

After The Storm

by Esther Perel

The Affair In Retrospect

The desire to find happy endings for sad human stories is probably lodged in most couples therapists' DNA. When the "sad story" is about infidelity that threatens a marriage, therapists generally aim for their favored resolution: saving the marriage. As a field, we've tended to think about this story in terms of a straightforward, three-part narrative: Part 1: A couple is shattered by the discovery of an affair and comes to see us. Part 2: We help them get through the immediate crisis, tend to the underlying wounds in the marriage, and then take a deeper look at childhood scars. We provide compassion and advice as needed, and encourage new trust, forgiveness, and intimacy in the relationship. Part 3: As our preferred denouement, the couple leaves therapy weeks or months later, their marriage repaired, stronger, even transformed—or at least improved. We consider treatment a success; the couple has weathered the storm. Of course, some couples refuse this neat storyline and, instead, use therapy as a gateway out of the marriage altogether. But, hopefully, they still live happily ever after.

However, we typically have no idea what really happens "ever after." Helping couples recover from the immediate crisis is critical, but what happens to them after they leave therapy? Did the insights gleaned carry the couple through the years of marriage, the slings and arrows of ordinary domestic fortune? Was there a brief, second honeymoon before the marriage reverted back to its pre-therapy condition? Did they file for divorce once out of the therapist's benevolent gaze? Did either spouse commit more transgressions? Unless we're among the few therapists who seek periodic feedback from our clients, we simply don't know, and, without knowing what impact our treatment had on these couples, we have little idea of what worked and why. When couples leave us, we're looking forward to what their future holds; however, I'm intrigued by what we might learn from looking back.

For several years, I've been contacting couples I've treated to find out more about the long-term impact of the infidelity that brought them to therapy. With those couples who've remained together in the intervening years, I offered a free, follow-up interview to discuss how they regard the infidelity retrospectively, and how they integrated the experience into the ongoing narrative of their relationship. All marriages are alike to the degree that confronting an affair forces the couple to reevaluate their relationship, but dissimilar in how the couple lives with the legacy of that affair. I already knew the marriages I was tracing in these follow-up interviews had survived; now I wanted to assess the quality of that survival. What were the

useful shock absorbers that sustained the couple? Did they think that therapy had helped?

Specificities notwithstanding, I identified three basic patterns in the way couples reorganize themselves after an infidelity—they never really get past the affair, they pull themselves up by the bootstraps and let it go, or they leave it far behind.

In some marriages, the affair isn't a transitional crisis, but a black hole trapping both parties in an endless round of bitterness, revenge, and self-pity. These couples endlessly gnaw at the same bone, circle and recircle the same grievances, reiterate the same mutual recriminations, and blame each other for their agony. Why they stay in the marriage is often as puzzling as why they can't get beyond their mutual antagonism.

A second pattern is found in couples who remain together because they honor values of lifelong commitment and continuity, family loyalty, and stability. They want to stay connected to their community of mutual friends and associates or have a strong religious affiliation. These couples can move *past* the infidelity, but they don't necessarily transcend it. Their marriages revert to a more or less peaceful version of the way things were before the crisis, without undergoing any significant change in their relationship.

For some couples, however, the affair becomes a transformational experience and catalyst for renewal and change. This outcome illustrates that therapy has the potential to help couples reinvent their marriage by mining the resilience and resourcefulness each partner brings to the table.

Stuck in the Past

"Every time I can't get Marc on the phone, I'm reminded of how he wouldn't answer when he was with the other women," says Debbie, still bitter three years after she discovered his affair—the latest in a string of extramarital dalliances. Married to Marc for 14 years, she decided to remain with him ostensibly to preserve the family. She constantly makes him feel that he's lucky she didn't kick him out, as if he's the only one who stands to lose everything they've built if they divorce.

Since the transgression, Debbie has assumed a sense of moral superiority, believing that Marc has never fully owned up to the wrongness of his behavior. In her eyes, forgiving him wouldn't repair the marriage, but would instead effectually give him a clean slate, allowing him to feel that he no longer has any reason to feel guilty. Her refusal to "let bygones be bygones," as she sarcastically put it, was evident when they talked about sex. "I want to make love," Debbie said, "but it would be as if I'm telling him everything is OK now." They haven't had sex since the affair three years ago, except during the few days right after the discovery, when sex is often used to ward off loss.

There's no way that he can be reassuring about his renewed commitment to her, Marc says, when she only responds to him with biting sarcasm and condescension. Often, he adds, she ruins what might be perfect moments between them—their daughter's piano recital or a dinner with friends. "There *are* no perfect moments," she sneers. With a tired voice, he tells her, "I'm here and I'm ready to rebuild." She replies, "I haven't made up my mind." She felt so rejected by Marc that she still doesn't feel that he really wants to be with her, she explains. Their dialogue has become rigid, narrow, and predictable.

