
Treating Couples Recovering From Infidelity: An Integrative Approach



Kristina Coop Gordon

University of Tennessee-Knoxville



Donald H. Baucom

University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill



Douglas K. Snyder

Texas A&M University

Infidelity is one of the most difficult problems to address in couple therapy, most likely because it involves a traumatic relationship event that alters the ways in which couples process information about each other and established behavioral patterns. We present a three-stage treatment designed to address the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional sequelae of affairs that integrates cognitive-behavioral and insight-oriented strategies with the literatures on traumatic response and forgiveness. A case study with pretreatment, posttreatment, and 6-month follow-up data is presented to illustrate the treatment methods. © 2005 Wiley Periodicals, Inc. *J Clin Psychol/In Session* 61: 1393–1405, 2005.

Keywords: infidelity; affair; extramarital relationship; relationship trauma; treatment; therapy

Couple therapists consider infidelity one of the most difficult relationship issues to treat (see, e.g., Whisman, Dixon, & Johnson, 1997). Although research has not fully investigated why clinicians regard infidelity as being so therapeutically difficult, the clinical literature on infidelity gives several clues as to why this might be the case. It is likely that the complexity of these couple cases arises from the traumatic nature of the problem.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Kristina Coop Gordon, Ph.D., Department of Psychology, 311B Austin Peay Building, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN 37996-0900; e-mail: kgordon1@utk.edu; or to Donald H. Baucom, Ph.D., Department of Psychology, Davie Hall—Campus Box 3270, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3270; e-mail: donbaucom@aol.com; or to Douglas K. Snyder, Ph.D., Department of Psychology, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843-4235; e-mail: d-snyder@tamu.edu.

Many clinicians have noted the similarities between responses to the discovery of infidelity and responses to trauma in general. They have observed that couples experience intense emotions that often vacillate between rage towards the participating partner and more inward feelings of shame, depression, powerlessness, victimization, and abandonment (see, e.g., Brown, 1991; Cano & O'Leary, 2000; Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2004; Pittman, 1989; Spring, 1996; Thompson, 1984; Westfall, 1989). This emotional turmoil is often accompanied by a corresponding cognitive upheaval. A primary disruption experienced by the injured partner is intrusive, persistent rumination about the event, which can become so overwhelming and uncontrollable that it interferes with both concentration and daily functioning. A major cognitive response associated with the discovery of the affair is the change in beliefs about the partner and relationship; one can no longer trust in his or her partner or feel safe within the relationship. Behavioral avoidance is common, with some partners going as far as immediate termination of their relationship to avoid dealing with the aftermath of the affair. Other responses are hypervigilance, obsessive questioning, and other extremely negative, punitive interchanges.

Not surprisingly, individuals presenting for couple therapy who have recently discovered an affair report clinically significant elevations on measures designed to detect symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Gordon et al., 2004). Infidelity is an interpersonally traumatic event for the couple and, as such, can be disruptive to their ability to function and interact with each other.

Given the need for effective treatments for infidelity, we developed an integrative treatment incorporating elements from the trauma and forgiveness literatures, using both cognitive-behavioral and insight-oriented strategies, to help couples recover and forgive each other following this experience. This treatment is detailed below and elsewhere (e.g., Gordon & Baucom, 1999; Gordon et al., 2004; Snyder, Gordon, & Baucom, 2004).

The Integrative Treatment

Not all negative events are experienced as traumatic; instead, the literature suggests that people are most likely to become emotionally traumatized when an event violates basic assumptions about how the world and people operate (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; McCann, Sakheim, & Abrahamson, 1988). The cognitive disequilibrium resulting from an interpersonal trauma, such as an affair, can be better understood when placed in this light. Several marital assumptions are typically violated by an affair, such as assumptions that partners can be trusted and that the relationship is emotionally safe. When these assumptions are violated, individuals lose predictability for the future and are likely to experience a loss of control, which can then lead to feelings of anxiety and depression (see, e.g., Seligman, 1975). As long as individuals do not have a clear sense of why the trauma occurred, their assumptions remain violated and they cannot trust their partners not to hurt them again. The recovery process is further complicated by the fact that the partners who had the affair often are dealing with their own feelings of guilt, shame, anger, or depression and, thus, are often ill-equipped to respond effectively to the injured individual's strong expressions of emotions and attempts to understand why the affair occurred.

