

“The most comprehensive and balanced book I have ever read on the subject. It is ‘must’ reading for any couple who has experienced the violation of trust as a result of an affair.” —Harville Hendrix, Ph.D.

AFTER *the* AFFAIR

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Healing the Pain and
Rebuilding Trust When a
Partner Has Been Unfaithful

COMPLETELY UPDATED SECOND EDITION



JANIS ABRAHMS SPRING, Ph.D.
WITH MICHAEL SPRING

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and Rebuilding Trust
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WILLIAM MORROW
An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

To my best buddies, Aaron, Max, and Michael

Dedication

Introduction

STAGE ONE

Reacting to the Affair: “Is What I’m Feeling Normal?”

1 The Hurt Partner’s Response: Buried in an Avalanche of Losses

2 The Unfaithful Partner’s Response: Lost in a Labyrinth of Choices

STAGE TWO

Reviewing Your Options: “Should I Stay or Leave?”

3 Exploring Your Ideas About Love

4 Confronting Your Doubts and Fears

STAGE THREE

Recovering from the Affair: “How Do We Rebuild Our Life Together?”

5 Learning from the Affair

6 Restoring Trust

7 How to Talk About What Happened

8 Sex Again

9 Learning to Forgive

10 Sex, Secrets, and Affairs in Cyberspace: Living with the “New” Infidelity

Epilogue—Revealing the Secret: Truth and Consequences

Notes

Bibliography

Index

Acknowledgments

About the Authors

Praise

Also by Janis Abrahms Spring, Ph.D., with Michael Spring

Credits

Copyright

Back Ad

About the Publisher

Can a Couple Survive Infidelity

As a clinical psychologist who has been treating distressed couples for thirty-five years, I answer you—provided that each of you is willing to look honestly at yourself and at your partner, and acquire the skills you need to see yourself through this shattering crisis.

It may help to remind yourself that you're not alone. Statistics vary widely, but according to one of the most recent and reputable studies, as many as 37 percent of married men and 20 percent of married women have been unfaithful.¹ No one knows the exact percentages; I'm sure that someone who lies to a spouse might also lie to a researcher. But even by the most conservative estimate, we can say with some confidence that, in the United States, 1 in every 2.7 couples—more than 21 million—has been touched by infidelity.²

WHAT CONSTITUTES AN AFFAIR?

Must an affair be coital? What about a kiss? What about lunch?³

I don't try to answer these questions because, in the end, what matters is what matters to you. A breach of trust depends entirely on what you agreed to—or thought you agreed to. Virtually all of you would feel betrayed by a partner who had intercourse with a third person, whether during a one-night stand or as part of a long-term emotional entanglement. But many of you would also feel betrayed and certainly threatened, by other intimate behaviors—a hug, say, or the sending of a dozen white roses. Five years ago a patient of mine named Sharon took her blouse off and showed her breasts to her best friend's husband. They never went further, but the two couples have been struggling with the violation ever since.

In this second edition, I've added a chapter on the “new” infidelity: the electronic or e-affair. [Chapter 10](#) will help you determine what constitutes an affair in cyberspace and give you the tools you need to negotiate your differences.

THREE JUDGMENTS I DON'T MAKE

1. *I don't make blanket judgments about whether affairs are, in themselves, good or bad.* While one may be enhancing for one of you may devastate the other, and destroy the relationship. I have found, however, that a continuing affair, without the consent of both partners, perpetuates the dysfunction in a relationship and makes the forging of an intimate attachment virtually impossible. If you're an unfaithful partner who is serious about reconnecting, you must, I believe, give up your lover.

2. *I don't separate the two of you into victim and victimizer, betrayed and betrayer.* Each of you must accept an appropriate share of responsibility for what went wrong. Rather than assign blame, I encourage each of you to confront those parts of yourself that led to the affair, and to change in ways that rebuild trust and intimacy. That doesn't mean I hold you equally accountable for the affair—no one can make another person stray. But I do ask you both to be accountable for whatever space you created that made room for another person to come between you.

3. ~~I don't suggest that you should stay together no matter what, or bolt just because you feel unhappy.~~ Instead, I invite each of you to explore with me your unique reasons for having or giving up on a lover, for choosing or refusing to recommit. Your decision should be deliberate and well-considered, not based on feelings alone. Your feelings, in fact, may betray you.

A WORD ABOUT THE CHOICE OF TERMS

Throughout the text I refer to partners as *hurt* or *unfaithful*. The hurt partner is the person in the primary relationship whose assumption of monogamy has been violated. The unfaithful partner is the one who had the affair. It was difficult choosing labels for these people. Certainly the unfaithful partner may feel equally hurt at times. In general, however, it's the one whose partner strays who experiences the greater sense of devastation. I don't categorize partners as *betrayed* or *betrayed* because these words convey a certain moral righteousness or condemnation, and put the burden of responsibility on one partner alone, which is almost never the case. I refer to the person with whom you or your partner had the affair as the *lover* or the *affair-person*. As a rule, I use the term *lover* when I'm speaking to the unfaithful partner and the affair is still alive. I use the term *affair-person* when I'm speaking to either partner and want to remove the romantic connotations of the word *lover* and protect the feelings of the hurt partner.

The quotes and case studies I refer to throughout the text are drawn from my practice over the years, but I've masked all identities so that I don't violate any confidences.

WHO IS THIS BOOK FOR?

I wrote *After the Affair* primarily for any two people who want to explore the possibility of rebuilding their relationship after one or both of them have been unfaithful. This includes married and cohabitating couples, heterosexuals and same-sex couples. I try to address hurt and unfaithful partners with equal weight.

My book is also for:

- people whose relationship ended as a result of infidelity, who are having a difficult time moving beyond the experience, and who want to understand why the relationship didn't survive and what they should accept as an appropriate share of responsibility for what went wrong;
- people who want to make better sense of the infidelity they experienced in their own families when they were growing up, in order to avoid similar patterns of behavior in their own relationships;
- professionals and spiritual leaders who treat individuals and couples affected by infidelity;⁴
- partners who are thinking of having an affair and who want to understand their feelings better before taking any irreversible steps;
 - partners who want to think through the advantages and disadvantages of revealing a terminated affair;
 - partners who have no intention of disclosing a terminated affair, but who still want to rebuild their relationship and learn about themselves;
- partners who suspect their mates of infidelity but have never confronted them;
- couples who are struggling with secrets, lies, and trust issues other than infidelity;
- couples who want to learn how to cope with the inevitable disenchantments of conjugal life before turning elsewhere.

THREE STAGES OF HEALING

The book guides you through three identifiable stages—some would call them minefields—as you react to, grapple with, and recover from the affair.

