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# Partners Of The Chronically Unfaithful

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*Synopsis: A person in a committed long-term relationship who learns that his or her partner has engaged in multiple acts of sexual betrayal will find few places to turn for emotional support and objective guidance. There are many challenges to address in order to heal from the wounds of repetitive sexual deception, and this article will provide much-needed information and valuable perspectives.*

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A person in a monogamous relationship who learns that his or her partner has been sexually unfaithful, especially if it has happened more than once, experiences a level of emotional devastation that just cannot be fully understood or appreciated by someone who hasn't endured the same dreadful pain. Intimate betrayal cuts to the marrow of a partner's self-esteem, trust and emotional security.

This is worth repeating: sexual infidelity is immensely damaging to a partner's sense of emotional safety and well-being, especially when it happens more than once, after forgiveness, re-commitment and reconciliation have taken place. It is as if a raw wound has slowly been restored to health, only to be cruelly torn open again.

## **Repeated Sexual Betrayal Turns Reality Upside-Down**

The loyal partner of a chronically unfaithful person is often shocked by the degree to which deception has infiltrated the relationship. It can seem like he or she has never known the person who so tenderly and soulfully promised a lifetime of love and commitment. This is a kind of trauma that causes a person to question absolutely everything:

- Was anything in this relationship real?
- What about all those loving acts, thoughtful gestures, and times of deep emotional support....how can they exist alongside such terrible lies?
- Will the relationship ever feel normal and healthy again? Will I?
- Who can I turn to for support and understanding?
- How could I be such a fool to not know about this until now?

- What else don't I know?
- Should I stay in or get out of this relationship?

A person who has weathered the ups and downs of a long relationship is likely to assume that the bonds of commitment have remained intact. Sure, there may have been troubled times, misunderstandings, disagreements, arguments, hurt feelings or even periods of outright hostility – but infidelity is a class of pain all by itself, *especially when it is revealed that a partner has engaged in all kinds of sexual betrayal not once or twice but potentially dozens or hundreds of times.*

### **Typical Symptoms Of Repeatedly Betrayed Partners**

The poison that oozes from recurrent sexual betrayal contains a toxic mix of *abandonment, manipulation, deception, withholding of affection and deflection of responsibility.* It's therefore not surprising that a host of conflicting emotions and symptoms can infect the psyche of a person who has been repeatedly sexually deceived. These include:

- **Obsessive preoccupation**, such as intrusive thoughts about what has already happened, what is currently happening and what may eventually happen;
- **Hypervigilance and paranoia** that can result in a partner continually looking for evidence of ongoing infidelity such as by checking phone records, wallet contents, bank accounts, internet histories and so forth;
- **All manner of anxiety** such as an upswing of fear if the partner who cheated doesn't answer the phone or is even a few minutes late coming home from some seemingly legitimate event;
- **Disturbance in eating and sleeping patterns** such as sudden-night awakenings, especially in the early days, weeks and even months after discovery;
- **Difficulty concentrating** due to continually unsuccessful attempts to "work the math" of this strange new world where so much of what was once accepted no longer makes sense;
- **Difficulty achieving sustained emotional balance** to the point that moods and reactions are unpredictable and can shift suddenly and seemingly without provocation;
- **Intrusive memories** and other unwanted sources of renewed shock, anger, sadness and fear;
- **Shame and embarrassment** due to the nature of the revealed behavior;

- **A sense of inadequacy** as a person, even though the sexual betrayal was a failure of the one who did the deception and not the one who was deceived;
- **Seething resentment and outright rage** in response to the inherent abuse inflicted by chronically repeated betrayal.

One defining attribute shared by all the above characteristics is an almost overwhelming loss of stability, control and safety. A person experiencing such emotional upheaval has no more ability to calm these symptoms than to control an allergic reaction. Trying to get through this kind of crisis without ample support and guidance is likely to result in ongoing frustration and lead to an ultimate depletion of emotional reserves.

Essentially trustworthy people typically do not suspect that they are being deceived, and therefore evidence to the contrary may have been initially discounted. When they finally begin to examine events that don't entirely make sense (such as questioning discrepancies between what they were told and what they observed) they are often subjected to scoffing and scorn by the guilty partner, and made to feel as if they were somehow the source of the relationship problem.

As a result, people who have been chronically sexually betrayed often find that their ability to trust their own judgment has been shaken, gradually eroded or outright shattered. The loss of trust in another person pales in comparison to the exhaustion and demoralization that results from the inability to feel confident in your own perceptions and judgment.

### **Chronic Infidelity And the Concept Of Sex Addiction**

It is becoming increasingly common to consider the phrase "sex addict" when repeated sexual betrayal is discovered. (*Discovery rather than disclosure is almost always the way this behavior is brought to light. Chronic betrayers rarely stop: they are stopped*). Maybe the person who has been unfaithful is the first one to speak the words, generally in great despair as his or her world comes crashing down. This is when the betrayed partner faces one of many challenges: is this a true explanation or a convenient excuse?

Other times it is the victim of repeated infidelity who recognizes the signs of sex addiction, often after scouring the internet for help and understanding. Sometimes the phrase is hurled in accusation: "you're nothing but a sex addict!" Sometimes it is offered as a form of intervention, sometimes as a plea, sometimes as a potential lifeline to the faint possibility of salvaging the relationship. The reaction of the betrayer will be somewhere on the continuum between *denial, consideration or acceptance*.