Many of the behaviors observed in injured partners following the discovery of an affair can be viewed as resulting from disruption of their basic beliefs and their strong needs to reconstruct a shattered world view and protect themselves from further harm. If working through the aftermath of an affair is conceptualized as a response to interpersonal trauma, then the recovery and forgiveness process can be understood as parallel to the stages involved in the traumatic response. Therefore, we propose that the three major stages of this treatment are: (a) an impact stage, involving absorbing and experiencing the

impact of the interpersonal trauma; (b) a search for meaning for the trauma, along with an awareness of the implications for this new understanding; and (c) moving forward with one's life within the context of a new set of relationship beliefs.

Stage 1

In the impact stage, people are attempting to comprehend what has transpired. If a partner engages in an extramarital affair, it likely triggers the disruption of a number of standards and assumptions; if one's spouse behaves in a way that disrupts these beliefs, then the injured partner can no longer predict what will happen. Well-established daily patterns of behavior likely are questioned, and the injured partner often is motivated to make some sense of why the affair has occurred. This cognitive processing usually is impeded by an overwhelming array of emotions such as fear, hurt, anger, numbness, or disbelief. As a result, the interactions between the partners are often chaotic, intensely negative, and likely to lead to frustration and anger rather than a sense of resolution.

Both partners may find themselves acting in ways that are erratic or unlike their usual selves. The injured person often retreats or establishes barriers to protect him- or herself, such as sleeping in a different room, no longer sharing events of the day, and having little physical contact. This withdrawal also can serve the purpose of punishing the participating partner. In addition, the injured person may perceive that the balance of power in the relationship has shifted; the offending partner may now appear to have more power, particularly in his or her ability to hurt the injured partner. In an attempt to right this imbalance, injured partners may lash out in destructive ways or demand that their partners perform extraordinary tasks in order to compensate for what occurred.

The therapeutic goals in this stage are to contain the damage from such fluctuating emotions and to help the couple begin to process the impact of the affair. The therapist also orients couples to treatment and to the conceptualization of the affair as a traumatic event.

Stage 2

The second stage of this recovery process involves seeking more in-depth explanations for why the traumatic events have occurred. Typically it is useful for couples to consider a number of factors and how they contributed to the context in which the trauma occurred. Many of these factors are proximal; that is, they are circumstances present at the time of, or immediately prior to, the trauma. These include how each member of the couple was functioning individually, the status of the couple's relationship, and outside stressors. For example, after exploration, a couple might realize that the wife had an extramarital affair at a time when she experienced significant distress at work, felt emotionally disengaged within her marriage, and felt that her husband dealt with their increased distance by focusing his energies on his own work. This understanding is not intended to blame the husband or justify the wife's decision to have an affair. What is important is for the wife in this instance to take responsibility for her decision to have an affair as well as for both partners to understand the salient factors at the time she made that decision.

Couples often benefit from an increased understanding of how both partners have learned to respond to stressors in particular ways over time. This means that an understanding of distal factors, such as early developmental influences, often is important. In the course of a couple's attempts to work through the forgiveness process on their own, they may vary widely in their ability to understand these developmental issues. That is why dealing with significant relationship traumas often benefits from professional assistance; this developmental understanding can be a critical ingredient in the partners'

ability to reconstruct their views of themselves and their relationships, and hopefully to develop empathy for one another.

Once the partners develop a shared view of why the affair occurred, it gives both members of the couple the ability to try to prevent it from happening again (either while maintaining the relationship or by ending it). It may also give them the sense of safety needed to “move on.” From a cognitive perspective, developing more accurate and comprehensive attributions for the traumatic event can contribute to the development of new expectancies or predictions for the future; without understanding why an event occurred, it is difficult to predict whether it will recur in the future.

Stage 3

The couple eventually must move beyond the affair and stop allowing it to control their lives. Most of the time, the search for understanding in Stage 2 leads the couple to re-evaluate their relationship based on their new understanding about each other and to examine what changes need to be made in their relationship. At times, this re-evaluation may mean altering their relationship in significant ways. In more disruptive instances, the couple must make a decision regarding whether they wish to continue with their relationship.

During Stage 3, the couple benefits from a more direct discussion of forgiveness; this is not attempted in earlier stages because of the degree of hurt and anger experienced by the couple. From a psychological perspective, there is nothing in the forgiveness process that requires reconciliation. Nor does forgiveness require that anger disappear completely. In fact, it is expected that the emotions and thoughts associated with the event will reoccur, similar to PTSD flashbacks; however, these thoughts and feelings are no longer as severe or as disruptive as they once were.