The First Stage: Normalizing Your Feelings

Once the affair is revealed, both of you are likely to get swept up in an emotional whirlwind, the hurt partner overcome by a profound sense of loss, the unfaithful partner overcome by conflicting choices and emotions. By giving a language to your feelings, I hope to reassure you that you're not crazy, unstable, that others have experienced the same pain and confusion, that you're not alone.⁵

The Second Stage: Deciding Whether to Recommit or Quit

Before your emotions can settle down, you need to confront your ambivalence about whether to stay or leave. By exploring your options, you'll be able to make a thoughtful decision based on your circumstances and needs. "What can I expect from love?" "Should I trust my feelings?" "How can I tell if my partner is right for me?"—these are the types of questions I'll help you answer.

The Third Stage: Rebuilding Your Relationship

If you decide to recommit, you're likely to spend months, perhaps years, working to restore trust and intimacy. By reviewing strategies with you, I hope to give you the tools to:

- decipher the meaning of the affair, and accept an appropriate share of responsibility for it;
- say goodbye to the lover;
- earn back trust (if you're the unfaithful partner), or communicate what you need to trust again (if you're the hurt partner);
- talk in ways that allow your partner to hear you and understand your pain, and listen in ways that encourage your partner to be open and vulnerable with you;
- recognize how you may have been damaged by early life experiences, and how you can keep these experiences from contaminating your relationship today;
- manage your differences and dissatisfactions, so that you can stay attached even when you don't feel particularly loved or loving;
- become sexually intimate again;
- forgive your partner, and yourself.

I assume throughout the book that the secret is known, but in some cases it won't be. In the Epilogue, I help you, the unfaithful partner, weigh the pros and cons of telling. Whatever you decide, you and your partner can still work to renew your life together.

A DEATH KNELL OR A WAKE-UP CALL?

Some of you may not want to risk starting over and exposing yourself to further hurt and disappointment. Turning your back on a damaged relationship may be the simplest or most sensible solution, one that frees you from the tyranny of hope. But it may also be a way to escape growing up, facing some bitter truths about life, love, and yourself, and assuming the terrible burden of responsibility for making your relationship work.

This book reaches out to those of you who are deeply wounded by an affair but are conflicted enough or courageous enough to admit that you may still want to stay together, confront how you each contributed to the infidelity, and work to rebuild trust and intimacy. If you choose to recommit to each

other, you may in time come to see the affair not merely as a regrettable trauma but as an alarm, wake-up call. You may eventually discover that you needed a nuclear explosion like an affair to blow your previous construction apart and allow a healthier, more conscious and mature version to take its place. Given how battered you both feel, you may not have many chances to test the strength of your relationship. I encourage you to enter the process, to challenge the hurt, and to see what you're capable of producing together. In essence, on the count of three, I invite the two of you to step into the center of the ring, remove your boxing gloves, and join hands.

STAGE ONE

Reacting to the Affair: “Is What I’m Feeling Normal?”

The Hurt Partner's Response: Buried in an Avalanche of Losses

“When I was fifteen, I was raped. That was nothing compared to your affair. The rapist was a stranger to you, I thought, were my best friend.”

“When I first uncovered your secret, I stopped feeling special to you. But on a deeper level, I lost trust in the world and in myself.”

These comments only begin to suggest the profound and sweeping losses you're likely to experience when you first learn that your partner has been unfaithful. There's no way to prepare yourself for this crushing revelation. Your view of your life and the world you live in may be ripped apart. Whatever self-assurance and security you felt in the past may now seem naive or false. “Where have I been?” you ask yourself. “Do I live on this planet?”

Your mind and body are likely to be in shock. Gone is your fundamental sense of order and justice in the world. Gone, too, are your sense of control over your life, your self-respect, your very conception of who you are. You may feel abandoned by everyone—family, friends, God. A stranger to yourself, you may swing wildly from one extreme to another, determined and confident one moment, humiliated and needy the next. Battered by feelings so intense, you may start to wonder, “Am I going crazy?”

I want to assure you that you're not—that, in fact, what you're experiencing is a normal and appropriate response to an acutely traumatizing experience. You're reeling not only from the loss of the integrity of your relationship but also from the loss of an illusion—that you're special to your partner, and that the intimacy you thought you shared with that person would last forever. In the face of such shattering news, it would be strange if you didn't feel lost.

It took Marsha, a forty-year-old social worker and mother, more than a decade to find her feet again:

After thirteen years of marriage, Larry announced he was trading me in for the babysitter, a girl fourteen years his junior. My first reaction was, “This couldn't possibly be happening to us, we're the perfect couple. The babysitter's almost a daughter to me, how could she betray my trust?” When Larry moved in with her, I went to bed for a month. Overnight, I went from a person who was capable, independent, full of zest, to a total zombie—paralyzed by a depression I had known only from an academic distance. One night I was lying in bed comparing the silence in the house with the terror and confusion in my head, when I heard the garage door rattle open. “He's come back,” I thought. “He wants to work it out.” I raced downstairs in my pajamas—first looking in the mirror to check how I looked—only to realize that the garage door had never budged. I had imagined the whole thing. It suddenly occurred to me: “I've not only lost my spouse, I've lost my mind.” My confidence continued to plummet. I saw myself as a fraud, a hollow shell, too empty to practice therapy, parent a child, or deserve

a decent partner. Life belonged to others, not to me. I was still struggling with my depression three years later—long after my husband and I were back together—when I learned in a workshop on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder¹ that someone under extreme emotional stress is likely to withdraw from life and lose touch with themselves, even experience delusions. My mind clicked: So that was it. My depression had a name. I wasn't cracking up; what I was going through was normal. If only I had known earlier, I would have felt less alone and perhaps opened myself up sooner to the possibility of a future. If only someone had helped me understand what happens, that would have been an act of supreme kindness.

This is where this chapter begins, in preparing you for the losses virtually all hurt partners are bound to experience in the crucible of infidelity. Once you realize how universal your responses are, you're likely to feel less gutted by the betrayal, less rocked by your own fierce emotions. Once you can anticipate your reaction and give it a name, it should become more tolerable to you. The healing process begins when you bear witness to your feelings and make sense of your pain. What's critical to remember is this: The greatest threat to recovery is the loss of hope itself.

THE PHYSIOLOGICAL IMPACT OF THE AFFAIR

It's likely at this moment that you're undergoing physiological changes in both your nervous system and your cognitive functioning. As adrenaline and other stress-related hormones pour into your sympathetic nervous system, you experience a heightened state of arousal. You're constantly on the lookout for signs that your partner is straying again. Chronically anxious and agitated, you take long to fall asleep, awaken frequently during the night, and are more sensitive to noise. You become exhausted from sleeping too little and thinking entirely too much.

Your mind is punctured by vivid and upsetting memories, sensations, images. When you are asleep, the quality of your dreaming becomes more violent and alarming. When you are awake, you find yourself suddenly lost or otherwise disoriented.