I'm a firm believer that the concept of sex addiction fits many people who repeatedly engage in behavior (a) they know is wrong, (b) which will clearly result in devastating consequences upon discovery, and (c) which they have unsuccessfully tried to stop or control despite their sincere desire to do so. It is this last criterion that is the source of so much confusion and controversy. Is

the alleged absence of control real or just an excuse? This is a worthwhile and vexing question, especially since attempts to stop are not evident to others until the point of discovery and can't be proven.

As I've written elsewhere, there are explanations other than sexual compulsion to explain chronic sexual betrayal, and none of them are pretty. Maybe the person somehow doesn't think this is wrong to do, hasn't fully appreciated the degree of damage this causes, has some sort of mental illness, feels entitled to act this way, or simply doesn't care. Fundamentally this means that a person who repeatedly engages in sexual deception, especially if he or she has promised to stop this behavior, is either ignorant, impaired, unethical or addicted.

Sex addiction is not a "get out of jail free" card. Ultimate responsibility for chronic infidelity remains foursquare on the one who did the deeds. The need to accept the consequences of these actions and to do whatever it takes to insure that they never happen again must be fully accepted despite whatever degree of compulsive drive might exist. *The idea of addiction is not an excuse: it is an explanation* that puts a lot of behaviors together in a way that can make sense and that can offer a direction toward real and lasting change.

## **MODELS FOR HEALING THE WOUNDS OF CHRONIC BETRAYAL**

But if the perpetrator of recurrent deception is a sex addict, what word or phrase best describes his or her partner? This is an important question because the process of healing from chronic infidelity will depend to a significant extent on how the nature of the problem is perceived, and there are often profoundly different ways of looking at the same situation or event. No label or definition is going to be fully satisfying to a betrayed partner who is grappling with how to make sense of this calamity that he or she *didn't cause, can't stop and can't easily escape*.

### **Sex Addiction and The "Co-Addiction" Model**

A useful analogy to consider is the impact of alcoholism and drug addiction on families. It's well-recognized that people who continually abuse mood-altering substances tend to pull those around them into a despairing storm of chaos, confusion, and deception. The Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) program of recovery begins with the admission that "we were powerless over alcohol and that our lives had become unmanageable". Upon reflection it is evident that this statement also rings true for an addict's family members. To confirm this, just ask anyone who has loved a chronically relapsing alcoholic if they ever felt powerful enough to get that person sober or trusting enough to believe that early sobriety would last.

This is why alcoholism is often considered to be a "family disease". Because of this systemic perspective, it's understandable that many treatment professionals encourage the partner of an

addict to carefully examine his or her own reactions to the problem. The purpose of this approach is not to implicate the partner as the cause of the problem but to recognize the negative consequences an addict's behavior has on everyone who is emotionally close to that person, even before they are aware the problem exists.

So even though an abuser of drugs or alcohol is ultimately responsible for the turmoil this behavior causes all around, labels such as "co-addict" or "codependent" are often assigned to that person's partner. These terms are intended to describe some of the reactions that regularly occur as a result of the distorted reality that comes from being in a relationship with an addict. Upon reflection, however, it is clear that this kind of language can subtly implicate the partner as part of the problem.

In other words, the "co-addict/codependent" model can unintentionally impose a framework of "illness" around the very people who have been victimized. This way of looking at the problem comes close to implying that a partner of an addict somehow has a contributory role in either developing or maintaining a toxic relationship with some aspect of the addictive process. This approach inevitably blurs the line between pathology that contributes to an addiction and that which results from one. While it is true that partners have been made sick, it's important not to confuse cause and consequence. The partner isn't part of the problem, the problem is part of the partner.

Partners of people who demonstrate sexually addictive patterns of behavior have often been similarly slotted into this same model, and many resources for support and treatment reflect this framework. For example, 12-step support groups such as "S-Anon Family Groups (S-Anon)" were created to help shattered partners of sex addicts regain a sense of emotional balance and combat overwhelming isolation and despair. In much the same way that Al-Anon Family Groups (Al-Anon) formed decades ago to benefit family members of alcoholics, these groups are invaluable sources for the kind of help and hope that cannot be found anywhere else.

Unfortunately, partners of addicts frequently resist or flat-out refuse to attend such support groups and some even resent the recommendation to receive individual counseling. "I'm not the one with the problem!" is a common and seemingly compelling retort. While this statement is true, it's the equivalent of a person who has been hit by a bus denying the need for assistance simply because somebody else was driving. Regardless of who is responsible for the damage that has been inflicted, a person who is injured needs help. Accepting this reality is one of the many challenges a partner must face. My recommendation: get past the label and get to the help.

### **Sex Addiction and The "Relational Trauma" Model**

Addiction specialists are beginning to conceptualize many of the common reactions to chronic betrayal as typical symptoms of trauma. Many partners of chronically unfaithful individuals consider the evolving "trauma model" to be a more accurate description of their experience than the traditional "co-addict" perspective. In some extreme examples it is even possible to consider a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) for some partners of multiple betrayal.