In order to move forward, the injured partner needs to achieve three goals by the end of this third stage: (a) to develop a realistic and balanced view of the relationship, (b) to experience a release from being controlled by negative affect toward the offending partner, and (c) to relinquish voluntarily his or her right to punish the participating partner. After the couple has re-evaluated their relationship and discussed forgiveness, the treatment turns to either helping the couple terminate their relationship in a constructive manner or helping them make the changes necessary to stay together.

The following case demonstrates how the stages of our integrative treatment unfolded with a typical affair couple. Because this couple was part of a replicated case study, the case also provides detailed data on their individual and marital functioning pretreatment, posttreatment, and at 6-month follow-up. The couple also provided information about their functioning prior to each session in weekly pretreatment narratives, and their reactions to the sessions in posttreatment narratives. The couple provided narratives regarding the impact of treatment on themselves and their relationships at posttreatment and at follow-up. Segments from these narratives are incorporated below to give a richer picture of how this couple responded to the treatment as it developed.

Case Illustration

Presenting Problem and Client Description

Nancy and Nick, ages 35 and 43, entered treatment 2 months after the discovery of Nancy's affair with a neighbor. They reported a 4-year marital history and the recent stressors of a major move and a period of Nancy's unemployment. Nancy's and Nick's scores on the Global Distress Scale (GDS) of the Marital Satisfaction Inventory—Revised (MSI-R; Snyder, 1997)

indicated that they were experiencing a moderate to high level of marital discord. Nancy's score on the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1979) indicated a moderate level of depressive symptomatology. Finally, Nick received significantly elevated scores on Stage 1 and Stage 2 subscales of the Forgiveness Inventory (Gordon & Baucom, 2003), and a significantly depressed score on the Stage 3 subscale, thus indicating that he was likely still wrestling with the initial stages of forgiveness.

Nancy was the third child in her family. Her mother and father had a tumultuous relationship; one of Nancy's earliest memories was watching her mother "nag my father out the door." Nancy believed that she could never meet her mother's high expectations and consequently she gave up trying. She also noted in her pretreatment assessment that her mother had affairs during her marriage, and the end result of these affairs was always that her father's behaviors toward her mother significantly improved. Finally, Nancy reported that she felt unattractive as an adolescent and was consistently rejected by males until college, at which time she said she learned how to "flirt." She then had a series of relationships, each of which ended when the couple began to experience some conflict, and she would find another man who made her feel better about herself.

Nick was the fifth child in a first-generation immigrant family from Latin America. He recalled his childhood as marked by significant family conflict; however, this conflict was rarely resolved and problems were either avoided or family members would explode and then "sulk" for days without speaking to one another. The family's immigrant status caused great economic hardships, and Nick was acutely aware that he was "different" from his classmates in school, and often felt inferior. It was only when he discovered that he had artistic talent that he developed a sense of self-worth. However, despite this growing self-confidence, he did not have a close relationship with a woman until his early twenties, at which time he "blossomed." He married early and felt that he soon outgrew his wife. The divorce was difficult, but was managed with a small degree of bitterness.

Nancy and Nick met when working together; they decided to live together after a friendship of 2 years and after dating only a few months. Nancy was attracted to Nick's air of experience and knowledge; Nick liked Nancy's energy and enthusiasm, but was particularly attracted to her interest in him. One year after moving in together, they married. Soon after their marriage, Nick's job was terminated and he eventually found a new job in a different state. Their move was difficult because it required Nancy to leave her job as well and to find a new one, which took a long time. Although the couple had experienced little conflict to this point, this period of great uncertainty and stress was difficult for them, and their differing responses to job hunting and differing needs for emotional support created considerable strain on their relationship. When Nick became heavily involved in artistic endeavors and the couple had even less time together, Nancy found herself turning to an attractive neighbor, whom she found to be sympathetic, concerned about her, and complimentary of her both emotionally and physically. Nancy found this combination quite appealing, but reassured herself that it was solely a platonic relationship; nevertheless, on one occasion she and the neighbor consumed a great deal of alcohol at a party, expressed their attraction to each other, and an affair subsequently developed. The affair was discovered by the other man's wife, who then told Nick about the affair. Nancy quickly ended the affair and told Nick she wanted to work on the marriage, at which point they entered couple therapy.