What happened to Gloria, a thirty-year-old journalist, is typical. "The day after my husband admitted he was having an affair, I got lost going to work," she told me. "I was terrified that I was going crazy. I mean, this was a route I had followed daily for five years."

Pam, a thirty-seven-year-old real estate agent, tells a similar story: "When Jeff admitted that he was in love with another woman, I made him pack his bags and move out. The next weekend I went to visit friends on Block Island to avoid facing my loneliness. On my way I stopped at a golf tournament and walked the course. So far, so good. But when it came time to return to my car, I couldn't remember where it was. I finally found it after an hour of searching, but I was so shaken, I drove home crying all the way. I canned the weekend and stayed home in bed instead. It wasn't my spaciness that upset me so much, it was the meaning I gave to it, that I was losing my mind."

Because of alterations to your nervous system, your intense emotions may overwhelm you with a sense of terror and helplessness. "The whole apparatus for concerted, coordinated and purposeful activity is smashed,"² writes Abram Kardiner, describing the neurophysiological effects of trauma.

Another, very different physiological change takes place with the release of endogenous opioids similar to morphine, into your nervous system. This dulls your perception of pain and shields you from extreme emotional stress. In other words, your body constricts, goes into hibernation, shuts down. Your range of feelings and sensations narrows, and you lose interest in relationships and activities that only weeks before gave you pleasure and purpose. As you struggle to pull yourself together, you find yourself barely functioning. Your mind wanders. You have trouble concentrating

At work, you shuffle papers across your desk; at home, you sit staring off into space. Having lost confidence in your ability to interact with the world, you shrink back into yourself, into isolation. You feel oddly numb and detached.

“It’s like going through the motions of living, aware that a part of you has died,” explained Stephanie, a forty-two-year-old special education teacher. “I once felt like John and I were connected by a golden thread. I’d glance across the room and feel the energy drawing us to each other. Now the best I can say is, I’m managing. We’re still together, but inside I’m dead.”

In his novel *Separation*, author Dan Franck describes the hurt partner’s emotions as the reality of his wife’s affair sinks in: “He has been living in terror; but it now gives way to smooth, dull shores of sadness. Terror is mobile; sadness stagnant. Like water in a vase.”³

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF THE AFFAIR

There are nine different types of losses that you, the hurt partner, are likely to experience. All are variations on one very basic loss, one that goes beyond the loss of your partner: the loss of self. It may be hard for you to recognize this loss in any of its forms, because none of them is tangible. But though you look the same to others, inside you’re likely to be hemorrhaging. Suddenly you feel you’ve lost your:

1. Identity
2. Sense of specialness
3. Self-respect for debasing yourself and forfeiting your basic values to win your partner back
4. Self-respect for failing to acknowledge that you were wronged
5. Control over your thoughts and actions
6. Fundamental sense of order and justice in the world
7. Religious faith
8. Connection with others
9. Sense of purpose—even the will to live

Loss of Identity: “I no longer know who I am.”

The discovery of your partner’s affair forces you to redefine yourself in the most fundamental way. “If you, my life partner, are not the person I thought you were, and our marriage is a lie, then who am I?” you ask. Suddenly you see yourself as fractured, disfigured, different from how you’ve ever known yourself before.

In the past, you may have described yourself as capable, independent, funny, bold, friendly, warm, stable, loving, generous, attractive. No more. Now you experience yourself in a hundred negative ways—as jealous, enraged, vengeful, out of control, petty, diminished, bitter, frightened, lonely, physically ill, defiled, ugly, mistrustful, socially disgraced. Blinded by your partner’s deception, you lose sight of your familiar self and doubt your goodness, your desirability, your basic ability to negotiate with the world.

“‘Vibrant, athletic, plucky’—that’s what they called me in my college yearbook,” reminisced Jan, a thirty-one-year-old accountant married five years. “Now, after John’s affair, I don’t seem to have the energy, or inclination, to even go outside. I feel too exposed.”

Roberta, married fourteen years, also grappled with her sudden loss of identity. “I used to like myself. I used to think of myself as a nice person, as a loving, lovable human being. That’s gone. I can’t stop thinking that the reason Don cheated on me is because I’m too sweet, too ordinary. Maybe

I'm alone for a reason. Maybe no one worth knowing would want to be in a relationship with me."

If you're as depressed as Roberta, you're likely to magnify your defects and accept excessive blame for your partner's adulterous behavior. Whatever you loathed about yourself now defines you. You alone, you assume, have caused this terrible thing to happen. "If only I remodel myself, I can win my partner back," you think, deceiving yourself into believing that the fate of your relationship is in your hands. Later on, you should be able to look at yourself more objectively, and assign blame more equitably. Right now, though, you're unlikely to have the distance or perspective to be fair to anyone, least of all yourself.

The loss of your basic sense of self is an injury that cuts much deeper than the infidelity itself. What could be more distressing than the experience of being stuck in skin that feels alien to you, disconnected from that core self you always counted on to tell you who you are?

Loss of Your Sense of Specialness: "I thought I meant something to you. Now I realize I'm disposable."

Swept away with your sense of self is your conviction that you and your partner were meant for each other, that no one could make your partner happier, that together you formed a primal and irreducible union that could not be shared or severed. The affair marks the passing of two innocent illusions—that your marriage is exceptional, and that you are unique or prized.

By the time Miriam reached her teens, she had been raped by her stepfather and abandoned by her mother, who refused to believe her allegations. Miriam came to view herself as damaged goods and found herself drawn to men who treated her as shoddily as her parents had. After putting herself through secretarial school, she got a job as a receptionist at a law firm. There she met Ed. At first she distrusted his interest in her—why would anyone be drawn to her for herself? she wondered. Gradually, however, she came to rely on his generosity and protection. After living with him for three months, she agreed to marry him. She wasn't passionately in love with him, but he was the first man who made her feel decent, valued, clean. When she discovered, a year later, that he was sleeping with his secretary, she lost her newly found self-esteem. "You were the most special person in the world to me," she told him, "my best friend, the first person I could totally trust. I felt completely safe with you and could tell you anything. But what mattered even more was that you allowed me to believe in me—that I was okay, that what had happened to me as a child wasn't my fault, wasn't because I was bad. For the first time in my life I felt special and loved for who I was. Now I realize that I'm disposable, garbage."

When you, like Miriam, are willfully discarded by someone who once made you feel irreplaceable, you may devalue yourself not only as a partner but also as a parent. Demoralized by the destruction of your nuclear family, you may write off your importance to your children, and believe that you have little to give to anyone, even those who love and need you the most.