Some skeptics may doubt how a diagnosis that applies to combat veterans and disaster survivors can be applicable to relational injury. The answer is that the impact of a traumatic event is based on the experience of it, not just the event. How a situation is internally perceived can be more important than what externally took place. A person may feel either thrilled or terrified to ride a rollercoaster, and a crucial determining factor is going to be whether he or she signed up for the ride! Any event that is overwhelming to a person to the point of threatening a fundamental sense of security is traumatic.

Resolution of trauma depends on a person's ability to make sense of the event and to work through basic core beliefs of safety, control, fairness, responsibility and self-worth. Difficult, wrenching emotions such as profound grief, shock, rage and fear must be carefully navigated, not just "gotten over." The trauma model offers a way to move from victim to victor in response to the abuse that has occurred.

I feel that both the co-addiction and trauma approaches have great merit as well as substantial challenges. The 12 step-based perspective can help a partner find a place of existential solace and serenity in an essentially unpredictable relationship (and world), while the trauma model provides concrete steps along the pathway to regaining a sense of empowerment and safety. On the other hand, the focus on relational detachment and personal responsibility that is so characteristic of the co-addict model can obscure the need to recognize and respond to the inherent trauma of victimization, while the trauma model's focus on empowerment over acquiescence can obscure the need to find a place of acceptance amidst the turmoil and regardless of anything or anyone else that poses a risk to emotional well-being. Ultimately, both models work toward the ultimate well-being of the chronically betrayed partner, and I believe an approach that utilizes both philosophies has the greatest value in the long run.

One of my clients who benefitted from such a blended perspective put it this way:

*"I've discovered parts of myself during this ordeal that I never knew existed, both good and bad. Even though I didn't create this problem in my marriage I have a responsibility to myself and to my kids to keep growing and facing myself, even during my waves of anger and sadness. I need my husband to respect me but I can't depend on him to sustain my sense of self-worth.*

*Words like 'surrender' and 'acceptance' used to drive me nuts until I came to realize that I gave away my serenity every time I needed him to act a certain way for me to be OK. This doesn't mean he can do anything he wants without consequences. But 'one day at a time' I'm learning to maintain my sanity by releasing us both from false expectations.*

*I've also grown to be much clearer about the limits and boundaries I need to establish in all areas of my life in order to recover from the trauma of this terrible crisis in my life. I would never wish this kind of pain on anybody but I want people to know it's possible to do more than just survive. It is possible to come out of this crisis stronger, wiser, more self-aware and (even though it can be hard to believe at first) emotionally healthier than ever.*

Good books are available on both approaches, although there is not yet a text that knits the best aspects of each into a cohesive blended model. The best book on the trauma model is “Your Sexually Addicted Spouse” by Barbara Steffens and Marsha Means. It clearly presents insights, strategies and steps for achieving healing from the damage that almost always occurs. There are so many books that utilize the co-addict approach that I prefer to recommend the ones that I think are best after completing a personal consultation in order to assess the unique circumstance of each individual situation.

## **INITIAL CHALLENGES FACING CHRONICALLY BETRAYED PARTNERS**

Regardless of which model seems to best fit a person’s situation, there are certain initial struggles that are almost inevitable for a partner who is facing the long road of recovery from repeated sexual betrayal.

### **An Inevitable Sense of Isolation**

Partners of chronically unfaithful individuals usually lack sufficient sources of much-needed support and understanding. A combination of shock and shame contributes to a sense of isolation precisely at the time when access to strength and comfort is most needed. It can seem almost impossible to tell friends or family what’s really been going on, especially when doing so is likely to yield some emotional reactions and advice that may be well-meaning but short-sighted. People without an adequate conception of the complexity of emotions and choices that such a terrible situation brings may recommend strategies (i.e. “I’d just leave him if I were you”) which are simplistic in conception and difficult to implement. People do a poor job of accurately predicting how they would respond in a difficult situation unless they have personally gone through something similar. Another painful discovery that repeatedly betrayed partners make is how uncomfortable and ill-equipped many friends and family feel discussing such sexual matters at any appreciable depth.

### **Public Perception Versus Private Pain**

Many betrayed partners can attest that it can be simply infuriating to know that the world at large thinks that a chronically unfaithful person is a wonderful, loving and responsible human being. The distance between such a public facade and private reality can seem like the Grand Canyon. The repeatedly betrayed partner must either somehow withstand such a distorted image or reveal the reality of the situation for all to see. There are occasions when this is exactly what happens, as the partner makes it almost a quest to insure that everybody knows the truth that lies lurking

under the myth. Parents, siblings, children, co-workers, employers, neighbors.....soon everyone knows the terrible things this person has done.

I don't recommend this course of action since it can backfire in a couple of regretful ways. Sometimes the partner who reveals the sordid mess for all to see can wind up being perceived as vindictive and not very stable. And in the many scenarios in which the damaged relationship heals and even grows (which often happens, even though this can be hard to imagine in the early days after repeated sexual secret-keeping has been discovered or disclosed) the couple must face the task of reintegrating their relationship into a community of watching eyes, guarded whispers and limited understanding.

