

AFFAIRS:

I frequently meet couples that are trying to deal with the aftermath of an long-term extramarital affair. The stages of dealing with this are often predictable. The emotional distress is usually devastating for the betrayed partner. Assuming, for the sake of this article, that the betrayer is the husband, I find that the needs and issues experienced by both partners are uniquely different. It is not uncommon for me to meet with the man who says something like the following:

“What happened was a terrible mistake. I regret it terribly and want to reassure my wife that I love her, that it was a once off, and that I was acting out of character. I realise now the mistake I made and that I nearly threw away our marriage. What I want now is to put the past behind us and start a new leaf. I want my wife to know that I love her and I can promise her that nothing like that will ever happen again.”

That sounds good you might say. That’s exactly what you would hope to hear if you were the betrayed spouse you might think. However, these words are in fact a long way off the mark in terms of what the wife needs to hear. There are actually a number of implicit assumptions in the position declared by the man that, instead of reassuring the woman, make life more difficult for her.

What this position fails to take into account are

- The traumatic effects of an affair on the betrayed spouse;
- That the effects of an affair are in the present and will extend into the future and therefore cannot be left in the past;
- That the betrayer has not yet earned the right to declare undying love;
- That this declaration by the man leaves him off the hook and leaves the emotional work to the woman – i.e. she has to get over it;
- That an affair is always in-character for the betrayer and should never be explained away as something out of character.

Any woman who has been betrayed by a long-term affair finds the man’s words quoted above to be very difficult. They are very difficult because they lack the brutal honesty that the relationship now needs to survive. The words quoted above lack courage because they are focused entirely on the betrayer’s needs to be forgiven, to be allowed to put things behind him, and to not be held accountable for what he has done. More importantly, they fail to understand the deep long-term effects of a trauma as distinct from the temporarily effects of non-trauma.

An affair is, in every sense of the word, a trauma for the woman. By definition, a trauma leaves the victim with a host of effects that are natural and inevitable. To be traumatised by an affair is to be left desperately vulnerable, to doubt oneself at the deepest level, to doubt the others behaviour and intention, to have swings in mood from confidence to despair, to suffer from intrusive thoughts and images about the affair; etc. The trauma leaves a deep wound that needs to be healed. That healing takes a lot of time and it leaves a scar that never goes away. It leaves a scar that when touched it smarts painfully. Years later when he leaves for a meeting with a nice shirt and tie on she may feel a surge of panic and suspicion that is not neurotic but entirely normal. What is not normal is to think that the woman should be able to put it in the

past because the effects, as I indicated, are left in the heart and body. She will often feel like there is something wrong with her that she cannot move-on but that is because she underestimates what has happened to her not because she is stuck-in-the-past, as he might suggest.

The man who makes the declaration quoted above lacks courage because he does not appreciate many things. In truth, if he were brutally honest, what he would say may sound negative but would ring true for the woman. He would say something like this:

“I feel awful about what happened. I want to tell you I love you to take away my shame and to make things better for you, but the truth is that because I had the affair it means I do not love you like I want to imagine I do. My betraying you shows the flaws of my love and if we are to have a future I must come to terms with this. So you are right not to trust me, and you are right to be suspicious of my motives because, in truth, I have not earned that trust. My hope is that I can make amends for what I have done and I know I have a lot of work to do to make those amends. For now, therefore, I want you to know that your lack of trust and fear of me are justified. I know for the next year at least you will be suffering the effects of what I have done on a daily basis. I will want to avoid that but that avoidance is just part of the problem that had me betraying you in the first place; trying to pretend that I was a better person than I was. You don't need to hear me say I love you because you would be right not to believe it – you need to see me honouring and understanding the trauma I have caused you. It is only then that you might get an inkling that I can love and respect you. So lets not put this in the past and start a new leaf. Let's keep it in the present because it will be with us for a long time and I need to be strong enough to carry that pain. I have wounded you deeply and I cannot expect that wound to be healed by false declarations of my new-found faithfulness.”

There may be some hope for this relationship.