When Debbie brings up the affairs, Marc alternates between justifying and blaming himself. He says that she was no innocent bystander, citing her continual criticism of him and hair-trigger temper that predated his adulteries. While the dismal state of their marriage before his affairs was a joint production, Marc says, Debbie refuses to take any responsibility for her part in the decline of the relationship in the past *or* the present. He thinks he's expressed shame, guilt, and remorse, but it just won't ever be enough. Infidelity remains at the epicenter of their relationship, and they tag it onto every disagreement between them.

In fact, it's likely that the pair would have had the same miserable interactions had there been no infidelity. Couples like these live in a permanent state of contraction, sharing a cell in marital prison. To the betrayed spouse, the betrayer becomes the sum total of the transgressions, with few redeeming qualities. To the betrayer, the betrayed spouse becomes the sum total of a vengeful fury. I'm reminded of this phrase: "Resentment is like swallowing poison and waiting for the other person to die."

When couples like Marc and Debbie come to therapy, it's often at the insistence of the partner who endured the affair, who seeks somebody who can honor his or her grief, dismay, and

turmoil. Just as often, betrayed partners need moral confirmation, viewing themselves as the victims and their partners as perpetrators, if not unredeemable villains. A first step is explaining to them that wholesale condemnation distracts them from tackling the real relationship issues. I introduce a neutral perspective that allows us to explore the motives and meaning of the affair. But in these highly reactive couples, there's little room for neutrality, because the partners take the call for self-reflection as a personal attack: "Are you saying that because I fall asleep at 9 o'clock every night that it's my fault he had an affair?" a betrayed spouse will practically shriek. "So *what* if I want nothing to do with you sexually? I refuse to take the blame for your cheating!"

I also have to address the obsession with the affair that seems to stay at the center of these relationships, sometimes for years. The betrayed person relentlessly replays the stories in his head and hunts for lies, even if it's humiliating to do so. He turns himself into an amateur detective. One betrayed partner told me, "I check her computer, I go into her phone. When I left for a weekend, I kept calling home and got no answer. When I found out that she'd left the kids with her sister, I instantly thought she was seeing *him* again." To which his wife answered with bitter resignation, "He never actually asks me, he just assumes." Accurate information—the spouse *was* engaged in some perfectly innocent activity—diffuses the distrust, but the calm lasts only until the next bout of insecurity. This cycle makes it impossible for the betrayed partner to feel loved again.

I believe that genuine trust rests on our ability to tolerate what we don't know about the other, and as long as we're driven to uncover every detail, we can't trust. In these couples, past experiences of abandonment and rejection loom large and keep trust from being reestablished. Reclaiming a sense of reality after the revelation of the affair is essential for the betrayed spouse, but some remain tethered to their investigative quest—rifling through credit card statements and cell phone bills, repeatedly pressing the browser's "back" button, listening in on phone calls.

In an effort to allay their anxieties, these spouses establish a regime of control in which intimacy is confused with surveillance. Their myriad questions are less about honoring closeness than about intrusiveness. The interrogations, the injunctions, and even the forensic evidence fail to assuage their fundamental fears. I help them move their stance from detective to researcher or explorer. Rather than scavenge for the sordid details, it would be more enlightening to ask questions that probe the meaning of the affair, like: How did your lover illuminate other parts of you? Did you think of me when this was going on? Were you afraid to lose me, our family, the kids? At what point did you realize you wanted to stay? If an

affair is a solo enterprise, making meaning of it becomes a joint venture. Couples like Marc and Debbie, unfortunately, don't get to these questions. They want their partner fixed. For them, therapy seems more a part of the penance rather than a mending experience—there's no absolution in sight.

One feature fueling an inability to move on can be the unyielding hurt. I asked another of my clients what he longs for in his relationship, now that he's five years past his wife's multiple affairs. He replies, "To go back to six years ago." He tells her, "I used to think, no matter what, I was your man. And you just abandoned me." For him, it's the inconsolable grief that keeps him feeling unsafe and in a permanent state of unhappiness. For her, a tortured sense of guilt and failure is unending. Witnessing his unbearable pain reinforces the magnitude of her shame and guilt. In the meantime, life with children and work goes on, but the emotional abscess doesn't drain.

For these couples, it's hard to look back because they never went forward. The affair has become the narrative of their union. The marriage may technically survive, but their couplehood is dying on the vine. When infidelity becomes the hallmark of a couple's life, something has been broken that can't be made whole again. The relationship is permanently crippled.