### **Limited Choices and Difficult Decisions**

Sometimes partners of chronically unfaithful individuals feel they have little choice but to accept the possibility that future deception will occur or try to believe the promise that it won't happen again. This difficult choice can be influenced by many factors, including economic reality: spouses and longtime partners who face the dissolution of their relationship often retreat back into their unhappy life together when faced with the dire financial impact this will have on both of them. Couples may also look at innocent children sleeping peacefully in the next room while the parents' tears rain down and wonder how they could ever visit such hardship among them.

This commitment to bear up under such strain because there seems to be little other choice becomes another source of the partner's perceived lack of power and control over the direction the future will take.

## **THE ROLE OF INFORMATION IN THE JOURNEY TO HEALTH**

The realization that some basic assumptions about the relationship have been false makes the search for truth a fundamental component of the healing process for a partner of a person who has engaged in multiple acts of sexual betrayal. Once trust is broken, however, it is difficult to place faith in anything that cannot be verified, and even that can be subject to great scrutiny.

### **Information And The Search For Truth**

Often the partner decides that what is necessary to heal is to become aware of everything that took place, even in the darkest crannies of the chronic betrayer's secret life. Interrogations such as "what hotel room did you use.....what did you say to each other.....how many times did this take place.....tell me every website you visited" may go on and on and on, sometimes seemingly without end.

This insatiable quest for information is easy to understand. Since a basic theme that keeps emerging for sexually betrayed partners is the sense of powerlessness that comes from being emotionally tossed around like a raft in a hurricane, it makes perfect sense that the search for a semblance of control and self-direction can assume epic proportions. The old adage that ‘knowledge is power’ holds great sway for people who have been kept in the dark for so long.

### **The Risk Of “Information Addiction”**

It’s certainly true that possessing adequate information allows for decisions to be made on the basis of fact rather than fantasy. Information can be an important antidote to a partner’s unchecked imagination. But it’s also generally the case that the value of ever-more-specific details quickly reaches a point of diminishing returns. Eventually it becomes evident that information is very different from insight, just as understanding is a poor substitute for acceptance.

This limit can be difficult to determine in the ongoing search for that elusive sense of regained personal power, which is why some partners can fall into an unhealthy pattern of what has been termed “information addiction”. Examples of this can be seen when a partner pulls years of phone records, questions every imaginable discrepancy and wakes the betrayer up in the middle of the night to demand another piece of information. This degree of detail rarely serves healing. Information will not scratch the itch where it resides, for that wound is not in the head where the thoughts are but in the heart where the soul lives. For this reason I caution partners against demanding or searching for too many explicit details immediately, if at all.

A useful analogy to consider is the shock you would feel upon learning that you are in a relationship with a person who repeatedly shoplifts. How many incidents would it take to indicate that this is a problem for the both of you? Would it be necessary to know the brands of the items that were stolen, the location of the security guards, the names of the cashiers on duty or even the reason for the crimes? Boil it all down and all that fundamentally matters is that you’re in a relationship with a chronic shoplifter. What else do you really need to know to come to grips with the essence of your dilemma?

### **The Dangers Of Unrestrained Disclosure**

Ironically, there are times when the betraying partner unleashes a tidal wave of explicit details early into the discovery or disclosure process. This generally happens when he or she recognizes an absence of moral authority to hold back any information that the aggrieved partner might want to know. In addition, a person who has long been lost in a self-created maze of deception, isolation and shame can find great relief by finally telling the truth and bringing what has been shrouded in darkness into the light.

But a sordid avalanche of specific detail about every act of deception can pummel the betrayed partner into a state of profound shock without yielding much that is productive enough to make such pain worthwhile. Wounds rarely benefit from salt, and the negative impact of such unrestrained disclosure can last forever. As the old saying goes, a bell can never be un-rung.

I'm not saying that a hurt partner doesn't deserve to know whatever is helpful to his or her healing process, nor that chronic betrayers should try to dictate the extent of their disclosure.

Often times their protests that "I don't want to hurt you any more than I already have" or "I don't think it would be helpful", or "my sponsor told me not to go into too many details" mask deep fear and shame at the prospect of taking full accountability for the consequences of their behavior.

But in my experience partners who have been grievously hurt by chronic betrayal may demand to know every possible excruciating detail precisely at the time of their most tenuous hold on emotional stability. The harshest detail at the worst time is rarely the best course. When a partner insists on getting the most potentially damaging information while in the worst state of mind to be able to handle it, it is as if the unhealthiest part of that person is screaming for information that takes every ounce of reserve and emotional balance to incorporate. This can lead to an ultimately self-destructive phenomenon has come to be known as "pain shopping".

### **The Elusive Search For Explanations**

Another source of frustration for chronically betrayed partners who are seeking to know more about their partner's deceptive history is that people who have engaged in chronic sexual betrayal may claim extensive memory gaps for a variety of reasons:

- A reality that can be painful for the betrayed partner to hear is that sometimes the sheer number of illicit sexual acts makes it impossible to remember each one with clarity.
- A truly sexually addicted individual in the midst of a sexual binge experiences a dramatic shift of persona, judgment, reasoning, values and perception. The neurochemical activation of arousal, numbing and fantasy is why sex addiction has been called three drugs in one, as I've written about elsewhere. This altered state of awareness is a form of dissociation in which parts of the self that don't fit together are compartmentalized into fragments rather than integrated into a stable sense of identity. It's not coincidental that the word integrity and integration share the same root: *a lack of integration leads to a lack of integrity*. In the same way that it's difficult to remember dreams once you're awake, such episodic distortion of reality impairs a person's ability to recall events, even those which occurred fairly recently.
- Finally, the intense shame that accompanies some of these acts can make it difficult for a person who lacks strong moral character to face the facts of his or her history. It is

important for a chronic betrayer to resist the desire to “put the past behind” without completely facing it, for this would be just another form of compartmentalization rather than integration. One value that derives from involvement in a 12-step recovery process is the emphasis on obtaining a “fearless and searching” acknowledgment of all that has happened in the past. This can have a powerfully positive effect on a person’s ability to recall events.

