

Steps in recovering for Marital Infidelity.

Marital infidelity is one of the most traumatic of all life experiences. However, we believe that the identification of the emotional, character and spiritual conflicts that contribute to marital infidelity can be uncovered and resolved. Such healing is not possible unless each spouse has an understanding of and a loyalty to the marriage and to the goodness in his/her spouse.

The excessive use of internet pornography has increased the trauma of virtual marital infidelity in which one spouse seeks happiness and sexual satisfaction through another woman or, less often, another man. Such behaviors are experienced as marital infidelity by the other spouse. Also, online infidelity is also increasing through social networking, especially Facebook.

"The strength of such a (mature) marital love emerges most clearly when the beloved stumbles, when his or her weaknesses or sins come into the open. One who truly loves does not then withdraw love, but loves all the more, loves in full consciousness of the other's shortcomings and faults, without in the least approving of them. For the person as such never loses his/her essential value. The emotion which attaches to the value of the person is loyal," The most challenging aspects of the healing process are resolving the justifiable rage and rebuilding trust, both of which are possible.

Origins of Marital Infidelity

The following marital conflicts contribute to a vulnerability to marital infidelity.

- Loneliness and sadness
- An emotionally distant spouse
- Selfishness/materialism
- Lack of a moral code
- Lack of confidence
- Controlling and disrespectful behaviors by spouse
- Compulsive use of pornography
- Lack of balance in married life with failure to attend to romantic aspect of marriage, the marital friendship and sexual intimacy/betrothed love
- Seriously disordered priorities with the placement of work, others, sports, children, etc. before one's spouse
- Strong resentment and anger with a desire to punish
- Attempt to escape from responsibilities and pressures
- Strong mistrust and anxiety
- Weak faith with a failure to engage in the struggle against temptations
- Modeling after an unfaithful parent
- Failure to address marital stresses
- Close friendships with others who have been unfaithful
- Lack of understanding of the sacrament of marriage
- Unresolved family of origin sadness, mistrust or anger

- Failure to find fulfillment in fatherhood or motherhood and as a protector of one's spouse and children
- Previous infidelity
- Failure to communicate the Scriptural teaching about marriage and sexual morality.

Prevalence of infidelity

Research studies demonstrate that the majority of married couples are faithful and loyal. Marital infidelity with another person is not as common as some believe. However, a major factor in the growth in infidelity is the use of internet pornography.

A survey of 884 men and 1,288 women found that 77% of married men and 88% of married women remained faithful to their spouses, Wiederman, M.(1997) Extramarital sex: Prevalence and correlates in a national survey. *J of Sex Research* 34:170.

A University of Chicago national survey found that that 75% of husbands and 85% of wives never had sexual relations outside of marriage, Laumann,E.O., et al. (1994) *The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Table 5.15, 216.

A highly regarded survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago has found that 22 percent of men have had a sex partner other than their spouse while married, compared to 13 percent of women. (The figures are an average of the years between 1991 and 2004, Whisman M.A., et al., (2007) Predicting sexual infidelity in a population-based sample of married individuals. *J Fam Psychol.* 21(2):320-4.

Another study revealed an annual prevalence of infidelity was 2.3% . In controlling for marital dissatisfaction and demographic variables, infidelity was predicted by greater neuroticism and lower religiosity, Whisman M.A., et al., (2007) Predicting sexual infidelity in a population-based sample of married individuals. *J Fam Psychol.* 21(2):320-4.

Mistakes made after infidelity

A number of serious mistakes can be made after marital infidelity including,

- Insistence upon immediate separation
- Failure to see the goodness in the offending spouse
- Refusal to identify each spouse's emotional or character weaknesses
- A need to blame one's spouse exclusively for the infidelity
- Failure to identify the extent of the infidelity
- Refusal to try to understand and forgive
- Insistence upon divorce
- Unwillingness to face family of origin conflicts
- Fear of correcting the offending spouse
- Failure to love the vocation of marriage
- Failure to obtain expert advice from those loyal to marriages

- The expectation that the offended spouse should "get over it" quickly
- The lack of understanding as to how difficult it is to heal the infidelity wound
- The failure to realize that faith is essential in re-establishing trust and the marital friendships.