The Survivors

On Friday, Joanna was all set to go. On Saturday, she couldn't sign the lease. She'd fantasized about the moment for almost two years: she'd leave her husband, Michael, move in with her lover, Eric, and be bathed in a state of bliss and sensuality that had been sorely missing from her life. Eric had showered her with affection and a sense of importance—attention she'd only ever received from her children, since Michael had excused himself from these gestures, saying he wasn't that kind of guy. Lassitude had gradually crept into her marriage, leaving her feeling more attached to the habit of being married than to the man she'd once loved.

Joanna's transgression was an attempt to recapture what she'd shared previously with Michael and didn't want to live without: a sense of importance and belonging, relief from loneliness, and a feeling that life was basically good. Unfulfilled longings for feelings like these drive

many of today's adulterers. Joanna carefully plotted her departure, but when push came to shove, she couldn't do it. She thought about the 24 years she and Michael had been together, their unwavering friendship, his dependability, the comforts of their life, and, most important, her kids—realizing that once she turned her affair into her primary relationship, there'd be no turning back. Often people begin to see what they want to preserve at the moment that their affair is about to come out of hiding. Perhaps not surprisingly, this is also when they realize that the lover was meant to be exactly that: a lover.

Joanna didn't want to leave Michael partly out of fear and partly because she still loved him. It wasn't clear which was stronger, fear or love. "Part of me was very disappointed in myself for not being able to leave Michael, and I wondered if I was letting go of the love of my life," Joanna recalled. "But part of me felt relief that I was going to stay and not destroy my family." Michael alternated between panic and rage, between begging her to stay and chasing her away. "I couldn't believe she was ready to jeopardize everything for this guy, Eric, and I felt trapped because I suspected that her reasons to stay -didn't have much to do with me. It was more about what we *had* than about who *I* was."

At the core of Joanna's predicament is a conflict of values, inherent in the affair itself, not just in its resolution. When people talk about their fears, often they're really pondering their values. When they say, "I don't want to break up my family," they're also saying that they hold dear family continuity. When they refer to the shared history with their spouse, they express their respect for loyalty and commitment. Following Cupid's arrows is akin to losing one's moral compass, and, in this sense, the affair brings about an identity crisis: how to reconcile the enchantment of an experience with the feeling that it's fundamentally wrong. For Joanna and others in her place, lying and deceiving are more agonizing than thrilling. They don't set out to betray their partners. Sometimes, as in the case of Joanna, they're motivated by a yearning for what they're no longer willing to live without: passion—not in the narrow, sexual sense, but as

a quest for aliveness and erotic vitality. Although a glimmer of passion can be intoxicating, many of us shudder at the prospect of losing everything. The volatility and unpredictability of desire is scary.

For these partners, sexual excitement and what they regard as self-centered desires for more romantic "fulfillment" aren't powerful enough incentives to turn them away from the more meaningful, long-term rewards and vital obligations of family. They hold themselves to the premise "when you marry, you make a commitment and you must honor it." These couples value family integrity, security, continuity, and familiarity over the rollercoaster of risky romantic love. There can be deep, enduring love and loyalty in these couples, but passion

doesn't feature prominently on the menu. Doing what's right creates a wholeness that helps the unfaithful person come to terms with the sacrifices they make. However, while people's values can remain intact, the decision to stay in the marriage can be heart-wrenching.

When I work with these couples, I always include joint and individual sessions, keeping all information from the individual sessions confidential. The purpose of solo meetings is to provide a private space in which each partner can resolve his or her individual predicament, no matter how long it takes. With these couples, the therapeutic process is one of reasoning and rational thinking, as a way to temper the turbulence of their emotions. Our sessions are meant to shepherd them through the crisis and to anchor their relationship. Couples like Joanna and Michael had carefully crafted a path for themselves in their marriage, and much of what they seek in post-affair therapy is to reclaim a sense of control. They aren't looking for massive renovations in their relationship; they simply want to come back to the home they know and rest on a familiar pillow. On the road back, they make amends, they renew their vows, and they make sure to plug any leaks.

In therapy, I explore the riches of the love affair, what they found in their relationship with the "other," and what they can take from it into their primary relationship. We draft the new amendments for their life, in the singular and plural. We weigh the pain of ending the affair—that fact that "it's the right thing to do, but it hurts"—and I always ask how they imagine themselves 10 years down the road.