Regardless of the “who, what, when, where and how” of chronic deception, the question that can seem most important to a betrayed partner is “*why*”. However, this often proves to be the least productive line of inquiry. The reasons why people repeatedly engage in ultimately destructive behavior are often complex and subject to many unfolding layers of insight which often emerge over time. One of the goals of therapy for chronic betrayers is to delve into the psychological drivers of such behavior. But I’m also reminded of the story of the simple response the famed bank robber Willie Sutton gave when asked why he kept robbing banks: “Because that’s where the money is.”

### **The Value Of Structured Disclosure**

An adequate and appropriate disclosure process may take awhile to develop. Often it is best achieved in a counselor’s office in order to provide structure, containment and guidance through a process that may otherwise go off-course in a thousand ways. It can be helpful if both partners have had the chance to achieve a degree of support and stability through some measure of individual counseling.

Since this process occurs a little later in the healing process I am not going to discuss it in depth here, since this article is written more for people who are starting out on their journey and the structured disclosure process is best discussed with a therapist in order to be tailored to the specific needs of each individual situation.

### **Some Information Needs to Be Immediately Disclosed**

Of course some pieces of the puzzle are best turned face up right away. *The following categories of information need to be immediately disclosed* rather than revealed in dribs and drabs over the course of weeks or months.

**1. The types of deceptive behavior that took place (online chats, phone sex, IM’s, anonymous sex, affairs, one-night stands, professional sex services, etc.)** Partners have a right to know the various categories of illicit sexual behavior that the chronic betrayer engaged in, even when it is not necessary to know every detail of every encounter.

**2. How long the behavior has been occurring.** In some scenarios partners learn that chronic infidelity began at some time after the relationship began, while in other situations they are

shocked to learn that this behavior has always been a shadow side of the relationship, and may have even been a part of the betrayer's pattern of behavior well before the couple ever knew each other.

**3. Whether the partner knows any of the other people involved in the sexually inappropriate behavior.** Addicts may want to hide this behavior by fearing it will implicate a friend, neighbor or business associate, but this is not where the most important sense of loyalty resides. People willing to engage in sexual betrayal should know what the risks are from the very beginning, and that includes being revealed when the secret comes out.

**4. Whether any laws were broken.** Partners certainly need to know if any portion of the pattern of chronic betrayal has transgressed legal boundaries, regardless of whether such behaviors resulted in arrest. Examples include prostitution, public exposure, illegal voyeurism, sexualized behavior involving minors, embezzlement to pay for illicit sexual activity, and so forth.

**5. Whether there has been any risk of exposure to sexually transmitted diseases.** It is obviously crucial to know if any bacterial or viral infections caused by unprotected sexual activity could possibly be a concern. Betrayed partners may decide to get medically tested regardless of what they are told. Even if sexual behavior within the relationship continues, partners may insist on condom use until all fear of risk has passed.

**6. The amount of any money that was spent.** Not all repetitive sexual infidelity involves significant amounts of money but some patterns can be stunningly expensive. A person who has repeatedly used professional sex workers (prostitutes, strip clubs, massage parlors, etc.) can place a huge financial toll on a relationship.

What all of these categories have in common is their direct impact on the chronically betrayed partner's need to plan a course of action for the future. This goal is not substantially aided by knowing about every detail about the secret life of the sex addict (or non-addictive chronic sexual betrayer). All that is necessary is a sufficient sense of what has taken place to make important life decisions.

I want to be clear: if you ask your chronically unfaithful partner to tell you whatever information you want to know, he or she should be prepared to do so. It may turn out that the actual details are not as important as the knowledge that your partner is willing to give you whatever you feel you need to heal the wounds caused by his or her behavior. On the other hand, it's your responsibility to be cautious about what it is you are trying to find out and clear about your motivation. Both the co-addict and trauma models of healing recognize that feeling "compelled" to get extensive details is a potentially unhealthy symptom.

## THE BIG QUESTION: WHAT DOES YOUR FUTURE HOLD?

Partners who are trying to decide whether or not to remain committed to the relationship throughout a potentially long and difficult recovery process inevitably want to know the chances for ultimate success. While I know just what they mean when they look into my eyes and pleadingly ask me to give it to them straight, my initial response is to explore what ‘success’ means to them. Sometimes they stare back at me like I’m simple-minded: of course success means that the chronic betrayer won’t ever do this kind of behavior again.

No one can guarantee this.

