

Talking About an Affair

What follows refers to a couples relationship in which ...

Person A = the person who did not have the affair

Person B = the person who had the affair

The affair has become known to both parties.

Initial Couples Conversations

Decisions regarding whether and when to talk about an infidelity are initially controlled by Person A.

Initially decisions regarding how to talk about the infidelity are primarily made by Person A. In the earlier stages this is most often asking for details, although some people prefer not to talk about details at all.

Person B must be honest, however they may moderate their delivery of information with sensitive judgements.

Conversations with Others

For both Person A and B talking about the affair with friends who know their relationship and who will remain impartial is most productive and most helpful for eventual healing. Conversations with friends who 'take your side' are more usual. These types of conversations initially lend some support however there is a danger that, and probably more so for Person A, they may become stuck in judgement and opinion and this can hinder their progress toward healing. The words of Bill Bullard and George Eliot are important here:

"Opinion is really the lowest form of human knowledge. It requires no accountability, no understanding. The highest form of knowledge is empathy for it requires us to suspend our egos and live in

another's world. It requires profound purpose larger than the self kind of understanding."

Conversation Change

If the relationship is to have a genuine chance of reconciliation conversations about the affair need to change from asking for details to developing understanding. If the conversation becomes stuck in asking for details or opinionated judgement then an unproductive negative feedback loop develops in which Person A attaches strongly to hurt and has great difficulty moving on. Person B may eventually become frustrated and discouraged and feel as though there is nothing they can do because they are stuck in seeming never ending apology. There can also be an attraction by Person A toward playing the ultimate trump card, "You are the one who had the affair". This is potentially damaging to recovery and interferes with the conversation change. A genuine difficulty here is that sometimes Person A believes they did nothing wrong and they do not need to change and that all the change is required by Person B. If this occurs then Person A is blindsided by the process of their relationship. If, under these conditions, both parties agree to reconcile the relationship then one possible outcome is that the relationship will become unsatisfying and the same, or similar, old problems will re-emerge.

When the conversation changes any specific conversation may be instigated by either Person. This is because the couple is now engaging in forming a mutual understanding of what went wrong and what to do about it.

The change in conversation requires genuine courage because both parties will discover that there were problems in their relationship that they did not openly deal with or resolve in positive ways. There is a realization here that together they created unhappiness and the affair has been one outcome of this. Sometimes people will defend their position (their ego) rather than look inside in an honest enquiring manner.

The conversation change also requires great empathy. Each person will find it necessary to attempt as far as they are able to be the other and feel what that is like.

An emerging understanding from the conversation change is helpful in creating a new more rewarding and mutually supportive relationship.

This creation requires the learning and developing of new processes within the relationship because use of the old processes is more likely to recreate what was before rather than something fundamentally different. These new processes are in the general family of collaborative communication rather than the more often encountered points scoring adversarial communication. They require that members of the couple be honest and especially when they are up against a personal vulnerability where they would more usually be defensive.

Early Stage of Recommitment

After working through the initial highly charged emotions a couple may decide they want, or at least want to try for the relationship. At this stage they are engaging in a personal contract and commitment with each other involving a desire to work on their individual and relationship issues and make positive changes. Much will be asked of each party, in particular the courage to be with, in some cases, extremely unpleasant emotions and thoughts. For Person A, a common stumbling block is in the area of trust. They may encounter thoughts that their partner is being unfaithful again, or that they were in the past so how can they ever trust. It is necessary to see these thoughts for what they are i.e. arising from hurt and wanting to protect from imagined future hurt. It requires that Person A is prepared to be with these thoughts and emotions but not let them dictate what their behaviour must be. They may encounter a very strong trigger and it will feel rather like the moment they first found out about the affair. The emotions and thoughts will demand an immediate resolution but actions based upon such demands will be quite destructive to the relationship. At this stage Person A needs both courage and mindfulness to embrace their recommitment to at least try for the relationship and honour this both for themselves and their partner. This means encountering the unpleasantness – actually being with it but not acting on it in a self-protective manner. It is helpful to admit what they are experiencing to their partner in a non-blaming way and to talk through it. It can also be helpful to talk

through these episodes with a friend who has the ability to be impartial.

For Person B great patience will be required to help their partner through triggering episodes like the one mentioned above. Sometimes Person B can become frustrated at how long it can take for their partner to trust again and not act out of ongoing hurt feelings. For the first 6 months the hurt may be rather raw and easily triggered, however gradual change in behaviour will eventually become noticeable. Person B may experience a lot of guilt, it is difficult to watch your partners hurt behaviour and not experience strong pangs of guilt. Protecting yourself from this guilt is a sure path to relationship destruction. Expressing the guilt to your partner may not result in empathy from them. It can seem as if you are caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place. It is necessary to discover what lay at the bottom of your actions and face this with realism and gentleness of self. If this isn't done the probability is towards repeating unhelpful behaviours. This is true for both Person A and B.

Couples who have the willingness and strength to traverse the journey can experience a relationship that is far more real, mutually supportive and rewarding than what they were capable of before the affair.

The three keys are looking inside and revealing this, empathy, and learning new more effective processes.

Courage is a prerequisite.

Note: All of the above applies to a situation where there has been an affair and the couple are interested in attempting a reconciliation. The above would need some modification where the couple is not interested in reconciliation but is interested in learning from the experience or where both parties had an affair.

The above does not apply to a situation where one or both members of the couple have a recognised sexual disorder or if one member is a serial sex offender.