With the betrayed person, we examine the ebbs and flows of trust, the sense of impermanence that snuck into the relationship, and their wish to return to familiarity. Therapy offers couples like Joanna and Michael a place to evaluate the fundamentals of their lives. We also address the hurt that persists even though the couple remains together. One of my patients told me, "A few years ago, when I had a car accident, I remember thinking how much support I got from friends and family. With a broken leg, the pain is visible, everybody knows you're suffering, and everybody sympathizes. But when a couple decides to stay together after an affair, it's easy to think everything is fine. People no longer bring it up, and you're left living with an invisible pain."

Joanna and Michael ultimately were able to resume a life similar to the one they'd had before the crisis. "We weren't ready to divorce over this, but we don't see the affair as being good in any way. It was a kind of temporary insanity," Michael sums up. Listening to them, it's clear that they're both relieved that they were able to pull through. Once in a while, Michael can feel a surge of insecurity, since Joanna and Eric occasionally meet professionally, but his suspicion is intermittent and easily absorbed. He'll inquire, "When's the last time you met him? Does he

have a new girlfriend? Do you talk about personal things?" On occasion, humor is the perfect antidote. Once, when Michael asked Joanna if she thought Eric was still interested in her, she told him, "I don't think so, but here's his telephone number. You can call him and ask."

The Explorers

"The affair was a shock that forced us to get unstuck," was Julian's unequivocal response in an interview five years after I'd seen him and his wife, Claire, in couples therapy. "I agree that our relationship is now much better than it ever was," said Claire as she turned to Julian and added, "but I still think that you acted like a jerk. You didn't need to cheat on me to make the point that our marriage was in trouble." While they still disagree on the way Julian delivered his "message," they agree his affair transformed their marriage.

Julian had first set eyes on Claire standing in front of him at the Student Coop 15 years earlier, and he made sure to get her phone number before she reached the cashier. With her beguiling smile and the mysterious way she hesitated ever-so-slightly before giving her name and number, she hooked him. In those first moments, they began to take on the roles that would continue into their marriage. Julian would be the initiator—of social life, of sex, of decisions about vacations—and Claire's protector from the world. Claire would be the graceful, albeit somewhat tremulous, helpmate, always following his lead, reassured that, with his firm and reliable hand on the helm, she never needed to worry. What came as a surprise for Julian through the years, however, was the volume of worries he was expected to assuage: almost anything could be fodder for Claire's anxiety. She could never arrive early enough at the airport; her trepidation about hosting a dinner began days in advance; and for her to feel comfortable about having sex, conditions needed to be perfect—which they rarely were. Over the years, he grew tired of the veto power she was imposing on their lives: "You want to go out?" he'd ask. "NO," she'd respond. "Let's get together with some friends." "NO." "I want to make love to you." "NO."

With so many noes ringing in his ears, Julian welcomed the resounding yes from Emma, whom he met on a business trip and continued to sleep with for a year and a half. It wasn't just that he wanted more sex: he wanted to recapture the feeling of playfulness and freedom that sex used to allow him. The affair with Emma brought with it a sense of vitality that he'd been missing. With her, he threw off the growing lethargy that had smothered his life. He once again experienced the excitement, attention to preliminaries, sense of timelessness that fills lovers' hearts.

Claire found out about Julian's affair through accidentally discovering e-mail messages. Deeply jolted, she sought individual therapy and reached out to her friends. But along with giving her support, they asked her to see that, while Julian had betrayed her trust, she herself had—as she later put it—"betrayed my vows." Knowing that Claire didn't want to lose the man she loved, her friends encouraged her to fight for him. So she reached out to him, and they talked with each other as they hadn't done in years, sharing feelings and thoughts that had long been tucked away. As the conversations evolved and they began to narrow the distance between them, they felt awakened into a new experience of connection, in which they felt both great pain and excitement, as they never had before.

When couples like Julian and Claire begin to find their way back to each other, there's often a combustive rekindling of desire, a mix of anxiety and lust, which many couples are shy to admit. In this emotional maelstrom, couples swing between starkly opposing feelings: one minute it's "Fuck you"; the next minute it's "Fuck me." Then it's "Get out of here!" Followed by "Don't ever leave me!" Throughout this drama, Claire and Julian managed to sustain these swings without either one marching off to a divorce lawyer. Being able to express and accept such a wide range of feelings without demanding a premature "closure" made them good candidates for a positive resolution. Tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty is vital to discovering a space from which a more creative and robust relationship can emerge.