It is necessary to accept that history argues against the prospect that a chronic betrayer will remain forever faithful to a new vow of monogamy. Regardless of whether the underlying issue is a problem of addiction, ethics, ignorance or illness, the past is the most potent predictor of the future. Even though *sexual fidelity is quite possible for even the most hardcore deceiver*, there’s no escaping the possibility that some sort of a relapse may occur at any point in the future.

As difficult as this can be to accept, perhaps the greater misfortune is to consider sexual sobriety to be the sole measure of success. True recovery is a much more encompassing concept than “staying out of trouble”, for it includes the need to develop a new way of engaging life in such a way that the underlying issues that set the stage for chronic infidelity are managed in a much healthier manner.

There’s an old A.A. saying that an alcoholic horse thief who stops drinking is merely a sober horse thief. This might seem harsh, but it serves as a reminder that behavior can be easier to change than the underlying personality structure that created and supported it. It is the underlying quality of character and conscience that ultimately defines a person more than the quantity of his or her outward achievement. As the saying goes, not everything that counts can be counted.

For people who accept and incorporate the addiction model into their understanding of repeated sexual betrayal, the 12-step program of recovery provides an invaluable pathway for emotional growth that is deeper than mere behavioral change. Programs such as Sex Addicts Anonymous (SAA), Sexual Compulsives Anonymous (SCA), Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous (SLAA) and Sexaholics Anonymous (SA) help a person examine the underlying aspects of his or her personality and get to the heart of what it means to be an ethical, courageous, humble, self-aware and emotionally available human being.

## **Narrow Definitions Of Success Create Confusing Distinctions**

When sexual fidelity (which 12-step groups term “sexual sobriety”) is narrowly defined solely by the absence of certain behaviors, it’s not long before hair-splitting distinctions can seem monumental. Here are a few examples:

*1. What if your chronically cheating partner never again engages in sexual behavior with another person but occasionally (or even regularly) masturbates to pornography? How about if his or her sexual fantasies include people or situations outside of the relationship?*

Committed partners by definition are not sexually involved with other people. (There is an entire culture of polyamorous relationships, but that is outside the scope of this article). A person in a monogamous relationship generally wants and expects to be ‘enough’ for his or her partner, and ongoing infidelity shakes this assurance to its core.

But is masturbation a form of cheating? Is there such a thing as solitary infidelity? Most people in healthy relationships don’t consider sexual self-gratification to be a cause of concern in and of itself. It’s not uncommon for people in committed relationships to occasionally pleasure themselves sexually. However, since masturbation almost always involves some degree of fantasy, easy online exposure to a virtually endless supply of pornographic imagery is inevitably going to expand the range of person’s sexual imagination.

So at what point along the continuum does masturbation to pornography increase the risk of a relapse for a person who has repeatedly engaged in sexual deception? For a true porn or sex addict the likelihood is so great as to be an almost certainty. While opinions vary as to whether the act of masturbation itself can be incorporated into the healthy sexual expression of a recovered sex addict, the clear alterations of brain chemistry caused by pornography are so dramatic that there is little question that masturbating to it is risky business.

*2. How about if your partner is exceedingly friendly to – and spends unaccountable time with -- a person outside the relationship in a way that raises your distrust or jealousy?*

Wounded partners of repeated betrayers often develop a highly refined “radar” regarding situations and relationships that have a potential for being inappropriately sexualized. It can be exceedingly difficult to fully trust the chronically unfaithful partner’s interactions with other people, no matter how brief, chance, necessary or seemingly innocent they appear to be. Danger seems to lurk everywhere.

A vicious circle can ensue: the person who was unfaithful soon begins to notice the betrayed partner constantly evaluating his or her eyes, actions, emotions and interests for signs of deception and intrigue. This can quickly result in a build-up of resentment and a corresponding reluctance to reveal more than seems absolutely necessary, which contributes to the very fear and distrust that is so toxic to relational healing.

The way to break out of such mutually unsatisfying interactions varies according to each specific situation and is often best worked out in couples counseling.

*3. Finally, what if your partner desires to remain sexually but reveals sexual fantasies or fetishes that you did not know about?*

Some people initially engage in sexual deception at least partly to explore or satisfy a long-standing desire for more unusual or adventurous sexual practices which they have kept from their partners due to a fear of abandonment or some other outcome that is terrifying to them. This often results in a highly reinforcing cycle of “acting out” these repressed desires in a manner that can quickly reach addictive proportions.

Is the revelation that your partner has sexual interests, fantasies and/or fetishes that you did not know about better or worse than the discovery of chronic sexual deception? On the one hand you now know an extremely fragile, very fearful and intensely guarded part of your partner’s true self. The process of looking this deeply into a person, no matter how it occurs or how painful it is, is a form of intimacy (“into-me-see”). On the other hand, the nature of these revelations may require you to come to terms with the previously unexamined contours of your own sexual values, interests, insecurities, limitations and misperceptions.

Some partners who find themselves in such uncharted territory angrily respond that this is nothing more than another layer of dishonesty that has no place in the relationship. But the truth is that stopping a certain behavior can be easier than ridding oneself of the deeply embedded desire that fuels it. Adopting a ‘no-tolerance’ policy that refuses to even consider ways to accommodate these sexual desires may require your partner to repress an aspect of his or her true nature. The irony is that such a stance encourages continued deception, only this time on your terms. Wishing your partner had different sexual desires is different than pretending they don’t exist, shaming them into submission or refusing to accommodate them.

