STAYING TOGETHER: THE JOURNEY OF HEALING AFTER INFIDELITY

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Abstract

Relationships are an important aspect of a fulfilling life. They can bring joy and pleasure or pain and devastation. One of the most detrimental issues within the context of committed relationships is infidelity, and subsequently it is one of the most prevalent issues seen in therapy. Although it is a common presenting problem in couples therapy, research on the treatment and healing of infidelity is limited. A majority of the literature is focused on the clinician’s point of view rather than the couples’ perspective. The purpose of this study is to present the results of a qualitative study of eight public weblogs in which individuals and couples described their experience with healing from infidelity. Utilizing grounded theory procedures, the researchers are seeking to identify factors outlined by the bloggers that contributed to their healing experience.

Background

- Over 90% of Americans consider extramarital affairs morally unacceptable (Laumann & Redmenn, 2000)
- 25% of men and 15% of women admitted to having at least one affair outside of their marriage (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994)

Definition:

- Infidelity can be defined in several ways, with a range of behaviors, including, but not limited to: having an affair, extramarital relationship, cheating, sexual intercourse, oral sex, kissing, fondling, emotional connections (beyond friendships), internet relationships, and pornography use (Bow & Hartnett, 2005a)
- Infidelity is any form of betrayal to the implied or stated contract between partners regarding intimate exclusivity (Fife, Weeks, & Gambescia, 2007)

Types:

- Sexual Infidelity
- Emotional Infidelity
- Combined-Type Infidelity (sexual & emotional) (Glass & Wright, 1992)
- Internet/Cyber Infidelity (Hertlein & Piercy, 2008)

Prevalence:

- Clinicians state that 40% of clients have had an affair (American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy)

Method

Participants & Data Collection:

This study included data from eight separate weblogs. In order to be included, participants had to experience infidelity within their committed relationship, remain together, and provide detailed accounts of their process of healing and recovery. Seven participants were female and one was male.

Qualitative Analysis:

Qualitative analysis was conducted by a team of 5 researchers. The analysis process was guided by grounded theory methodology initially utilizing a process of constant comparison, which is characterized by continually moving in and out of the data to form conceptual categories (Harry, Sturges, & Klingner, 2005). Open coding was used to find key terms and themes. Axial coding was used to identify and group intersecting themes. Selective coding was used to designate how the themes pertain to each other and what the narratives reveal (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Harry et al., 2005). Team members independently analyzed the data and met together to review and discuss the emerging findings. Discrepancies in findings were discussed until a consensus was reached regarding the codes, themes, and relationships between categories. Multiple researchers were used to analyze the data in order to prevent a myopic view of the data and to increase the trustworthiness of the findings.

Results

Preliminary results indicate recovery and healing is a long, continuous process. Some compare healing to a roller coaster of emotions of which forgiveness is an integral part. It appears that experiencing these stages on a continuum may lead to forgiveness and healing. The key emerging themes are as follows:

- Faith: Finding strength and courage through a prayer
- Awareness/Perpective and Personal Accountability: Both partners taking responsibility for the demise of the relationship, as well as changing thoughts and behaviors
- Counseling: Seeking out professional help to alleviate challenges and to foster better communication
- Commitment to the Relationship: Reevaluating and setting healthy boundaries and agreeing to work on the relationship
- Honesty: Personal versatility, as well as between partners
- Forgiveness: Involves empathy, humility, and an apology (Fife, Weeks, & Fillert, 2013)

Conclusion

Many committed relationships will be affected by infidelity. Some couples will choose to remain together and work on the relationship. The results of this study suggest that it is possible to overcome the anguish of infidelity and find love and happiness again. However, healing is not a simple or easy process. Forgiveness seems to be a necessary and critical component of the healing process, and many seek therapy to help.

The complexity of emotions that follow from infidelity leaves therapists and couples in a delicate and challenging predicament. The results of this study highlight important aspects of healing that are grounded in the experience of individuals and couples who have experienced and overcome many of the effects of infidelity. This information can be valuable for therapists who work with couples through this traumatic experience. Further study should include accounts and insight from couples that have experienced and moved past infidelity with self-described success.

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Note

The study presented in this poster is part of a larger study investigating the process of healing from infidelity. Questions and comments can be addressed to bolick@unl.nevada.edu.