

**Your Spouse's Infidelity Revealed:  
Of Course You Are Angry and Scared**  
By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Infidelity can be a component of sexual addiction or relational event(s). It is generally enshrouded in secrecy and dishonesty, with great amounts of time and effort spent to keep it hidden. Spouses find out about the infidelity or sexual addiction in a wide variety of ways. Several are listed below:

- \* Receiving anonymous phone calls from the unfaithful spouse's spurned lover or other parties;
- \* The suspicious spouse finding credit card receipts, phone bills, or other tell-tale signs in the paper trail.
- \* The spouse intercepting phone messages or calls meant for the unfaithful spouse;
- \* The couple being faced with the negative consequences (i.e., legal, financial, career) of infidelity or sexual addiction
- \* The infidelity or sexual addiction being revealed in counseling or in substance abuse treatment.
- \* Catching him/her "in the act".

These are but a few of the ways that a faithful spouse receives the news that their beloved has been unfaithful. Regardless of how the infidelity is revealed, the disclosure or revelation of the infidelity creates or intensifies a crisis within the marital relationship. Spouses often have a sense or an intuition that "something is wrong" before the infidelity is revealed. They may engage in "fact-finding missions" to affirm or deny their own suspicions. Although they are engaged in evidence gathering behavior, they are probably at mixed purposes, with wanting on one hand, to satisfy their need to know the truth, and on the other hand, to be reassured that they are wrong. Usually before the disclosure occurs, there have been accusations and arguments about the faithful spouse's suspicions. Most suspicious spouses will ask questions, make accusations, and confront the unfaithful spouse with pieces of evidence, then believe the unbelievable explanations and denial.

This may go on for awhile or the faithful spouse may step up the efforts to "prove" their suspicions. The compulsion to find out the truth snowballs until there is little else that they can think about. The spouse may feel immobilized by the need to know. The compulsion to "prove" that their suspicions are correct may be about trying to prove to themselves that they are not "crazy", or that the problem is not within themselves. Then again, they may want to be proven wrong, due to fear of having to face making a decision about whether to stay or leave the relationship. Spouses experience a lot of conflicting emotions when faced with infidelity.

Regardless of whether suspicious spouses spend their own time and energy playing detective, or actually hire a private investigator, the need to know is devastating

emotionally. When the distrustful spouse confronts the faithless spouse with the evidence of the infidelity, the disloyal spouse, having spent so much energy in hiding the acting out will usually continue to try to deny the infidelity. At some point, when they feel that they are not believed and cannot successfully maintain the deception, the disloyal spouse will often admit at least some of the facts. They may project blame and responsibility onto the questioning spouse, for drilling them for the information, for "having to lie" to them, or forcing the revelation. Often, more information may be disclosed in the highly emotionally charged discussion.

Although the suspicious spouse feels compelled to gain the information about the infidelity, the truth, even pieces of it, is painful. The faithful spouse will experience anger, hurt, betrayed. They may feel helpless, hopeless, and unloved. The anger may be internalized into depression and despair or externalized into rage and acting out. The "facts" of the infidelity as revealed, seem to be branded into the visual imagery and memory of the shocked spouse. These emotionally bruised and battered spouses complain that the imagery or the memory of the disclosure is ever present in their thoughts and feelings. They continuously replay the visions of catching the spouse "in the act", "the look" that said it all, and the verbal admission of guilt. Many spouses indicate that they feel physically ill, that they can't concentrate, or that they can't do even routine self-care. They indicate that the revelation destroys their emotional and physical well-being.

They replay the minor pieces of evidence, and seemingly unconnected events that now have meaning in the context of the acting out. Spouses obsess about how this could have happened. They question the unfaithful spouse about why they did this to their relationship. They demand an answer to the "why" questions-perhaps believing that the right answers might empower them to make a decision about whether to stay or leave, or once again make their world make sense, or to figure out whose fault it is, and what will be needed to fix it. In seeking to assign responsibility, the wounded spouse looks to his/her own feelings of inferiority, insecurities, and need to control. This endless questioning of self and spouse produces emotional exhaustion. The unfaithful spouse, despite the guilt and shame, feels compassion fatigue and wants to put it in the past and get on with their lives. They often grow impatient with the wounded spouse's questioning and repeatedly bringing up the issue with all the tears and recriminations.

For many unwary spouses, the discovery of the infidelity shakes their sense of the world as they know it. A sense of security and safety is destroyed, leading the shocked spouse to question what else might be an illusion in his/her life. Questioning the "truth" about one's beliefs about a variety of things in life may then begin. The obsessions and ruminations may be an attempt to try to restore some sense of normal reality in your life or to adapt to a "new normal".

Infidelity is so life-changing that betrayed spouses often begin to mark time in terms of the infidelity. For example, when referencing even routine events, they may say something like, "Before the affair, I spent a lot of time cleaning house." Those still in shock and disbelief, who are continuing to try to put together the information to make sense of it all, will discover that the ongoing obsession and rumination is not helping their

mental or emotional health. It is not solving any problems either. It is a normal reaction to the events, but to continue to feed it over time, does not help recovery.

People like to say that time heals all wounds. It is not necessarily so. Spouses that have been betrayed by an unfaithful spouse learn that in order to get on with their lives, that they must do the work of recovery. It can start with a conscious and deliberate attempt to stop obsessing.

Some thought stopping techniques are discussed in Part 2. These are best accompanied by stepping up efforts at self-care, and allowing oneself to experience the range of emotions, identify them, and express them. This is also a good time to acknowledge your own strengths, talents, and skills. While the shock of marital infidelity can be emotionally, mentally, physically, and even spiritually devastating, it doesn't have to derail your life, your self-esteem, or your self-confidence. It does not have to be the deciding factor of whether you can be happy in your life.

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