Acute stress disorder in the victim spouse

The victim spouse not infrequently develops a group of symptoms that constitute an acute stress disorder. These symptoms include anxiety, dissociative and other symptoms that occurs within one month after exposure to extremely traumatic stress including:

- a sense of detachment or unreality
- a sense of being in a daze
- inability to recall aspects of the trauma
- a regular reexperiencing of the trauma
- sadness/despair
- intense anger, rage, hatred, impulses for revenge
- profound fears
- severely damaged self-esteem.

An acute stress disorder can lead over time to the development of posttraumatic stress disorder in which one obsesses about the past betrayal, has great difficulty in trusting and at times feels intense betrayal anger.

Post traumatic stress disorder

Marital infidelity is one of the most traumatic life experiences leaving spouses stunned, dazed and profoundly wounded. The proverb, no wound worse than the wound of the heart is applicable. The infidelity profound wounds the ability to trust and can lead to the anxiety disorder of a post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Effective marital therapy that incorporates a faith component can often diminish the severity of this conflict. However, the wound is so severe that painful memories associated with profound sadness, mistrust, anxiety and intense anger can be recurrent under various types of stresses for many years or even decades. Offending spouses need to understand this and they attempt to rebuild the marital trust.

When obsessional thinking about the betrayal memories occur in association with intense anxiety, medication such as a serotonin reuptake inhibitor can be helpful as a chemical crutch while the trust is being rebuilt.

The four phases of healing

The healing process includes first uncovering the extent and the causes of the infidelity, next making a decision about addressing what has been uncovered and third doing the hard work of resolving conflicts and anger and of building trust. The final phase is accepting the trauma and believing that some good can come from it.

Uncovering phase

In this phase it is important to identify the state of the marriage before the infidelity, particularly in regard to the ability of each spouse to give to the marital friendship, to romantic love and to betrothed love, which includes but is more than sexual intimacy. During this phase it can be helpful to complete checklists that evaluate self-giving, trust, selfishness, anger and parental legacies.

The most common resistance we find in this phase is in men whose infidelity is the result of weak male confidence due to a weak father-son attachment in the husband (with his father.) These men tend to misdirect their anger and deep unhappiness from their father relationship onto their wives. The confidence of many husbands may also have suffered because they did not experience success in team sports as boys and teenagers that, unfortunately, can leave a lasting wound in the male psyche.

We ask spouses to evaluate their marital friendship. This attempts to reveal the many problematic behaviors and emotional responses that develop in an unconscious attempt to escape from the pain of having a weak male or female identity.

The second most common conflict we find here is in women with controlling tendencies and secondary disrespectful behaviors toward their husbands as a result of the failure to have a trusting relationship with their fathers. These wives also misdirect anger meant for their fathers at their husbands.

The third conflict that is difficult to face is loneliness for comforting parental love which contributes to infidelity. Spousal love is very powerful and comforting but it cannot resolve the wounds of loneliness from childhood and adolescence. This childhood loneliness leads spouses to engage in numerous harmful behaviors in an unconscious attempt to escape from this intense pain including:

- * attempting to find old boyfriends or girlfriends on the internet
- * spending excessive time on facebook
- * using drugs or drinking excessively
- * engaging in compulsive sexual behaviors
- * spending excessive time outside the home in pleasurable activities because the childhood home is associated with unhappiness.

Finally, selfishness, the major enemy of marital love, can be difficult to face but, it is a leading cause of marital infidelity.

Decision phase

This is a very difficult phase of treatment for the victim spouse who has been so wounded that he/she fears becoming vulnerable again. Also, the rage toward the unfaithful spouse can be so strong that what is desired is distance from the spouse rather than a commitment to work on the marriage. The sacrament of reconciliation can be helpful in diminishing this intense anger.

The decision to work on the healing of the infidelity trauma in the sad, angry and fearful victim spouse can be motivated by the desire to protect children from the trauma of separation and divorce, by a compassion for wounded child within the perpetrator, and by the belief that it is God's will to strengthen the marriage.

Fortunately, most unfaithful spouses are open to try to understand and address their conflicts with the exception of those who are overly proud, selfish or controlling.

This research was based on analysis of data from the National Survey of Family and Households. It measured both personal and marital happiness of 5,232 married adults during the late 1980s; 645 or 12.3% reported being unhappily married. They were re-interviewed in the mid 1990s. Some of the findings of the University of Chicago analysis were:

- Among those who rated their marriages as "very unhappy," 80% of those who stuck it out reported themselves as happily married five years later.
- Those spouses who separated were, on average, no happier than those who stayed married.
- Those spouses who separated and remarried were also no happier than those who stayed married.

