

# SOS Détresse

## When love goes off the rails - infidelity

**Unfortunately infidelity happens more frequently than we think, or wish to admit.** The cheated partner experiences it as a **most hurtful breach of trust** and a downright betrayal of the relationship. This deep wound and humiliation often causes not only intense anger, but also distress, shame, self-doubt and feelings of guilt. The betrayed partner is **wounded to the core of their femininity or masculinity, and feels destabilised and demeaned with regard to their own attractiveness.**

How the betrayed partner takes it, and what the outlook for the relationship may be, will differ according to whether the betrayal concerns a fleeting romantic escapade or a long-term affair involving an ever greater mesh of lies. Infidelity plays out in various scenarios. It may be the classic one-night-stand, or a brief but passionate affair conducted through secret meetings with the beloved. Equally, it may involve regular extra-marital contact for the purpose of satisfying sexual needs and desires without the creation of any emotional bond; or it may be a more stable couple relationship which is tantamount to leading a double life. In any case, the hurt partner's trust and belief in the relationship are damaged. In the case of long-term unfaithfulness, the hurt occasioned by the breach of trust is further compounded by grievous disappointment, once the partner realises they have been exposed to systematic lies and falsehood over months and even years. **Once the betrayal is revealed, the cheated partner's whole world collapses.**

The degree to which we are personally affected by our partner's infidelity will also be culturally determined i.e. by our concept of a loving relationship. In our contemporary world-view, the prevailing model is romantic love, with very high expectations of a faithful and long-lasting bond; in that context, infidelity is generally viewed as extremely humiliating.

## Infidelity as an alarm bell

Although infidelity shakes the very foundation of a couple's relationship, it does **not necessarily lead to a parting of the ways.** A strong and mutually satisfying bond will probably not be destroyed by unfaithfulness. But as often as not, **something in the relationship was already shattered**, lacklustre or lost before the unfaithfulness occurred. At times, we fail to see the alarm signals that indicate our relationship is headed towards deadlock. At times, we cannot or will not recognise these signals because we are too engrossed in our daily cares of work, of bringing up the children, and so forth. In a way, **infidelity could be said to be one of the most hurtful ways**

**of alerting us to the need for change.** We are brutally and painfully made aware that our relationship is in serious crisis.

## **What are some of the underlying causes of infidelity?**

Infidelity produces a knee-jerk reaction expressed in accusatory and judgmental attitudes. As initial reactions go, this is perfectly natural in view of the deep emotional hurt causing it. **If, however, we remain stuck in this frame of mind, the risk is we dodge making a frank reassessment of our relationship. Yet that scrutiny is necessary for its survival.** This is why understanding the possible causes of a partner's unfaithfulness is so important.

Love, no matter how great, has its ups and downs and periods of crisis. There is no instance of a stable relationship where the intensity of love remains undiminished, giving rise to the same degree of happiness and attachment throughout. **That emotions and relationships constantly evolve is a perfectly natural state of affairs.** The idealised image each partner had of the other, when they fell in love at the beginning, generally wears off in the daily routine of cohabitation. When two people live together for a very long time, they get to know each other intimately; but passion wanes, and the feeling of being someone very special for one's partner gradually disappears. Our hopeful expectation that the initial ecstasy would last forever **can never withstand the reality of day-to-day living.**

A secret love affair can revive **the enchantment of being in love.** On top of that, there is the **attraction of forbidden fruits**, furtive meetings and concealment. Such a relationship is in a completely different league from a stable or marital bond. The particular fascination and intensity of an affair reside in **its freedom from commitment and in its exoticness.** There too, however, passionate love does not last. Many will then realise that **the cohesion forged over the years by the deep bond between long-term partners is stronger than the flames of passion.** As a result, affairs will often founder when the new lover seeks more commitment from the other. The **sense of freedom** promised by this type of relationship is revealed as illusory, thereby cutting it short.

Unfaithfulness may also indicate **the lack or loss of an important element in the relationship**, compensation for which is sought in a liaison with a third party. The erring partner may be looking for affirmation of their masculinity or femininity; they may be expressing a need to be needed; or they may be seeking emotional or sexual intimacy. The driving factor here is **the wish to escape from a relationship that has become too humdrum or inflexible**; it is an attempt to fulfil one's own longings, **but without incurring confrontation with one's partner.** However, the unfulfilled longings are not just those of the partner who looks elsewhere: in most cases, the cheated partner too is frustrated by unfulfilled needs.