The reality is that a wide variety of sexual interests, including fantasies and fetishes that you may never have discussed with anyone in an open-minded manner, are relatively common, normal occurrences in people who have never experienced any problems with fidelity. It is wise to carefully consider if one condition of sexual fidelity that you require is that your partner not express or demonstrate any interests, impulses, fantasies or behaviors that cause you discomfort. If your expectation for sexual monogamy extends to the guarantee that you will not have to address your own sexual issues, your definition of success now sets forth two goals instead of one.

These are just some of the many questions that challenge couples who are attempting to heal their relationship after repeated loss of sexual trust. For example, how is relationally-based sexual exploration incorporated into the healing process? What behaviors and activities improve or impair the integration of a couple’s emotional and sexual intimacy? How are the ghosts of old sexual wounds healed? These and many other questions are often best addressed in a safe and respectful counseling environment.

## **The Importance of Carefully Choosing What You Want**

Imagine you are presented with two alternative scenarios, and that you may choose only one.

The first is to be absolutely assured that your partner will never engage in any illicit sexual behavior again, with no other changes in the quality of the relationship. This potentially makes the minimum standard for "success" nothing more than a partner who never cheats again but who remains emotionally distant and defensive, the sexual equivalent of the sober horse thief.

The second scenario is to have a partner who:

- has undergone a deep transformation of personality,
- is psychologically healthier,
- is emotionally more mature,
- is relationally present and available in good times and bad,
- has demonstrated a lasting and meaningful growth in spirit, and
- has engaged in many substantive acts of amends for the deceptions and betrayals that were imposed upon you.

This second scenario would seem to clearly signify a person who in all ways has shown the most sincere and sustained actions consistent with the highest definition of "recovery." Now what if he or she confesses a "slip" back into some form of behavior that had clearly been agreed upon to be off-limits?

This is an often-overlooked dilemma of choice: would you rather have a partner who never cheats in any way but who remains otherwise essentially unchanged as a human being and life partner, or one who shows appreciable growth in many important ways but who may never-the-less experience an unfortunate backslide?

Treating monogamy as the sole indicator of a successful long-term partnership may be a poor substitute for what may be a greater and more lasting goal: sincere but imperfect growth as a person of integrity, honesty, humility, empathy and courage.

Of course it's natural to want both emotional growth and permanent behavior change. And it is definitely possible to achieve both of these excellent outcomes. As in most important life goals, the most lasting solutions emerge over much time and effort. Everybody has an important role to take in the creation of this best possible result.

## **The Role Of The Betrayer In the Healing Process**

There are specific steps that a chronically unfaithful individual can take to help heal the wounds of a deeply damaged partner, but they are much more than mere promises and apologies. This is the time to borrow some wisdom from the Alcoholics Anonymous “Big Book” that reads “...there is a long period of reconstruction ahead..... a remorseful mumbling that we are sorry won’t fill the bill at all.” This philosophy holds true regardless of whether the addiction paradigm is accepted as the core of the problem. Words are woefully insufficient in the absence of sincere and sustained action.

A person capable of repeated deception and betrayal must be willing to assess the entire measure of his or her life to have any hope of lasting improvement. Entering into (and sticking with) professional counseling is an extremely reasonable expectation in the absence of a compelling reason to the contrary.

It is imperative to accept that healing occurs in waves, with periods of relational pain and distance alternating with times of increased hope and emotional connection. It’s unreasonable to expect that a betrayed partner will be able to quickly and easily participate in a mutually satisfying intimate relationship, especially sexually (*which was often never really present in the first place*). A person who either directly states or obliquely suggests that his or her partner’s lack of sexual desire, comfort or prowess contributed to a cycle of repeated deception is denying that this problem could have been addressed in a more ethical and ultimately effective manner.

An unsatisfying sexual life does not authorize a couple to avoid or attack each other instead of addressing their mutual problem in a loving and courageous way.

I often tell a person who has been chronically unfaithful to “be the last one to trust yourself”, since self-deception typically precedes a sexual relapse. It’s natural to crave forgiveness, to expect things to get back to normal, and to conclude that every possible life lesson has been extracted out of all this pain. I encourage even the most devastated sex addict crying over his shattered life to not waste such a pivotal opportunity for personal transformation by simply trying to put the pieces back together. This is the time to remember that iron can only be forged under the most intense heat, when everything else has burned away.

People who truly want to stop living out a pattern of unprincipled sexual behavior are increasingly willing to concede (or at least consider) that they are sex addicts. Some do so hesitatingly, while others seize upon the concept with all the fervor of a drowning man clinging to a life preserver. For these individuals the various 12-step groups dedicated to this issue are able to provide an unprecedented source of “experience, strength and hope” (a phrase commonly heard in such meetings). Those who hesitate to attend these meetings may do so for a variety of reasons which I have addressed at length in my article “12-Step Groups: Twelve Objections and Twelve Responses”, available at [www.BillHerring.info](http://www.BillHerring.info).