"I thought seriously about getting a one-way ticket out of here, leaving everyone and everything behind," confessed Nancy, the mother of a nine-month-old girl. "I felt I couldn't compete with Jim's girlfriend—she seemed so young and alive compared to me. Why would my child want to be with me, the loser? What could I possibly offer her? I lost my sense of myself as a nurturing, significant, worthy human being. Thank God I came to see this was just my depression talking and stayed put. Maybe I wasn't special to Jim anymore, but I was still my daughter's only mother."

When you, like Nancy, lose your sense of specialness and feel like a ghost of the person you once were, it's important to realize that your perception of yourself, filtered as it is through your partner's infidelity, shouldn't be trusted. Your ability to see yourself clearly right now is likely to be at an all

time low.

Loss of Self-Respect for Debasing Yourself and Forfeiting Your Basic Values to Win Your Partner Back: “I’ll do anything to keep this relationship together.”

Nothing may seem more unforgivable to you than the way you prostrate yourself to win your partner back once the affair is revealed. Your desperate acts, you realize, violate your core values and principles. Not only has your partner abandoned you, *you’ve* abandoned you.

Jane’s story is a poignant example of the extremes to which you may go to wrest your partner back—extremes that later fill you with shame and rage.

“A year before I learned about my husband’s affair, I developed breast cancer,” she told me. “The radical mastectomy and silicone implant seemed to restore order to my life. But when Dave told me he was involved with another woman, I got so depressed I couldn’t eat and quickly lost ten pounds—leaving my healthy breast looking flat compared to my artificially puffed up one. So I decided to have that breast inflated as well. I can’t believe I was stupid enough to think this would matter. The plastic surgeon I consulted never questioned my motives or informed me of the hazards. A mammography expert cautioned me against manipulating the healthy breast tissue—it might make it harder to inspect in the future, he said—but I chose not to listen to him and went ahead with the surgery. What seemed everything to me was my appearance, my ability to compete physically with my husband’s lover. Of course what eventually happened was I gained back the weight, and now my healthy breast is fuller than the removed one.”

Jane’s husband returned to the marriage, but she continued to flagellate herself. “I’m left facing myself, wondering, ‘Where was I? Where was my head? How could I have been so out of touch with myself? How could my priorities have been so screwed up?’ I’m left looking at myself in the mirror trying to piece together what happened.”

Ruth, a forty-seven-year-old accountant, offers another example of how hurt partners sacrifice their dignity and self-respect to keep their relationships alive. “I couldn’t help feeling competitive—actually inferior, to Jerry’s young lover,” she told me, “so I spent—I should say wasted—hours, as well as a fortune, trying on skimpy underwear in the Bloomingdale’s lingerie department when I should have been visiting my mother, who was in the hospital recuperating from the removal of a cancerous tumor. It’s so depressing, I feel sick just telling you about it. I’m humiliated by what I’ve done—by what I’ve become.”

Jed, a thirty-three-year-old editor in one of New York’s major book publishing houses, struggles with the same issues:

My wife, Julie, promised me maybe a hundred times she’d break up with her boyfriend, and each time I believed her. Once she asked my permission to go off for the weekend with him so they could test their love, and I was crazy enough to agree. Of course she kept right on seeing him. Then she asked me to move into our beach cottage for a few days so the two of them could have a final fling in our New York apartment. Can you believe that I went along? I felt like someone forced into exile, like an accomplice to a crime.

At the time, I guess I felt I had no choice. I had a lousy salary and couldn’t afford to just walk out. But by agreeing to something so clearly unagreeable, I changed inside. I felt violated by Julie, but worse, I felt violated by *me*. We’re back together again, but I’m still struggling to regain my self-respect. I mean, I gave her no ultimatum. I hardly fought back. I went numb, like an animal in captivity. I figured she’d come back to me, the way she always did, and I was

right. But I never asked myself, “What’s in this for me? And at what price?”

For anyone who feels like Jed or Jane or Ruth, it’s important to understand that your basic values haven’t changed, but that this emotional maelstrom has temporarily shattered your ability to make thoughtful decisions in defense of your best self. In time you’ll develop a clearer and more compassionate picture of what you’re going through and why you’re acting the way you are. If you feel you’ve lost yourself, be assured that you’re not alone, and that your response is exactly appropriate to your injury. The emotional shock makes virtually everyone behave in ways that engender self-hatred and regret. If you can accept how deeply the infidelity has altered you, both physiologically and psychologically, perhaps you can learn not to judge yourself so harshly.

Loss of Self-Respect for Failing to Acknowledge That You Were Wronged: “Why didn’t I draw the line?”

Your self-respect may crumble when you look back at those days before the secret was revealed and realize how you hid from your suspicions, or kept them to yourself. “How could I have accepted my partner’s denials so meekly?” you wonder. “How could I have been so stupid and cowardly that I didn’t confront my partner with the truth?”

Obviously, not all suspicions are justified; some people mistrust obsessively and imagine what isn’t true. Often, however, the clues are unmistakable.

After his wife’s affair, Tom recoiled in disbelief at how he had intuited what was going on for months but had stuffed it away in a corner of his mind: “My wife sells computer software and travels a lot. Once, when she flew back from London, I thought I’d surprise her and pick her up at the airport. I saw her and her boss walking out together through the customs area, and from the way he touched her waist, I knew instantly they were lovers. But what did I do? I left without her ever knowing I was there, and sent her flowers with a note that said, ‘I’m afraid I’m losing you.’ When she read it, she scoffed at me for feeling insecure, and you know what? I needed to hear this so badly, I made myself believe it. I began to doubt what I had seen. Inside, though, I knew.”

Betty, a psychologist married eleven years, was equally mystified by the magic she performed on her head to dispose of disturbing information: “When I got back from a behavior therapy convention—it was out of town—I asked my husband, Jim, how he’d spent his Saturday night. He told me he had felt exhausted and gone to bed right after dinner. Well, for some reason I also asked the babysitter what she had done that night. She told me she had stayed up late talking to Jim about his career—the kitchen table. I knew the stories clashed, but I couldn’t deal with the implications. The idea of striking out on my own was more than I could handle. I said nothing. But the truth was so obvious, it was embarrassing.”

Dave, married four years, told me how he handled a similar deceit: “One day I found an unopened condom in my wife’s car. It was a different brand than we normally used, so I asked her about it. She tossed off some excuse—that it was a sample that came in the mail—a story not even the biggest moron would have swallowed. I look back now and wonder why I didn’t confront her, why I didn’t draw the line.”

Dave, Betty, Tom—all of them muzzled their voices and stopped trusting what they knew at some level to be true. To preserve their illusions, they denied the legitimacy of their suspicions. The failure to process or protest what was happening compromised their greatest asset—their authentic selves. “The loss of self coincides with a loss of voice in relationship,” Dana Crowley Jack points out in *Silencing the Self*. “Voice is an indicator of self.”⁴

Once the affair is out in the open, you can expect to swing to the other extreme of hypervigilance. Your suspicions are likely to be so visceral, so relentless, that whatever your partner says or does, you can no longer distinguish truth from fiction. Not only can't you trust your partner, you're also unable to trust your own perceptions. "What's my partner hiding from me," you wonder, "and what am I hiding from myself?"

