



STAY

or

Go?

Overcoming
infidelity and
moving on
after the
betrayal

BY DR. RACHEL NEEDLE

Bill Clinton, Tiger Woods, Elliot Spitzer, David Letterman, John Edwards...and the list goes on and on. What do these men have in common? All are headline makers who have been caught cheating on their spouses. What is often left off the front pages are the feelings of the other half of these couples and how their wives are coping and choosing to handle their respective situations. But now that's all changing. Hillary Rodham Clinton, Elin Nordegren, Silda Wall Spitzer, Regina Lasko and Elizabeth Edwards...after so many women decided to "stand by their man" there has been an increased awareness of what it takes to overcome an indiscretion, especially in the public eye. For many women, the fact that their cheating spouse will not make it on the front page of the tabloids or on the nightly news makes no difference. They feel as exposed and as publicly betrayed. Estimates of marital infidelity in American couples range from 26 to 70 percent among women and 33 to 75 percent among men.

For a modern woman, capable of balancing a high-powered career and family, a failing marriage is often enough to shake her to the core and question her principles. Which then begs the question: stand by your man or leave him behind? Before we can take a look at what leads an individual to that decision, we must understand infidelity and why people cheat.

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Affairs are about boundaries and boundary violations. The limits and flexibility of the couple's boundary are often unspoken agreements between partners. Most people would agree that a partner who has sexual intercourse with a third party, has betrayed him or her. But “lesser” forms of boundary violations could involve flirting, suggestive emails and possibly excessive emotional intimacy. An important factor to consider is if the relationship with the third party is taking away from your present relationship or hurtful to your partner.

Affairs also involve secrecy. Everyone has a right to privacy but secrets (not simply small white lies) often wind up hurting the other partner. Affairs don't happen by accident. They are the culmination of secrets combined with ever increasing levels of boundary violations. Over time these exchanges may become more frequent

and personal.

While each situation is unique, there are some common reasons why people cheat including (but not limited to): opportunity, anger, curiosity, substance abuse, impulsivity, adventure seeking, revenge, loneliness, narcissism and crisis. According to Dr. Michael Adamse a Psychologist in Boca Raton, Florida, one major reason people cheat is because they are “dissatisfied with something in the relationship, either emotionally or sexually”. In other words, something isn't working for them. When one's needs are not being met in a relationship, they have three choices: communicate with their partner about those needs and work towards having them met, end the relationship, or remain in the relationship and get those unmet needs from someone else.

The decision to cheat is not necessarily always a conscious and premeditated one. The emotional

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REBUILDING YOUR RELATIONSHIP

- Decipher the meaning of the affair, and accept and appropriate share of responsibility for it
- Say goodbye to the lover
- Earn back trust (if you're the unfaithful partner), or communicate what you need to trust again (if you're the hurt partner)
- Talk in ways that allow your partner to hear you and understand your pain, and listen in ways that encourage your partner to be open and vulnerable with you
- Recognize how you may have been damaged by early life experiences, and how you can keep those experiences from contaminating your relationship today
- Manage your differences and dissatisfactions, so that you can stay attached even when you don't feel particularly loved or loving
- Become sexually intimate again
- Forgive your partner, and yourself

From *After the Affair* by Janis Abrams Spring



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or physical process leading up to the indiscretion can begin in many ways Relationships can be hard work and require energy be put in to maintain them. For many people the beginning of a new relationship is exciting. The flirtation, the playfulness, the novelty, and even the sneakiness are all spark excitement and sexual desire.

People who engage in an illicit affair often fail to think about what effect possible discovery of the affair would have on their partner. Regardless of the couple and the relationship, if and when an affair is discovered, there will be consequences!

SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO?

When an affair is discovered or disclosed the range of emotions of both partners may be unstable and may shift between shock, sadness, guilt, anger, fear, hopelessness, rage, anxiety, confusion, relief and hurt. Perhaps the greatest of all emotions is often the sense of loss felt by both parties. The decision of whether to stay in the relationship or to leave is a difficult one to make. In the heat of the moment your impulse might be to “leave the bastard” and your friends will no doubt agree! However, Dr. Stanley Althof, a Clinical Psychologist at the Center for Marital and Sexual Health of South Florida, in West Palm Beach, warns that “there are so many ramifications of acting impulsively (financial, social, familial—impact on the children), that such an important decision needs to be made very deliberately, as often times impulsive decisions can cause more difficulties later”.

Beginning the decision making process might take some time. The first step for the partner who has been cheated on, will be to process the emotions that have been brought up as a result of the betrayal. Some people decide not to share the betrayal with friends or family members, because they know that once they do, there is no taking it back. However, this decision leaves the injured person (the individual who has been cheated on) to suffer alone. Seeking confidential psychotherapy to be supported during this difficult time while carefully analyzing and discussing issues can be extremely helpful.

MOVING ON

Moving on regardless of your decision to remain in the relationship or to leave, is not a simple task! Dr. Adamse suggests that “recovering from an affair is a process”. If you do decide to recommit, this process entails “the desire to forgive and move forward” according to Dr. Denny Cecil Van Den Heuvel, the Director of South University’s Masters in Counseling

Program in West Palm Beach Florida. She continues, “if one cannot do that with their partner, then the resentments fester and build and the relationship will ultimately break down”. This does not imply that forgiveness will happen over night, but rather is a process within itself. Sharing in your partners pain and rebuilding trust and intimacy aid in the forgiveness process.

Reestablishing trust is one of the most important, yet difficult tasks lying ahead of a couple where one partner has been unfaithful. “Trust can vanish in seconds and takes years to be re-established” says Dr. Althof. Reestablishing trust and restoring intimacy may take years of work and requires specific changes in behavior so that the injured partner (the partner who has been cheated on) believes that their partner will remain faithful. Too often, the focus is solely on the betrayer’s behavior; it is important to remember that both partner’s contribution to “the affair” require scrutiny and ultimately change.

There are times when cheating can be prevented and here are some suggestions for helping to keep your relationship strong.

- ❖ Communicate! Ongoing communication about needs and satisfaction in the relationship is extremely important.
- ❖ Consciously work on the relationship each day! Make connecting a priority. Schedule time to connect, if you have to, and stick with it. Use this time to talk and listen and be focused on one another.
- ❖ Maintain intimacy, both physical and emotional.
- ❖ Maintain your own mental health.
- ❖ Maintain your sexual health individually and in the relationship.
- ❖ Have fun and keep things exciting! Do something out of the ordinary at least once a month to keep things exciting. One fun idea is to role play picking your partner up at a bar or restaurant and pretending like you have never met before. ▼

For those who do not feel comfortable approaching your physician about these concerns, contact a Florida or AASECT certified sex therapist for help and support. You can find a specialist at: sstarnet.org or aasect.org.

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