Case Formulation

A number of factors likely converged to render Nick and Nancy's marriage vulnerable to an affair. First, they had recently encountered several stressors in their relationship and

their differing approaches to coping with these created distance and resentment, instead of increased intimacy. Second, their conflicting communication styles also contributed in that Nancy would raise issues, Nick would talk around the problem in elaborate monologues and interrupt Nancy when she spoke, whereupon Nancy would retreat and glower at Nick while he talked. Third, as their stress increased and Nick retreated into his art studio, Nancy felt abandoned and unable to address these feelings with Nick because of her fear of conflict. Developmentally, she had a strong need to feel attractive and desirable because of her underlying self-view as unattractive and inadequate; therefore, she was vulnerable to responding to flirtations from her neighbor. This pattern of behavior had been strongly reinforced in the past—first, vicariously through observing her mother, and second, through her own dating experiences.

Stage 1 of Treatment

Although both Nick and Nancy agreed that treatment was necessary, they were initially cautious and emotionally constricted when they came to sessions. Both reported explosive interactions at home, with Nick interrogating Nancy endlessly about the affair. By contrast, they demonstrated little affect in sessions and insisted that everything was “going okay.” Exploration of this style revealed that both were afraid of opening up painful information and thus destroying the tenuous connection they still had. The initial conjoint sessions focused on (a) explaining the treatment to the couple, (b) assessing and problem solving in areas in which the couple needed help setting boundaries or containing conflict, and (c) introducing emotional expressiveness skills. Following these sessions, each partner met individually with the therapist to talk about how they were coping with the aftermath of the affair and to develop strategies to handle the emotion-laden sessions that were to come in the next phase of therapy; these individual sessions also served to strengthen the alliance between the therapist and each member of the couple.

Both of the individual sessions proved to be particularly useful for Nancy and Nick. In Nick’s postsession narrative, he described how this session provided him a safe place to explore his reactions to Nancy’s affair and its impact on him without having to worry about how he was affecting Nancy. He confessed in his session that he was afraid to let her know the extent of his fears and anger because it might make her upset and angry, which would cause her to leave him. The therapist at first was supportive and understanding of his fears and lack of expression. As Nick began to show more comfort in the session, she talked with him about potential benefits of expressing these emotions to Nancy in the conjoint sessions. After considering how suppressing these emotions was negatively affecting his ongoing interactions with Nancy, and how exploring his fears with her directly might help him resolve his concerns, he agreed to share his feelings and describe the impact of the affair on him in a letter to Nancy that he would read in a conjoint session with the therapist’s support.

In Nancy’s postsession narrative, she also stated that her individual session allowed her finally to acknowledge and express longstanding anger that she had been experiencing toward Nick. She felt she had swallowed this anger and could not express it to him now because of her guilt over the affair. Her anger and guilt made her exquisitely sensitive to any comment from Nick about her affair; thus, they had been unable to make any progress in their recovery. Also, because Nancy’s scores on the depression scales were quite high, the therapist carefully explored Nancy’s individual functioning. Nancy’s guilt and stress appeared to lead to poor self-care—she slept little and was over-eating. The therapist approached these behaviors by talking about emotional vulnerability. In the

aftermath of her affair, Nancy was experiencing a great toll on her emotional resources and, by failing to care for herself, she was further depleting these resources. In response to her therapist's concerns, Nancy felt she was given permission to care for herself and to give her needs equal importance to Nick's needs. Her pre-session narrative the following week stated that she had begun to eat well, to exercise, and to schedule some pleasurable activities—all of which had a measurably positive effect on her mood. Furthermore, the therapist and Nancy discussed strategies to help her cope with the guilt, shame, and anger that likely would be aroused by material in subsequent sessions; in particular, they developed a system by which Nancy could let the therapist know when the discussion was becoming overwhelming for her and she needed a time-out and some extra support from the therapist.

These individual sessions were intended as preparation for the difficult session in which Nick read his letter to Nancy; both partners expressed dread of this session in their pre-session narratives. However, their post-session narratives were extremely positive. For the first time, they felt that they were able to talk about the affair in a constructive manner, and both acknowledged that important information emerged from this session. The therapist had asked Nick to write about how this affair might have touched on "sore spots" from his own history, and in his letter Nick revealed how isolated and inadequate he felt as an adolescent and how Nancy's affair revived those feelings and made him fearful she wouldn't love him. Although Nancy initially had difficulty listening to Nick, with the therapist's support and encouragement, she gradually listened to Nick's feelings and then demonstrated a great deal of compassion. In her post-session narrative, she stated:

This session brought out a startling revelation about Nick's past—specifically, his interactions with his parents while growing up. I never knew he felt so isolated and alone. I found out that he withdrew and retreated to the privacy of his own room when he was unhappy or needed to think about things. If only I had known! It could have possibly made events turn out quite differently. What I mean by that is I don't think I would have built up as much resentment over the past several years of our relationship when he retreated to his art studio/computer room all the times he did. I often felt abandoned when he did this.