On some level, this transformation from blindness to watchfulness is adaptive; the mind retains the memory of the injury to protect you from future harm. Should you and your partner split up, your mistrust is likely to follow you into other relationships. Should you stay together, it may lessen if your partner proves to be dependable, but it's unlikely ever to completely disappear.

Loss of Control Over Mind and Body: "How do I turn my head off? How do I stop myself?"

As you try to unscramble what has happened to you, both your thoughts and actions may spin out of control. You're likely to become more obsessional, dwelling on your partner's lies, the details of the affair, the events that led to it. You may also become more compulsive at work and play, pushing harder and more frenetically to diffuse your anxiety. None of these responses, however, will give you the relief you seek. Let's look at a few of them and see why.

Obsessive Thoughts: "How do I turn my head off?"

The mind has a mind of its own and, at times like these, refuses to be controlled. Your obsessions take over, and you find yourself staring off into space as images of your spouse and the affair-person bombard your consciousness, interrupting your sleep or concentration.

From the day Lynn learned about Mark's affair, she became fixated on it. "I keep thinking the same thoughts—like a broken record, like a broken head," she told me. "I have endless, imagined conversations with him: 'I was always there for you, Mark,' I tell him; 'I was always there.' I wake up at three A.M., dreaming of him and this woman in bed together, wondering how she touched him, how he thrilled her. I keep playing it through my head, trying to make better sense of it, but all I do is make myself sick."

Another hurt partner, Steve, spent every free moment piecing together the clues to his wife's deception. Alone or with her, he kept playing the same mental tape: "You mean when you said you were off on a business trip on our anniversary last May, you were really with *him*?" "When I walked in on you, talking on the phone, you were talking to *him*—in our bedroom?"

"As much as I hate being cheated on," Steve told me, "what really gets to me is how my mind has been contaminated. I never used to think like this."

Don't be surprised if you find yourself conjuring up scenes of violent revenge against your partner or the affair-person. The viciousness of these images may alarm you—they're so uncharacteristic the way you normally think—but under the circumstances they're not abnormal.

"I used to consider myself fairly laid back," a hurt partner told me. "Now I'm consumed with hatred. I hear myself hurling insults at my wife and her boyfriend, wanting them to suffer, too. Yesterday when I saw him crossing the street, I thought of running him over. In the end, it's *me*, of course, who suffers. They couldn't care less how crazy I've become."

If your ruminations are seriously compromising your ability to function, you can turn ahead to [Chapter 8](#) for suggestions on how to short-circuit them. You can also consult a physician for medication to calm you down and help you sleep at night. At the same time, try to accept what's happening within you as an appropriate reaction to the shock of the revelation. The most you may be able to do right now is to step back and observe your obsessions with compassion. Though they lead

nowhere fruitful, they're your mind's way of imposing order and justice on your world and giving yourself a sense of control.

Compulsive Behavior: "How do I stop myself?"

Your mistrust will cause you to behave compulsively, reflexively—without reason or restraint.

"It's been six months since I found out what was going on with his assistant," Marge told me, "but I can't stop myself from picking through his jacket pockets, desk drawers, you name it. When he's asleep, I scroll through his messages. I walk by restaurants and hotels where he used to take his girlfriends; I learned how to track his whereabouts on his iPhone. I call him at the office to see if he's there, and if he's not, I use his password to listen to his voice mail. I occasionally hire a private investigator to see if he's where he says he is. I even count his Viagra pills to see if he's been with someone else. I watch, I check, I set traps. And I waste an unbelievable amount of time and money. I know I'm out of control, but I can't seem to help myself. Who made me a detective?"

You, like Marge, are no doubt determined never to be made a fool of again. If your partner pledges fidelity, a certain amount of checking can provide a dose of concrete reassurance. Your constant vigilance, however, is likely to exhaust you physically and mentally, and further undermine your self-respect. It certainly won't bring back the trust or closeness you're hoping to restore.

Checking up on your partner is only one form of excessive behavior. Smoking, drinking, shopping, redecorating—these are all ways of trying to reduce your anxiety, dull your pain, and reward yourself in the few ways you have available to you.

You may also find yourself becoming more sexual, sometimes in irresponsible or inappropriate ways. A patient named Gail is typical: "The night I found out about Tom's affair, I went out to a bar, got drunk, and had unprotected sex with a stranger. I didn't even know the guy's name. The next day I went to a wedding and found myself flirting with my college roommate's husband. I was so crazed, I even tried to pick up some guy sitting next to me on the subway. The whole thing is mortifying, the way I flaunted and cheapened myself. It's not that my behavior was unjustified or immoral; it was stupid and self-destructive. It was as if, because I was hurt, I had to let the world know that nothing mattered. It was as if, because I was made to feel like a nobody, I had to treat everyone else that way too. I was so bitter, I wanted to wipe out everything good or decent—including myself."

Another common form of compulsive behavior is excessive exercise and dieting—activities that you hope, will give you more control over your life, make you more attractive to your partner, and restore your self-esteem. While there are some short-term benefits to these activities—you may improve your health, become more physically fit, and release pent-up tensions—you should realize that, in your hypercritical and depressed state, you're in no shape to evaluate your physical attractiveness, and you risk subjecting yourself to a regimen that's punishing, depriving, and extreme. Go ahead and pump iron or live on salads if that makes you feel better, but understand that no Cyber workout or Mediterranean diet will get at the root problems—your fear of abandonment and your shattered sense of self.

Another type of compulsive behavior is seeking out people who have influence over your partner and exhorting them to help you get your partner back. If nothing else, this keeps your hopes afloat and, like excessive exercise, gives you the illusion of power over, or at least some say in, the fate of your relationship. It's hard to sit passively and watch your life fall apart.

"I was frantic to get Glenn back so I spent hours micromanaging relationships with anyone I might listen to," recalled Abbey. "I contacted both of his parents and several of his best friends and pleaded with them, please, to talk to him. I called his brothers and their wives—even the priest."

threatened to take the kids out of state if the marriage broke up—not that I'd ever go, but I wanted to get to his parents, who couldn't bear losing their grandchildren and would pressure him to stay with me. I was swinging in the dark, but I refused to just wait around and pray for his return."

Some of you are likely to find yourselves moving compulsively between extremes, determined to save your relationship one minute, and end it the next. "My mood keeps changing," a hurt partner named Tina explained. "I wake up wanting to have nothing to do with my husband, and stay as far away as I can. An hour later, I love him to death and want to spend every minute with him. I'm constantly asking myself, 'Is he really worth fighting for?' When I answer yes, I act as sweet as possible, work on looking great, and cook him his favorite dinners. I'm not going to make it easy for him to leave me. But then I wonder, 'Do I really want this guy; he's hideous,' and I make an appointment with the attorney and arm myself to fight for my rights. It's not that I can't make decisions, I can't *stop* making them."