In my joint work with Julian and Claire, I did something that some therapists might consider risky: I suggested she invite Julian to talk about his experience with Emma. Paradoxically, I've found that this type of openness about one's affair, rather than being destructive and painful, can be a deeply affecting demonstration of loyalty to the spouse. Telling one's partner, "Okay, I'll show you who I am. This is what happened, and this is how I felt about it" can be a way of saying "I love you and never really wanted to leave you; I want to tell you this because you're so important to me." Indeed, Claire found that having Julian talk about his intimacy with another woman was itself an expression of intimacy with *her*—increasing their bond with each other.

Sometimes the crisis of infidelity helps couples make a crucial distinction, one between a relationship based on *exclusiveness* and one grounded in the *uniqueness* of their connection. Exclusivity depends on establishing rigid boundaries: the emphasis is on "not permitting," "restricting," "not sharing with others." Before the affair, Claire and Julian had increasingly based their relationship on this kind of external framework to set them apart as a couple. In contrast, through our work together, they learned to value what was distinctive about the

meaning they held for each other, with the emphasis on why they "chose to be with each other" rather than what was "forbidden with someone else." Ultimately, this enhanced sense of "us" is the most powerful analgesic for relationships at the edge, soothing the pain and promising a prospect of renewal.

Couples like Julian and Claire manage to turn the turmoil of an affair into an enlarging emotional journey. Each one takes appropriate responsibility for the deterioration of the relationship, focusing not only on mending the breach produced by the affair, but on rebuilding the emotional foundation of the marriage. Such couples tend to identify the affair as one event—but not the definitive event—in their history together. Rather than seeing the affair purely as an act of failure and betrayal, they transform it into a catalyst for change, an inspiration for a rebirth of connection.

All kinds of unexpected discoveries can come out of the crisis of infidelity. Claire, having had to reconnect with her own resources to weather the storm with Julian, experienced a new sense of self-reliance and a new willingness to take the initiative. As she learned how to express her sexual yearnings, Julian was surprised to find a partner with a strength and enthusiasm he'd never encountered before. At the same time, no longer the lone decision-maker in the marriage, he found himself missing the ability to make decisions for the two of them. While richer and more interesting, the relationship felt less secure to both of them. "I'm not sure at all where this is going to take us, but dull it certainly isn't," Julian said.

Reinventing the Self

Couples who can successfully recover from an infidelity often display a significant shift in language: From "you" and "me" to "our," from "when you did this to *me*" to "this was an event in *our* life." They talk about "When we had our crisis," recounting a shared experience. Now they're joint scriptwriters, sharing credit for the grand production of their life together.

Couples who think in absolutes are less able to integrate the infidelity into the new substance of their marriage and likelier to get stuck in the past. For them, the affair is entirely bad and destructive, a transgression against commitment and morality. Complete remorse, followed by dramatic confession, unqualified promises of "never again," unconditional forgiveness, and

categorical absolution are the only acceptable outcomes. But things are more fluid for those who see an affair as an event that, no matter how painful, may contain the seeds of something positive. Such couples understand that forgiveness doesn't happen all at once, and they feel OK with partial forgiveness. To be sure, after betrayal, trust isn't likely to be total. When declarations like "How can I ever trust you again?" are made by such couples, I often interject, "Well it depends. Trust for what?"

Above all, what sets apart couples who use therapy to turn an infidelity into a transformative experience is that they come to recognize that it doesn't provide clear-cut *answers*, but a nonjudgmental forum in which to discuss their ideas of betrayal, both sexual and emotional. They discover that such discussions can become the basis for their new relationship. While by no means giving up on the idea of commitment, they learn to redefine it in a way that will prevent the recurrence of secret affairs and betrayals. For them, monogamy means mutual emotional loyalty, fidelity, and commitment in a primary relationship, even if, for some, it doesn't necessarily mean sexual exclusiveness.

They find out that infidelity doesn't necessarily point to flaws in the relationship. Such partners see the affair as less a statement about the marriage than a statement about themselves. When we seek the gaze of another, it isn't always our partner we're turning away from, but the person we ourselves have become. We're seeking not another partner, but another self. Couples who reinvent themselves can bring this other self into their existing relationship.

People stray for many reasons—tainted love, revenge, unfulfilled longings, and plain old lust. At times, an affair is a quest for intensity, a rebellion against the confines of matrimony. An illicit liaison can be catastrophic, but it can also be liberating, a source of strength, a healing. And frequently it's all these things at once. Some affairs are acts of resistance; others happen when we offer no resistance at all. Straying can sound an alarm for the marriage, signaling an urgent need to pay attention to what ails it. Or it can be the death knell that follows a relationship's last gasping breath. I tell my patients that most of us in the West today will have two or three marriages or committed relationships in our lifetime. For those daring enough to try, they may find themselves having all of them with the same person. An affair may spell the end of a first marriage, as well as the beginning of a new one.

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