Dr. Waite stated, "Results like these suggest the benefits of divorce have been oversold."

Work phase

Full disclosure

The early steps in the work phase include being assured that extramarital relationship has ended and that there will be no further contact. Also, there should be full disclosure of the entire history of the adulterous relationship including examining phone records and text messages. Then, the perpetrator should understand the depth of the wound to the marital covenant and request forgiveness of God and of the spouse. In addition there should be a strong commitment to self-knowledge, a willingness to change and to practice fidelity. Each spouse should be able to discuss any weaknesses in their personal lives or in their marital friendship.

The offending spouse needs to be open to discuss the affair on a regular basis in order to resolve mistrust and anger symptoms in the victim. However, prudence is required in regard to amount of time discussing the affair.

Anger resolution

In this phase the first issue most often addressed is the sadness, mistrust and anger in the victim. When the process of understanding and forgiving the offending spouse, who is motivated to change, does not diminish the level of anger, this reaction is often the result of the fear of trusting and becoming vulnerable to the spouse again with an associated concern of further betrayal. Those with faith can be helped by meditating, "Lord take my anger and sadness and help me to grow in trust."

Unfaithful spouses often discover within themselves intense guilt for the harm they have inflicted upon loved ones. They often recognize, too, they fail to address weaknesses within themselves or within the marriage such as a lack of balance or lack of healthy self-giving to the marital friendship.

Also, the offended spouses can have sudden flashbacks to the emotional trauma as do those with posttraumatic stress disorders. At these times the betrayal anger can return with such a great intensity as though the marital betrayal had just occurred. Many spouses report that the only approach which is effective dealing with such anger attacks is spiritual forgiveness that is, giving their justifiable anger to God.

As they come to understand themselves more unfaithful spouses may discover strong resentment within them toward parents who spoiled them or were insensitive to them or toward a spouse who was controlling, emotionally distant or manipulative. Then they recognize that the process of forgiveness is essential in resolving this strong anger and in purifying the memories of the past.

Building trust

Marital infidelity severely damages a spouse's ability to trust. The restoration of trust is essential since it is the foundation for loving. One simply cannot be open to give and to receive love unless one feels safe with one's spouse. Understanding and forgiving the offending spouse not only diminishes anger but it also diminishes fear. However, it is not enough.

The full restoration of trust is nothing short of miraculous. That's right, we need a miracle to restore trust so that a betrayed spouse can open his/her heart to the offending spouse. The wounded heart of the offended spouse screams out, "Protect yourself, put up a wall!" The wounded spouse needs to feel that his/her spouse truly appreciates the depth of the wound and is sincerely motivated to understand and to resolve the conflicts present.

Addressing loneliness

Marital loneliness can also play a role in infidelity. The major causes of this pain from the marital relationships are emotionally distant behaviors, lack of balance with failure to attend to the marital friendships, selfishness, mistrust and anger, controlling behaviors and a lack of faith. While most adults who struggle with significant loneliness and unhappiness tend to blame spouses, it is possible that a degree of marital loneliness can also arise from unresolved childhood sadness in relationships with parents, siblings or friends. In many marriages the loneliness that leads to vulnerability to infidelity arises from both marital stress and unresolved childhood loneliness.

We have worked with a number of couples in which the major conflict was the result of each spouse being in different rooms in the evening with one watching TV and the other reading or working on his/her laptop. A sense of feeling isolated and alone develops and husbands, in particular can become involved in internet pornography and then may develop an affair with someone whom they met on the internet.

Addressing family of origin sadness

Unresolved childhood loneliness can be a significant source of unhappiness, irritability and criticism in married life, as well as in priesthood and in religious life. This emotional pain can lie dormant for many years or decades and then emerge later under various types of stresses.

A major mistake many spouses make is the result of the belief that a loving, giving marital relationship should protect one from unhappiness and anger. Although spousal love is very powerful and comforting, it has limitations and cannot enter an earlier life period and resolve childhood or adolescent loneliness and sadness that is encapsulated by anger as a result of having an emotionally distant or angry father, mother or sibling.