To divert yourself and ward off loneliness, you may make too many plans with too many people who mean nothing to you. Like other forms of compulsive behavior, these distractions serve as a temporary antidote to feelings of anxiety or emptiness. But if you want to put yourself back together, you need to slow down, confront your pain, figure out why the affair happened, and decide what you want to do about it.

It's scary to feel that you've lost control over your mind and body, that your mind wields so little influence over the way you conduct your life. Rest assured, however, that though you're experiencing yourself in odd ways, your behavior is not odd.

Loss of Your Fundamental Sense of Order and Justice in the Universe: "The world no longer makes sense."

You may have thought that you understood how the world works and that, through this understanding, you could exert some control over your life. "What goes around comes around," "As ye sow so shall ye reap"—these and other maxims you once lived by may have seemed unassailable. When you learn of your partner's affair, however, your belief in the order and justice of the world gets blown apart, and with it, your assumption that you are good, and that the world is fundamentally safe and meaningfully ordered.

When you suffer a personal violation of this magnitude, you're forced to confront your basic ideas about what's fair and just in every aspect of life, including love and marriage. You may never have articulated these assumptions, but once they're contradicted, you'll be struck by how much you depended on them. Your belief that if you did *X*, *Y* would follow—that you could anticipate and then do what was needed to be loved—made you feel effective and secure, and gave your world a structure you could count on. Now you realize how little control you have over your own happiness, and how little you can depend on being treated fairly by anyone, even the people you love.

When Sam learned that his wife, Jane, was sleeping with a twenty-three-year-old carpenter, his whole world came unglued: "I had thought of myself as a basically decent husband who earned his wife's love," he told me. "I was completely committed to her and tried to be there for her—helping around the house, working with her on her graduate school papers. I tried to be even-tempered and considerate, even when she wasn't. My mother used to say, 'Treat your wife like a queen and she'll make you her king.' What a joke. Maybe I failed her in some major way, but she never let on or gave me a chance to change. Now I feel misled and cheated. I see you don't win any prizes for being decent; in fact, you can get kicked in the face. I hate her for what she's done to me. I've become cynical and selfish, and I doubt I'll ever see people as good, or love as good, again."

Before the emotional anarchy of the affair, you, like Sam, probably held certain common assumptions about how relationships work:

- “I have some say over how my marriage goes.”
- “If I’m basically a good and loving person, I’ll be loved in return.”
- “If I’m a decent partner, my marriage will be safe.”
- “I know what to do to make my partner happy.”
- “I can trust my best friend.”

These ideas, once so self-evident, now may strike you as terribly naive. Rather than give them up, however, you may question your goodness, your decency, your judgment. In an effort to make sense of it all, you may start believing that you got what you deserved.

Depressed, confused, you may assume either that the world doesn’t work according to the principles you once took for granted (a condition that leads to outer chaos), or that *you* don’t measure up (an idea that leads to inner chaos). Not now perhaps, but later on, you’ll see that both of these perspectives are exaggerated and overgeneralized. You really don’t have to crucify yourself, or the world. Life is not so random, nor you so foul.

Loss of Religious Faith: “Why has God forsaken me?”

Some of you, trying to explain your suffering, may feel punished or abandoned by your God. As Rabbi Harold Kushner points out in *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, when people are struck by misfortune, the question they most frequently ask is: “If God existed, if He was minimally fair, if He alone loving and forgiving, how could He do this to me?”⁵

However you see it—a cruel God betrayed you, an indifferent God deserted you, a just God found you unworthy and gave you what you deserved—you’re likely to be robbed of the solace you once found in religion or religious ritual, and to feel more alone and needy than ever before.

Your faith may be further eroded by what you see as the insensitivity or aloofness of your religious mentors, and the loss of the spiritual family from which you derived both a sense of social identity and emotional support. At a time when you’re looking to community leaders for psychological renewal, reinforcement of traditional family values, or basic comfort, you may feel terribly let down.

Some members of the clergy will spoon out the old religious platitudes, telling you, for instance, that if you forgive, you shall be forgiven. Others, concerned about contributions and church attendance, won’t want to take sides. Many will be sensitive and supportive, of course, but, given how wretched you’re feeling, it’s possible that no one can console you right now.

Though it was Rachel’s husband who had the affair, it was she who felt shunned by her rabbi:

My religious faith always mattered a great deal to me. I was president of the local Jewish family services when my husband, the great, respected Jewish leader of the community, moved in with a non-Jewish girl. I don’t know if I went into hiding or if people shied away from me, but I felt rejected by everyone in the community, even the rabbi. Once, when I saw him putting his arm around my husband, I thought, “This is the man who batmitzvahed me, married me, and brisbed both of my kids. Someday he will bury my parents.” Somehow I thought that he, if anyone, would come through for me, but whenever I caught his eye after services, he turned away. When he continued to say nothing—no advice, no words of commiseration—I decided, “This is it; I don’t want to be Jewish.” To rid myself of my pain, I renounced my religion.

I needed to separate myself, to find a different identity, even if it was an anti-identity. My husband returned eventually, but it took eight years before I could feel comfortable observing the Jewish rituals again. One day I went to see the rabbi and confronted him with my rage. He seemed to have had no idea, all those years, how hurt and alone I had been. Now that he knew, he told me he felt hurt *I hadn't come to him* earlier for direction.

There's no way to know for sure, but my guess is that he was too timid, too political, to get involved. My husband, after all, was influential. As far as I was concerned, here was one more man who didn't have the courage or humanity to extend himself beyond his own self-interests and who expected me to make him feel important. Go fuck yourself, is how I felt. I discarded a lot of dead wood in those months and began to find other ways to embrace my spiritual needs.

For you, as for Rachel, being let down by religious leaders can turn your faith into a mockery and your God into a detached and powerless figurehead. Whether your disillusionment is with a member of the clergy or with God Himself, you're likely to feel abandoned by one of your most familiar and profound sources of affirmation and spiritual sustenance. Try to keep in mind that such feelings are normal at this stage and do not necessarily presage a permanent loss of faith.

Loss of Connection with Others: "Who can I confide in? Who's there for me?"

Your sense of shame and inferiority may make you think that everyone's talking about you and avoiding you like the plague—why else have they stopped calling to say hello or invite you out?

While one part of you wants to reach out and tell the world how you've been violated, another part wants to remain silent and alone. One moment you're craving confirmation that you're a likable human being, and clinging to anyone who will listen to your story and acknowledge that you've been harmed. The next, you're withdrawing into isolation, driven by a sense of pride, a fear of ridicule, and a perverse sense of responsibility for protecting the very person who deceived you.