A person who accepts the label “sex addict” and agrees to follow the 12-step approach quickly finds truth in the saying that “it works if you work it”. Regular meeting attendance is a crucial part of this process; I typically recommend a minimum of twice-weekly meetings for at least a year. It is important to develop a relationship with a “sponsor”, who is an experienced group

member who serves as a personal resource throughout the recovery process. A sponsor provides guidance for “working the steps”, which is a systematic process for dealing with the wreckage of the past, managing the challenges in the present and living in a way that brings about a healthier future.

Betrayed partners who accept that they are now in a relationship with a “recovering sex addict” discover that this pathway to healing is a mixture of opportunity and ordeal. The very idea that a bunch of people with poor sexual boundaries are gathering together in an anonymous manner can seem inherently risky. It may take awhile to fully trust that the presence of so many extremely motivated individuals provides a safeguard of mutual support and accountability that protects against any potential exploitation or intrigue among members. People attend these meetings to save their lives, not to mess around.

A sex addict in early recovery may spend as much or even more time away from his or her partner than when the addiction was in full swing. Some individuals experience life-changing benefit from the 12-step process by attending 90 meetings in 90 days (“90 in 90”), having daily contact with their sponsor, engaging in extensive written “step work”, making telephone calls to fellow members multiple times a day, participating in “service work”, sponsoring others who desire their own sexual sobriety, and doing anything else to insure that their recovery was the most important goal. Some betrayed partners can have mixed feelings about the amount of time an active recovery process can involve.

Sometimes a sponsor or therapist may recommend that a newly recovering sex addict refrain from all sexual behavior for a specific period of time, perhaps 60 or 90 days. The goal of this temporary period of conscious celibacy is to disrupt the addictive cycle and allow emotions that have often been buried by unhealthy sexual behavior to rise to the surface so that they may be dealt with consciously. Although many betrayed partners have little to no interest in being sexual with the person who has hurt them, it can feel odd to have this decision made by the betrayer.

There are situations when counseling and 12-step meetings are not enough. More intensive treatment options exist that provide the type of enhanced therapeutic environment that can bring about the deepest possible healing experience. Programs range from 5-day retreats to two-week intensives to inpatient hospitalizations lasting a month or longer. The decision to pursue any of these courses of care is based on both clinical and economic considerations. I often help people look at these options during personal consultation.

### **Your Role In Your Own Healing Process**

Regardless of what your betraying/addicted partner does or doesn't do, you have to accomplish many tasks:

- to develop and maintain a strong support system;

- to establish some sense of emotional safety, including the creation of appropriate boundaries;
- to practice good mental, emotional and physical self-care;
- to recognize and respond appropriately to the many cognitive distortions and negative self-talk that inevitably occur;
- to navigate the numerous stages of loss and grief;
- to discover and nurture a sense of personal resiliency and empowerment;
- to find a sense of hope, regardless of what the future brings, and many other difficult tasks.

These are your tasks, no matter what your partner does or does not do. Just as the betrayer is responsible for his or her growth, you must be responsible for your own. No wonder full healing (when it occurs) is not measured in days or weeks but more often in months or even years.

### **The Importance Of Finding The Right Professional Help**

Chronic infidelity is best addressed with experienced professional guidance in order to deal with all of the difficult and confusing issues that arise for each individual as well as for the relationship. This is not the time to “go solo”. Even if the investment of time, money and energy is substantial, the benefit can be well worth it. Attempting to avoid professional assistance in the healing process can cause emotional and relational damage to linger for much longer than necessary, decreasing your ability to be happy, healthy and productive.

Unfortunately many therapists do not adequately assess for the possibility of sexual addiction as the root cause of multiple affairs and other forms of repetitive deceptive sexual practices in relationships. Some will either subtly discount or directly challenge the notion that sexual compulsivity is even a valid concept worthy of careful exploration. In a similar manner, many sex therapists tend to be reluctant to consider that inappropriate forms of sexual desire can represent an addictive drive, even in the face of obvious damage caused by chronic infidelity. I consider those colleagues who continue to resist the concept of sexual addiction are revealing themselves to be either dogmatic or ill-informed.

Because of these concerns I recommend that anyone seeking a therapist’s help should find out (a) how that professional views the concept of sexual addiction, (b) what specific training that person has received on the topic, and (c) how often the therapist assesses the presence of sex addiction in cases involving repeated betrayal. If the answer is “almost always” or “hardly ever” then this person may lack the degree of objectivity this kind of situation requires. Every situation must be based on its own merits.

## Summary

It's obvious that repeated sexual betrayal causes damage to a relationship that often cannot be overcome. However, I have seen many situations in which couples have been transformed as the result of the hard work each person is willing and able to put forth over the long haul. The topics covered above are just a few of the many considerations that will accompany the discovery of chronic infidelity in a long-term relationship. I cannot over-emphasize the importance of gathering together a trusted and informed network of support and guidance. As the saying goes, *you alone can do this, but you can't do this alone.*

If you are seeking balanced, informed, experienced and compassionate help for a situation that involves any of the issues described in this article, I invite you to call me at **(404) 345-1570** or email me at **bill@billherring.info**. I will help you examine your options, assess the unique characteristics of your situation, and give you practical guidance and support in getting you through this difficult journey to a much better place. I'm available to provide assistance to you, your partner or the both of you. I offer telephone or Skype appointments for those who are too far away for an in-person consultation.

I hope this article is helpful to your quest for healing, understanding, guidance and hope.