge the infidelity to validate the other person and to preserve his or her integrity. The unfaithful person needs to be prepared to discuss the level or extent of the infidelity in an attempt to foster closure. This should not be an interminable process and sometimes closure needs to be forced to facilitate the process of turning attention and communication to appropriate boundary setting and relationship restoration and building.

Appropriate boundary setting is an important step in restoring trust. This needs to be tangible and concrete so that both parties know what to expect and how to work on establishing healthy trust.

Self-care is important throughout all of the stages so that you not only define yourself in terms of the infidelity. Self-care fosters feelings of self-worth and entitlement and provides opportunities for you to feel valued and deserving.

Once you have worked through the infidelity you need to make determined efforts to build on your relationship. Again this needs to be concrete and tangible so that nothing is assumed or left unattended. During these stages there needs to be a commitment that the infidelity will not be used as a weapon. This does not however mean that communication shuts down and it should be agreed upon that it can be discussed. This discussion should not however include any rehashing of the details of the infidelity as this may not be helpful to either of the parties.

As infidelity is so painful it is common that people find themselves being reminded of it. This can cause rumination that ignites old feelings of helplessness, anger and despair, and also doubt and insecurity. When this happens you need to remind yourself that closure has been attained about what happened and that a rehashing of details is not helpful. You acknowledge that it happened and that it hurt you and you then challenge the discomfort by engaging self-care activities or other forms of distraction.

The steps outlined in this book will assist you with working through the infidelity. It is important to acknowledge and to assimilate the pain. This may mean occasional “checking in” because when memories are conscious and not suppressed they go through “wear and tear” over time and you begin to heal.