Mary, the daughter of a well-established investment banker, was raised to keep family secrets and to solve problems for herself. When she found out about her husband's affair, she badly needed to connect with family and friends, but sealed herself off instead. "After what that bastard did to me, it's unbelievable that I saw it as my sacred job to protect his name," she told me, looking back. But when he continued to play around, she allowed herself to seek the support of allies. "Let him worry about his own reputation," she said.

If your parents are alive, you're likely to agonize about telling them. Whatever you decide to do involves substantial risk and leaves you asking yourself: "Will their knowing make future family gatherings unbearable? Will turning them against my partner make it more difficult for my partner to stay? Do I really want my parents to know my relationship is in trouble? Do I want to be dependent on them—to be cradled by them—again? Can I deal with their pity, their disapproval, their condemnation? Do I want to share with them the messy, humiliating details of the affair? Once I've become their child again, how will I break away?"

If you're a parent, you're bound to agonize about telling your kids. "Is it wise to burden them with the ugly truth?" you ask. "Are they too young to understand?" You long for their compassion, but worry about turning them against their other parent. One side of you says, "Yes, I'd love to poison their relationship with the person who destroyed me. I'd love to get even. I want the kids to love me more." But another side—the one that knows that each parent is an irreplaceable role model, and that children learn what it means to be an adult from both parents—reels at the idea of forcing them to split loyalties. "Do I want them to grow up with an incomplete or warped sense of self?" you ask.

“What will the truth do to their ideas about themselves? Will they be more likely to have affairs when they grow up? Will they be afraid to commit to intimate relationships of their own? Will they blame themselves for what happened? Perhaps if I can put the marriage back together quickly, they’ll never have to know.”

You also worry about unburdening yourself to friends. “Can I trust them to keep my secret?” you wonder. “Will I end up making a public spectacle of myself? No one likes socializing with an unhappy couple, so will we find ourselves sitting at home alone every Saturday night? Friends I confide in will probably say insulting things about my partner, either because they’re genuinely outraged or because they want to make me feel better, so won’t it be awkward getting back together as a group again? Worst of all, what if someone sympathizes with my partner?”

It’s important to realize that some people treat adultery as a contagious disease that might infect their own relationships if they get too close to you. Since for these people the subject of infidelity is a taboo, try not to expect too much from them or to take their coldness personally. It’s likely that they’re threatened by what they don’t understand, or that their own relationships are more fragile than they know or want to admit.

Most of your friends will want to help and comfort you, but simply don’t know what to say or how to begin. Even a funeral has established rituals for expressing condolences, with well-wishers coming forward with prescribed words of support; but at the news of a partner’s infidelity, even your closest friends may have no idea how to help you grieve. Unsure of what to say or do, they may avoid you or cut you off. It’s important to realize that they may be looking for cues from you that you want their company, that you don’t want to be alone. Often their staying away is motivated by respect for what they believe is your wish for privacy. You may need to invite them back into your life.

Some of you may think of talking to a therapist, someone anonymous and neutral who listens and tries to help. This may seem the most logical recourse, but you may feel conflicted about it. “It took me months to call you for an appointment,” one betrayed wife told me. “I thought you’d be shocked by my secrets.” When this woman finally did come to see me, she told me all about her husband’s current affair but said nothing about the many one-night stands that preceded it. “As crazy as it sounds, I was afraid you’d encourage me to leave him, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to,” she admitted. Her assumption was that if she got into therapy she’d be forced to decide whether she wanted to end her marriage, when all she really wanted was to explore her ambivalence (something I’ll help you to do in [Chapters 3 and 4](#)). At the end of her first appointment, she stood up and said, “I now realize why I’m here. I need to talk out loud and sort out my feelings about what’s happened to me. I don’t have to know where it’s all going to lead. I’m here for me, to bring me back to life.”

Opening yourself to others is fraught with danger. Parents, children, friends, therapists—all may help you at this difficult time, but all may also fuel your sense of alienation. It’s hard to know who to trust, and how much to say. There are no rules, no rights and wrongs. All you can do is think through the consequences of revealing the secret; no one can weigh your risks against your needs but you.

Whatever you decide to do, beware of isolating yourself and overdeveloping your solitary life. If you assume that your closest friends don’t want you around, or that you always must be buoyant and entertaining when you socialize, you’ll make yourself even lonelier and deny yourself the consolation you so sorely need. If there’s a network of people who give wholeness and meaning to your life, reach out and reengage yourself with them, even if you’re uncomfortable and self-conscious at first.

Loss of a Sense of Purpose—Even the Will to Live: “Sometimes when I’m driving home at night

I think it would be easier to swerve off the road and end this agony.”

When you can't imagine ever loving or being loved again, when you lose your ability to value yourself or your life, when living feels more painful than not living, it's not surprising that your thoughts turn to suicide. This is the most tragic response to your partner's affair: the loss of the will to live.

Paula, the mother of a mentally retarded daughter, was pregnant with her second child when she learned that her husband was sleeping with her best friend, Sybil. "One day I lost it," she told me. She couldn't come up with any reason to live. I felt like a complete failure. Sybil was sophisticated and sexy. The people I thought were my two best friends had betrayed me. My unborn child deserved more than I could give, or the world could give, I thought, so I shut the garage door, sat my daughter down next to me in the car, and turned on the motor. Was I out of my mind? I think I was—with grief, with hatred. I was saved by the realization that this was a crazy thing to do, that I had an obligation to be there for my children, and that perhaps my husband had acted crazily as well. On some level I understood that his fling was an attempt to escape responsibility for our daughter and deal with his anxiety over the health of our next child. I decided to explore these ideas with him, and we've been together, rebuilding our marriage, ever since. Life for us has always been hard, harder than for most, I think. But I felt then and still feel today that we owed it to each other to get beyond the pain and forgive each other for being human. We've both been so let down as parents, maybe we expected our relationship to compensate for what life didn't give us. We're finally beginning to acknowledge our bitterness at the cards we've been dealt, and learning to pull together as friends."

For you, as for Paula, few life events are more devastating than your partner's betrayal. Remember, though, that your depression is like a thick morning fog, obscuring your vision, and that having suicidal thoughts is different from acting on them. If you ever feel dangerous to yourself or others, you can walk into a hospital emergency room or call a friend and announce, "I'm depressed. Please protect me." *What you want to kill is not yourself but your pain.*

Your job right now is to do your best to tolerate your despair even if you don't yet know how to relieve it. At this moment, you may find it impossible to believe what I'm telling you, but you must have faith that you can, over time, learn to value yourself again and develop authentic connections with people who matter to you.

SEX DIFFERENCES: DO THEY INFLUENCE THE WAY YOU RESPOND TO THE AFFAIR?