This new compassion for Nick initiated a cascade of more positive feelings toward her relationship. It allowed Nancy to reattribute many of Nick's behaviors in the coming weeks as self-soothing rather than his rejection of Nancy. After another session building on these insights, the couple appeared more emotionally attached, less fragile, and were prepared to move into the next stage of therapy.

Stage 2 of Treatment

The couple was encouraged to explore in greater depth the factors that contributed to Nancy's affair. At this point, the couple generally felt more comfortable discussing problems in their relationship and also reported in their pre-session narratives several instances in which they had used their new communication skills to resolve disagreements and to come to a better understanding of each other. At the same time, these pre-session narratives revealed a complex therapeutic issue to address: Nancy's earlier frustrations with Nick's behaviors and her feelings of abandonment by him. As a result, Nick became upset after the sessions and reported that Nancy was making him the "bad guy." This problem highlights a difficulty of the second stage: assignment of responsibility for the affair. This problem particularly applies to the injured partner, who feels wronged by the participating partner and thus sometimes has difficulty seeing his or her own role in the context of the affair without feeling blamed for its occurrence.

The therapist discussed with the couple the difference between assigning responsibility for the actual affair, which rests solely on the participating partner's shoulders, versus looking at each person's contributions to the *context* in which the affair occurred. This reorientation was helpful for Nick, as were the therapist's attempts in later sessions to ensure that both Nick and Nancy had equal voice about their relationship problems.

As with Stage 1, this stage of treatment yielded surprising revelations to the couple. When they initially explored the proximal contributions to the affair, such as the stressors of job losses and their move, the couple experienced few new insights. However, exploration of their interaction styles—such as Nick's tendencies to interrupt Nancy and Nancy's subsequent withdrawal, which the therapist consistently noted in session—helped both partners to understand why Nancy began to look outside their marriage for emotional support. Nancy realized she needed to be more forthcoming with Nick and let him know when she felt dismissed by him, whereas Nick recognized his pattern of interrupting and accepted Nancy's redirection more gracefully.

The exploration of more distal contributions to the affair generated fruitful and groundbreaking material for the couple. The therapist was able to help the partners make connections between past events by using the concept of "choice points." For example, when a stressor occurred in their relationship, Nick or Nancy each theoretically could choose a variety of responses. However, each one chose a characteristic response that tended to exacerbate the problem. The therapist helped each partner to explore other potential choices, and why they had chosen a particular option given their history and developmental needs.

In particular, Nancy came to understand the connection between her mother's affairs and her own pattern of turning to other men for validation and reinforcement when she felt insecure or unloved. She further came to understand how this played a role in her response to marital conflict. She realized that her tendency to withdraw from conflict rather than express her feelings directly came from watching her parents' conflicts; she would rather relinquish her own needs than pursue them and be seen as a "shrew" by her husband. But this withdrawal left her feeling distanced, insecure, and alone—feelings that she assuaged in her friendship with her affair partner. These revelations were not only helpful to Nancy, but also provided considerable relief and empathic opportunities for Nick. One of his greatest questions about the affair was why Nancy didn't tell him more forcefully how unhappy she was instead of turning to the affair partner; understanding Nancy's developmental history helped Nick to resolve this question more satisfactorily and to make sense of why she made the choices she did.

Similarly, Nancy developed a greater understanding of Nick from these sessions. Many actions that she formerly attributed to Nick's rejecting her she now realized more likely stemmed from his own family of origin as well as his early history with his peers, and the strategies he developed to cope in those environments. His strong involvement with his art and need for extended periods of time alone were not indications of a lack of warm feelings for her, but rather were misguided strategies left over from childhood. As she stated in one postsession narrative:

Hearing how Nick felt so alienated as a young person really made me see him in a new light. He is as vulnerable as anyone, including me. Of course, seeing him in this way really helps to explain to me why he is the way he is and how he acts. I guess he is still fulfilling a need from long ago.