Spouses regularly become angry with their mate because of their sadness and look for ways to blame them for it. The lonely spouse's anger grows and trust diminishes. The loyal, faithful spouse then becomes the scapegoat for unresolved childhood anger that intensifies over time along with the sadness. He or she is no longer treated as a special gift from God and as one's best friend, but, instead, as an enemy who has inflicted great pain upon them. Unconscious hatred of a parent's behaviors deeply wounds the sacred union.

Also, as the anger drives the couple apart, intensifies in the lonely spouse who may attempt to remain loyal to the marriage for a time by engaging in numerous feel-good behaviors in a futile attempt to escape from the childhood pain. When these behaviors fail to bring freedom from the wound of loneliness, comfort and love may then be sought outside the marriage.

Men with rejection and pain in the father relationship usually turn unconsciously to women for comfort although a small percentage will turn to other males, particularly those who were also rejected in childhood by a brother or same sex peers. Women with the father disorder or brother rejection will turn to other men for love. Some women who did not experience comforting love with their mothers will be unfaithful with a woman in an unconscious attempt to fill an emotional emptiness in their lives.

Spouses are encouraged to grow in self-knowledge and to examine honestly their parental and sibling relationships in order to determine if a degree of their loneliness and irritability may be locked-in from childhood. The most common sadness that emerges in our experience is due to an emotionally distant, unaffirming or angry father. However, we have been seeing increasing number of young adults bring into their marriages sadness with their mothers whom they viewed as being turned in upon themselves because of selfishness.

When disappointments are identified, then an attempt is made to understand and to forgive the offending parent. Since anger is strongly related to sadness and in our view in a sense encapsulates resentment, the resolution of this powerful emotion is essential so that spouses do not remain, "prisoners of their past." This forgiveness process is demanding because of the degree and intensity of the resentment that has been denied. The role of faith becomes helpful, if not essential, in addressing the childhood loneliness. The chapter on the lonely, depressed spouse on this site discusses its benefits in the healing process.

Strengthening confidence

Male confidence is essential to being a loving spouse and protective parent. The cultural view of masculinity differs radically from the Christian perspective in that it focuses on success in sports, on a muscular physique, on sexual conquests and on financial success. The Christian view is that male strength comes from the pursuit of a life of virtues in which the goal is to become another Christ to one's wife, children, family, friends and colleagues.

Some men initially pursue the path of virtue, yet fall into marital infidelity because of their failure to address their emotional conflicts. Weaknesses in male confidence from unresolved conflicts with fathers, male siblings and male peers are major reasons for such behavior. While a wife's love is wonderful and strong, however, it cannot enter into the childhood and adolescent stage of development when the damage to male confidence occurred and heal the male identity wound.

The Father Wound

We have worked with many marriages in which they husband can at some stage of the marriage experienced deep unhappiness and irritability because of the emergence of an unresolved father wound with a failure to identify and address it. They then blame their wives for their unhappiness, misdirect anger at them and engage in pornography or in adulterous behaviors in an unconscious attempt to escape from their pain.

The path of healing involves admitting disappointments in the father relationship, understanding the father's childhood and then working at forgiving him. This forgiveness process is arduous but essential because without it the husband can remain, in the words of John Paul II, a prisoner of his past for the rest of his life.

When the weaknesses in male confidence are resolved, husbands regularly seek forgiveness from their wives and from God for misdirecting their anger meant for fathers, male peers and others and no longer blame them for their insecurities and associated sadness.

In this healing process some husbands discover anger with God for allowing them to have such a heavy cross as a lack of eye-hand coordination in childhood. Some husbands report benefit from taking their deeply seated resentment into the sacrament of reconciliation.

Acceptance

Acceptance of the pain and reality of marital infidelity is very difficult, however, it is essential to the healing process. Some spouses try to believe that good can come from the terrible trauma. However, those victimized by adultery can struggle with profound mistrust and rage which is difficult to resolve. This severe betrayal pain has been shown to respond to low doses of serotonin reuptake inhibitors, such as paxil or zoloft, and we recommend their use for severe rage and mistrust in the victim spouse. Also, we have observed this pain diminish in Christians by uniting their suffering to that of Christ on the cross.