Men and women tend to assign different meanings to a partner's affair, which, in turn, color their emotional responses to it. It's important not to overgeneralize—what applies to some people doesn't apply to others—but there's evidence that most people react at least partially in gender-typical ways. Awareness of these biological and cultural imperatives, no matter how fluid and inexact they are, should shed some light on your reaction to the affair, and make you feel less crazed and alone. It should also help your partner understand you better.

In general, women are more likely to try to rehabilitate the relationship and keep it alive; men are more likely to end it and find a replacement. Women tend to get depressed and strike out at themselves; men tend to get angry and strike out violently at others, if only in their fantasies. Women are more apt to attribute the affair to their general unworthiness; men, to their sexual inadequacy. Women may exaggerate the significance of the affair and take longer to heal; men may compartmentalize their pain and move on.

Difference #1: Women Try to Preserve the Relationship; Men Turn and Run

Women: "Maybe we can work it out."

Men: “Don’t bother to come back.”

When the hurt partner is a woman, she’s more likely to work to preserve the relationship⁶—in part because her culture has taught her to please others and deny herself.⁷ A man tends to cut his losses and search for a replacement—someone who will give him the love and attention he feels he deserves. Typically, women silence themselves or hide from their feelings when they’ve been emotionally violated. Pressured to maintain the appearance of harmony, they often muffle their authentic selves and the inner voice that cries out, “I need more than this.” Our society delivers the message that it’s the woman’s job—and measure of her self-worth—to maintain her ties to others. One fascinating study⁸ shows that when girls around the age of eight are asked how they feel about being mistreated by boys, they know their anger and speak up; but somewhere around the age of twelve, these same girls, asked the same questions, respond by saying, “I don’t know.” This well-documented body of research demonstrates that as women get older, many of them stop trusting their intuitions when they’ve been wronged. If you as a woman fail to acknowledge how your partner’s infidelity is harming you, if you stop speaking directly and authoritatively about your negative feelings in order to stay together, if you’re afraid to “blow the whistle,”⁹ you’ve been well-trained.

Another reason many women seek to preserve relationships, even damaged ones, is that they believe and fear that the alternative is to live alone. The famous 1986 marriage study by Harvard and Yale researchers Bennett, Bloom, and Craig¹⁰ sent women into a state of panic over an alleged shortage of bachelors. Although Susan Faludi pointed out back in 1991 that these statistics were grossly exaggerated,¹¹ they nonetheless created a state of “nuptuliatitis”¹² that continues today, in which women believe that their opportunities for marriage after age forty are next to nil.¹³

Divorced women suffer economically more than divorced men, in part because they assume more responsibility for raising young children,¹⁴ in part because their former spouses are more likely to meet car payments than child support obligations.¹⁵ Although the earning gap between the sexes is closing, women tend to fill lower-level jobs or earn less in comparable positions—77 cents to the male dollar.¹⁶ For these practical reasons alone, many women struggle to keep their marriages afloat.

Men—traditionally more financially secure, more confident that their partners can be replaced—are less likely to take their straying spouses back. Because they define themselves less in terms of the success of a relationship, they often feel they have less to lose when it falls apart. Women tend to silence themselves and stay; men, to flee. They cope with their injury by erasing the source of the pain.

Difference #2: Women Get Depressed; Men Get Angry

Women: “I failed at the most significant relationship in my life.”

Men: “If I run into my wife’s lover, I’ll kill him.”

Women tend to react to an affair by beating up on themselves. Men tend to react with anger, beating up those who injure them, at least in fantasy.

Women have twice as great a chance of becoming clinically depressed as men, according to recent figures gathered by the Mayo Clinic.¹⁷ One reason for this is their tendency to direct their criticisms inward at themselves rather than outward at others. Another reason is that they’re more likely to define themselves in relation to others and equate their self-worth with being loved. When a relationship falters or fails, a woman is more likely to get depressed and experience a diminution of self. It’s not just that she loses her partner, she loses herself.¹⁸

If you're a man, in contrast, you're more likely to direct your fury at your wife or at your wife's lover than at yourself.¹⁹ Aggressive men often have to hold themselves back from acts of violence, but even passive, introspective types find themselves daydreaming about assaulting the "enemy." In either case, your anger allows you to feel powerful and in control, warding off such unsettling feelings as shame and self-doubt. Some of you will want to view your partner as a victim, manipulated by a seductive lover. By directing your rage at him, you avoid confronting the painful possibility that your partner chose to stray because she was seriously dissatisfied with you.

Difference #3: Women Feel Inadequate as Companions; Men Feel Inadequate as Lovers

Women: "I'm not good enough. I can't satisfy my husband."

Men: "My penis isn't good enough. I can't satisfy my wife."

As a woman, you're likely to attribute your husband's betrayal to your own insufficiencies as a human being, not just to your performance in bed. You're likely to assume that your partner had an affair for love, not just sex, and that the attraction was more than physical. As a result, you may assign more significance to your partner's affair than he does. When he insists, "I never loved the other woman; I never wanted to break up our marriage; my affair meant nothing to me," you'll have an awful time understanding or trusting his words, but you may want to consider that he's being honest.

If you're a man, you tend to think your wife cheated on you for better sex, an assumption that makes you feel sexually inadequate and jealous, and may lead to violence against your wife or her lover. Men tend to overlook or minimize other, nonsexual relationship issues, such as communication and intimacy, which may matter most to their wives. If you want to salvage your marriage, you might begin by asking your partner what's missing in the relationship for her, and what exactly you can do to make her feel more loved and appreciated.

Difference #4: Women Obsess; Men Distract Themselves

Women: "I can't stop thinking about his girlfriend."

Men: "I refuse to think about her affair."

Because a woman's sense of self is so closely linked to her success in her most intimate relationship, she tends to be more obsessional about affairs than a man, more likely to dwell on the deception, the exclusion of everything else. In the process, she becomes more embittered by her partner's lie and remains more mistrustful for a longer time.²⁰ Actively reliving the details of the affair, she keeps her hurt and insecurity alive.

Men, in contrast, spend less time ruminating about the betrayal and more time actively engaging in physical activities that make them feel masterful and competent.²¹ They seem better able to compartmentalize their pain and move on—often to another partner.

Do these sex differences really influence how you respond to the affair? If you're a man, can you feel as depressed and self-critical as a woman? If you're a woman, can you be as preoccupied with your sexual performance as any man?

Gender-specific patterns have been identified in current research, but that doesn't mean they apply to you. At times, in fact, the opposite may be true. Betrayed women, after all, are certainly capable of demonstrating their rage. Euripides knew that over two millennia ago, when he spun his tale of Medea, an abandoned wife who slays her children and her husband's lover to avenge the infidelity. Zoom ahead 2,400 years to a daytime talk show where, as a guest expert, I watched a wife stride across the

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