These realizations and subsequent compassion for each other helped the couple to work more effectively together to develop new relationship patterns. The therapist taught them problem-solving skills, which they then used to construct new rules for their

relationship regarding time spent together and time spent alone. Nancy also used her new skills to assert herself effectively when she felt dismissed or angered by Nick. Nick responded well to these overtures, helping Nancy to realize that she did not have to be a “shrew” to get her needs met, nor did she have to wait for Nick to “mind-read” and automatically meet these needs. By the end of Stage 2, the couple was able to write a rich and thorough narrative of their relationship describing how Nancy came to engage in the affair. After writing these narratives and discussing them with each other, the therapist also asked Nancy to write a letter of apology to Nick for the affair and to read it to him in the next session. Although Nancy initially dreaded this session, she later wrote that she found it less difficult than she expected, and that it made her realize she was a much “stronger” person than when she started therapy. Nick also found the letter beneficial, as he was finally able to see that Nancy was sincerely remorseful and actively addressing her own conflicts so that this type of crisis would not happen again.

Stage 3 of Treatment

The summaries that Nancy and Nick wrote at the end of Stage 2 helped prepare them to take a realistic look at their relationship in the following sessions to evaluate its viability and their desire to stay married to each other. Both stated that they felt that their relationship had “come a long way” since beginning treatment. In particular, Nick noted his fears from earlier in the therapy—that Nancy did not really want to be with him and that she was outgrowing him—had been answered by the careful exploration that the couple had pursued in therapy. Nick’s original fears were not unfounded; in several of her earlier pre-session narratives, Nancy often wrote that she was unsure about wanting to stay in the marriage. However, after going through the formal relationship re-evaluation period in the treatment, both partners were able to answer this question positively, reaffirming their commitment in a caring, emotional session.

These sessions yielded information regarding areas that the couple needed to improve in their relationship to prevent serious problems from reoccurring. As both noted, they needed to work on their communication. Nancy wanted to be more direct and constructive with Nick to prevent resentment, whereas Nick noted how his tendency to “ramble” and interrupt influenced Nancy’s decisions to withdraw, and how his failures to listen to Nancy increased their emotional distance. They described significant progress: Nick noted several times in his pre-session evaluations that they were working better together as a team and that Nancy was showing him more affection than she had in years. Nancy noted that she was feeling more affectionate toward Nick than she had since they were married. In post-session narratives, both reported welcoming the time and focus in Stage 3 on identifying the changes needed to move forward and to develop further their communication skills.

One troublesome area for this couple arose when the treatment addressed forgiveness. Although both partners felt ready to move on and forgive each other, discussion of their past experiences of forgiveness in their families of origin revealed that Nick’s family considered forgiveness as “weak” and had implied that he was “womanly” for forgiving Nancy. His mother refused to speak to Nancy, and Nancy was bitterly hurt and humiliated by this rejection. Nick had felt pulled between Nancy and his family, and neither had known how to approach this problem. When the therapist encouraged them to discuss their own definition of forgiveness, using the treatment as a starting point, Nick felt able to articulate why he believed forgiveness came from a position of strength and why he was comfortable forgiving Nancy. This new definition and clarity allowed him to

take a stronger position with his family regarding his relationship and to set clearer boundaries between the marital dyad and his family of origin. Although his mother still rejected Nancy, Nancy was better able to accept this reality when she felt she had Nick's full support. The couple also used these forgiveness sessions to express their forgiveness of each other and to reaffirm their commitment.

Outcome and Prognosis

At termination, both partners scored in the nondistressed range on the Beck Depression Inventory and in the low-to-moderate distress range on the GDS as a measure of relationship distress. Nick's scores on the clinical measure of forgiveness steadily improved over treatment until his scores were at or below community sample means on Stages 1 and 2, and above community sample means on Stage 3, indicating that he had progressed well through the three stages of forgiveness. The couple's individual gains were maintained and their global marital distress continued to diminish at the 6-month follow-up. Both reported in their posttreatment and 6-month follow-up narratives that treatment had a major positive impact on their relationship and individual lives. Portions of their narratives are given below.

At posttreatment, Nick reported:

The major impact has been the problem-solving techniques. We are continuously making use of them and I have seen the positive results. It was also beneficial to get the opportunity to express some issues that I had not thought of for awhile so Nancy could benefit. That session was very enlightening for her in that she said she now understands why I act the way I do in some situations. Previously she was not aware of them. Overall, the treatment has had a very positive effect on my life.