There is also a category of individual who engages repeatedly in betrayal, falsehood and hurtful behaviour. These are often people **who do not seriously commit to the relationship**, indeed possibly are incapable of such commitment because of **very negative bonding experiences** during childhood. Living with them is difficult, not to say downright self-destructive. Paradoxically, their attraction may lie in their very

need for autonomy and lack of commitment, but any attempt to establish a bond with them is often doomed to failure. These are people whose deeply-rooted need for admiration and self-affirmation is more likely to be assuaged by conquest rather than by a stable relationship.

## The cost of infidelity

Infidelity usually comes at a high price. Potentially we face losing the familiar landscape of **the world we had built up together**. With our partner at our side, we have overcome many difficulties, enjoyed his or her support and experienced many good times together. We have entrusted ourselves to our partner, and know him or her inside out. **Infidelity puts all of that at risk**. The unfaithful partner is burdened by feelings of inner anguish and guilt, and risks deeply wounding their (former) loved one. If we start leading a double life, we can never again be open with our friends and acquaintances, for fear of giving ourselves away. This initiates a kind of game of hide-and-seek, which in the long run becomes quite gruelling.

## Can our relationship survive infidelity?

Depending on the specific circumstances, a couple's inner resources and ability to cope with such a crisis may vary considerably. **In some cases, mutual trust has been trampled underfoot too often for a continued life together to be considered**. In others, however, an affair can become **the catalyst for a positive development of the relationship**. For this to be possible, both parties must be prepared to engage in an analysis of their relationship and of themselves. Sometimes a temporary separation may help one to clarify issues, to get in touch with one's deeper feelings and desires, and to assess whether or not to continue the relationship.

Rebuilding a couple's relationship will only work if there is a **conscious choice made in favour of one's partner**. Both parties need to clearly declare for each other, and signal their readiness to invest in the preservation of their relationship. **This does not mean that setbacks or doubts will not manifest themselves along the way**. The betrayed partner, in particular, will constantly feel compelled to test their partner's sincerity, so as to be sure that further deception does not pose a threat. Consequently, it is for the cheating partner to demonstrate an unequivocal commitment to the first relationship, as well as to ask for forgiveness.

## Giving the relationship second chance

After a crisis like this, re forging the relationship and rebuilding **mutual trust** is a **lengthy process that may take years**. It demands **patience of the partners** and readiness to follow a difficult and sometimes stony path. **Making time for each other** is very important in bringing about reconciliation. Time is particularly needed to talk to each other in order to discern **what factors might have contributed to the couple growing apart and to the cooling of their love before ever the betrayal took place**. This means that the individual partners need to get back in touch with, and express those needs they had not dared to assert within the relationship before. But especially, they must **develop a positive vision of how the relationship might look like in the future** and find ways and means of living that

out. Equally importantly, they need to share good experiences again and inject new life into their relationship.

One of the main foundations of a sound relationship is trust; another is the **generosity to forgive**. Forgiveness of a partner's unfaithfulness is anything but easy; yet it is indispensable if the relationship is to be given a second chance. Forgiveness most certainly does not imply condoning misbehaviour. What it does imply is that **we somehow find it in ourselves to accept what cannot be undone, no matter how painful that may be**. It takes time to reach this frame of mind; for we have first to overcome the pain. For as long as our internal monologues, as well as our dealings with our partner, are dominated by accusation and faultfinding; for as long as outbursts of rage and desire for revenge continue to occur, we are far from having resolved the crisis. We can only genuinely forgive once **we have come to terms with what has happened**, and no longer feel that the betrayal casts doubt on the validity of every positive experience we have ever enjoyed with that person.

In this situation it is highly recommended that the couple seek professional support. Unfaithfulness often reawakens earlier emotional injuries to the betrayed partner, and this makes it difficult for them to regain confidence in the relationship. **Couple counselling can provide a safe, neutral framework within which to probe these earlier hurts and the present breach of trust**, and to learn how to interact with each other in a new way.

## **Openness is the first step.**

Before the couple can ever regain any positive momentum after a betrayal, the offending partner has to confess it. Were it only for the sake of honesty and respectfulness, a partner cannot be left in the belief that all is well. Once we find the courage **to assume responsibility for our actions**, our partner is given in all fairness the opportunity of choosing whether to fight to preserve the relationship or to put an end to it. Under no circumstances, however, should our partner be confronted with the truth blurted out on the spur of the moment. We must first of all try to view the situation dispassionately, so as to understand exactly how important the illicit relationship is to us, and what our feelings for our long term partner are. Clarifying matters with one's partner must be done in a considered and circumspect manner, so as not to inflict more pain than is absolutely necessary.