Facing the guilt

Human nature desires the honesty that looks squarely at the sinful situation, acknowledges it for what it is, and recognizes oneself as being in need. As Psalm 32:5 reminds us, "Then I declared my sin to you; my guilt I did not hide. I said, 'I confess my faults to the Lord,' and you took away the guilt of my sin" and "If you, O Lord, laid bare our guilt, who could endure it? But with you is found forgiveness; for this we revere you," Psalm 130. The sacrament of reconciliation can be helpful in overcoming this guilt.

Communication about the healing process

A discussion of the process of the healing of the emotional, personality and spiritual conflicts which contributed to the infidelity should be discussed several times per week. Such communication is essential so that the victim spouse can be reassured that intense work is being done to protect the marriage and the family.

Rebuilding the marital friendship

After working on identifying the origins of the infidelity and the diminishing anger, then it is important to work on rebuilding the marital friendship. In this vital process it is important that the perpetrator should have constant availability by phone and check in regularly. Also, it is important to work on the marital friendship by improving the marital communication and time together in the evening while at the same time improving both the romantic & intimate aspect of the marriage. Finally, couples report benefits from daily entrusting their marriage to God and from daily committing to trust one's spouse.

Recognizing the benefits of monogamy

Dr. Brad Wilcox, the director of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia, wrote, "Monogamous, married sex is more likely to deliver long-lasting satisfaction than the quick thrill offered by infidelity, [According to the renowned University of Chicago Sex Survey](#), a monogamous sexual partnership embedded in a formal marriage evidently produces the greatest satisfaction and pleasure. This study found that both women and men like the emotional security that fidelity affords, and are more likely to report that they are anxious, scared and guilty when they have had sex with multiple partners in the last year."

Freedom and loyalty

J.R.R. Tolkien has written about marital fidelity, "Faithfulness in Christian marriage entails great mortification. For a Christian man there is no escape. Marriage may help to sanctify and direct to its proper object his sexual desires; its grace may help him in the struggle; but the struggle remains. It will not satisfy him--as hunger may be kept off by regular meals. It will offer as many difficulties to the purity proper to that state, as it provides easements. No man, however truly he loved his betrothed and bride as a young man, has lived faithful to her as a wife in mind and body without deliberate conscious exercise of the will, without self-denial."

"Those who see marriage as nothing more than the arena of ecstatic and romantic love will be disappointed, When the glamour wears off, or merely works a bit thin, they think they have made a mistake, and that the real soul-mate is still to be found. The real soul-mate too often proves to be the next sexually attractive person that comes along."

The Role of Faith and Infidelity

Here are some powerful statements on infidelity.

"Adultery is an injustice. He who commits adultery fails in his commitment. He undermines the institution of marriage by breaking the contract on which it is based. He compromises the good of human generation and the welfare of children who need their parents' stable union,"

"By its very nature conjugal love requires the inviolable fidelity of the spouses. This is the consequence of the gift of fidelity of the spouses. This is the consequence of the gift of themselves which they make to each other. Love seeks to be definitive; it cannot be an arrangement "until further notice." The "intimate union of marriage, as a mutual giving of two persons, and the good of the children, demand total fidelity from the spouses and require an unbreakable union between them,"

"The consent by which the spouses mutually give and receive one another is sealed by God himself. From their covenant arises 'an institution, confirmed by the divine law..' The covenant between the spouses is integrated into God's covenant with man: 'Authentic married love is caught up into divine love,'"

"The twofold communion with God and with one another is inseparable. Wherever communion with God, which is communion with the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit is destroyed, the root and source of our communion with one another are destroyed. And wherever we do not live communion among ourselves, communion with the Trinitarian God is not alive and true either."

"We can realize how important prayer is with families and for families, in particular for those threatened by division. We need to pray that married couples will love their vocation, even when the road becomes difficult, or the paths become narrow, uphill and seemingly insuperable,"

Finally, a number of believing couples report benefit from asking the Lord to deepen their trust in Him and in each other; to help them grow in self-giving and love, that is, to truly wish for the good of one's spouse; to heal the sadness and anxiety and to strengthen the marital communication and friendship.

Conclusion

We believe that in the majority of marriages the severe wound of infidelity can be resolved and divorce can be prevented.

Research studies demonstrate that couples in troubled marriages who commit themselves to improve them are often happier five years later than couples who divorce. The process of

healing deep emotional wounds of mistrust, betrayal, sadness, loss of confidence is arduous but worth the effort. Also, the role of faith can be particularly helpful in the process rebuilding marital affection and the marital friendship.