At 6-month follow-up, Nick wrote:

Basically the treatment allowed us to express our feelings about each other in a safe environment. We were able to forgive each other for letting the situation get as far as it did. We were also able to lay the groundwork for the communication and understanding we enjoy now.

At posttreatment, Nancy reported:

This treatment has had a profound impact in several ways. First of all, I know that I would not be married to my partner today if we did not have this treatment. We have learned to really talk to each other and hear what the other person has to say and try to reach a productive conclusion. I have learned to see Nick in a different light, and that has helped me immensely in seeing why he is the way he is. I also have learned to use these communication skills in my daily dealings with other people. It greatly assists in problem solving, and that impacts my relationship in a positive way because I don't carry around ill feelings. As the person who had the affair, I never once felt that I was being judged or criticized for my actions while in session. I felt very safe and comfortable in expressing my reasons for why it occurred.

At 6-month follow-up, Nancy wrote:

This treatment has taken me a long way. Of course, it salvaged my marriage. I learned things that will carry me far into the future, in a positive direction. I am more confident in myself, and this has proved to be a catalyst for growth on all levels. Life is not perfect, but it's very good. I also realize and appreciate the things that make my husband the person he is. I am free to communicate my concerns in a safe and supportive environment. We appreciate each other. The treatment has proven to be very beneficial, and I can find little to criticize. The exercises undertaken, although difficult at times, were of great value to the big picture. My chief area of

concern is that I felt some of the sessions moved a bit too quickly. A few times felt like an assembly line; we had to keep moving or we'd fall behind.

The prognosis for this couple was good following treatment, as both partners made important cognitive, emotional, and behavioral shifts in their interactions with one another. At the end of therapy, the couple was experiencing an upward spiral of connection that they were still enjoying 6 months after the treatment's end.

Clinical Issues and Summary

This couple responded well to this integrative treatment and illustrated how this therapy works when it goes well. Two client factors that contributed to the success of treatment were (a) the couple still had a strong emotional bond and genuine desire to maintain their relationship despite some ambivalence; and (b) they were able to regulate their emotions relatively well and responded to redirection in therapy when their interchanges became too heated. Couples in which one or both partners have severe difficulties with emotion regulation tend to be more difficult, their treatment takes longer and requires more tailoring, and their prognosis tends to be poorer.

At the same time, this couple initially presented as emotionally constricted in treatment. If the therapist had failed to gain their trust and to provide safety in allowing them to gradually confront their problems, it is unlikely that this treatment would have been as successful. One major factor in this process was the therapist's careful stance of nonjudgment and acceptance of both partners. As Nancy stated in her narrative, she felt secure exploring some potentially difficult and painful self-realizations. Although this observation appears obvious, many couples that we have treated come to us from previous therapies in which at least one partner felt judged or blamed by the therapist. Even some clinical writings on the subject of infidelity use potentially pejorative terms to describe what we call the *participating partner*, such as the infidel or philanderer (e.g., Lusterman, 1998; Pittman, 1989). When we train therapists in this treatment, many of them state that they feel that they will have difficulty achieving an alliance with the participating partner. However, after training and after their individual sessions with the participating partners, therapists usually report that they feel considerable empathy with these individuals' struggles and can develop understanding of how they came to make these decisions. The development of this empathy in the psychotherapist likely aids in helping the couples develop understanding and compassion for each other.

At the same time, the therapist must also walk the tightrope of not excusing the participating partner for his or her actions. This difficult balancing act is one that couples themselves face. In fact, several of our injured partners expressed that they felt torn between understanding their partners and blaming themselves versus blaming their partners and holding themselves blameless. This complicated matter should be directly addressed in treatment, with the therapist holding the participating partner accountable for his or her decisions, yet also acknowledging that there is a context in which these actions take place. In addition, this problem is dealt with indirectly by the nonjudgmental stance mentioned earlier. It is noteworthy that findings from treating couples with substance abuse suggest that the therapeutic alliance with both partners during critical sessions is the primary factor responsible for these challenging couples staying in treatment (Raytek, McCrady, Epstein, & Hirsch, 1999). It is likely that the same principle applies here: Developing a genuine and supportive alliance that is well-balanced between both partners is critical to the couples carrying through with a long and often painful treatment.

Finally, it is important to note potential risks in moving too quickly. Because the couple described here was part of a treatment study, the therapist was required to adhere

to a structured timeline more than she might have if practicing independently. There is a complex balance required between structure and flexibility when treating affair couples. Particularly with more dysregulated couples in early sessions, it is easy for the therapist to get derailed by the “crisis of the week.” Therapists need to assess whether it is worth being derailed from the current focus to pursue a different track in therapy and address an immediate crisis. Many times these problems are manifestations of underlying themes that will eventually be addressed as treatment progresses. If that is determined to be the case, we advocate formulating the immediate crisis as part of the underlying problem and relating it back to the treatment at hand. However, if the therapist determines that this is a new crisis or problem that requires immediate attention, then this may warrant deviating from the treatment plan for that session.

Overall, our couples have benefited considerably from this integrated and structured therapy. The treatment protocol provides a cognitive map from which to chart an emotionally charged and treacherous terrain, and allows therapists to provide clearer direction and understanding to couples. Couples have appreciated a formulation bridging recovery from trauma with forgiveness. This treatment has helped them understand themselves at a time when they report that they are *not* “themselves” and to develop a more effective understanding of who they are individually and as a couple, as well as who they may become.

Select References/Recommended Readings

- Beck, A.T., Rush, A.J., Shaw, B.F., & Emery, G. (1979). *Cognitive therapy and depression*. New York: Guilford.
- Brown, E. (2001). *Patterns of infidelity and their treatment* (2nd ed.). Philadelphia: Brunner-Routledge.
- Cano, A., & O’Leary, K.D. (2000). Infidelity and separations precipitate major depressive episodes and symptoms of nonspecific depression and anxiety. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 68, 774–781.
- Glass, S., & Wright, T. (1997). Reconstructing marriages after the trauma of infidelity. In W.K. Halford & H.J. Markman (Eds.), *Clinical handbook of marriage and couples interventions* (pp. 471–507). Chichester, England: Wiley.
- Gordon, K.C., & Baucom, D.H. (1999). A forgiveness-based intervention for addressing extramarital affairs. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 6, 382–399.
- Gordon, K.C., & Baucom, D.H. (2003). Forgiveness and marriage: Preliminary support for a synthesized model of recovery from a marital betrayal. *American Journal of Family Therapy*, 31, 179–199.
- Gordon, K.C., Baucom, D.H., & Snyder, D.K. (2004). An integrative intervention for promoting recovery from extramarital affairs. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 30, 213–231.
- Janoff-Bulman, R. (1992). *Shattered assumptions: Towards a new psychology of trauma*. New York: Free Press.
- Lusterman, D.D. (1998). *Infidelity: A survival guide*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.
- McCann, I.L., Sakheim, D.K., & Abrahamson, D.J. (1988). Trauma and victimization: A model of psychological adaptation. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 16, 531–594.
- Pittman, F. (1989). *Private lies: Infidelity and the betrayal of intimacy*. New York: Norton.
- Raytek, H.S., McCrady, B.S., Epstein, E.E., & Hirsch, L.S. (1999). Therapeutic alliance and the retention of couples in conjoint alcoholism treatment. *Addictive Behaviors*, 24, 317–330.
- Reibstein, J., & Richards, M. (1993). *Sexual arrangements: Marriage and the temptation of infidelity*. New York: Scribner.

- Seligman, M.E.P. (1975). *Helplessness: On depression, development, and death*. San Francisco: W.H. Freeman.
- Snyder, D.K. (1997). *Marital Satisfaction Inventory—revised*. Los Angeles, CA: Western Psychological Services.
- Snyder, D.K., Gordon, K.C., & Baucom, D.H. (2004). Treating affair couples: Extending the written disclosure paradigm to relationship trauma. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 11, 155–160.
- Spring, A.J. with Spring, M. (1996). *After the affair: Healing the pain and rebuilding trust when a partner has been unfaithful*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Thompson, A.P. (1984). Extramarital sexual crisis: Common themes and therapy implications. *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy*, 10, 239–255.
- Westfall, A. (1989). Extramarital sex: The treatment of the couple. In G.R. Weeks (Ed.), *Treating couples: The intersystem model of the Marriage Council of Philadelphia* (pp. 163–190). New York: Brunner/Mazel.
- Whisman, M.A., Dixon, A.E., & Johnson, B. (1997). Therapists' perspectives of couple problems and treatment issues in the practice of couple therapy. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 11, 361–366.

Copyright of Journal of Clinical Psychology is the property of John Wiley & Sons Inc.. The copyright in an individual article may be maintained by the author in certain cases. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.