

Infidelity: Not a Pretty Picture

Kay Rutherford, PhD, LPC, NCC, RN
Kmrutherford@viterbo.edu

Kay Rutherford has a PhD in Counselor Education and teaches Racial Ethnicities and Abnormal Psychology at Viterbo University. She also counsels at a private agency. Dr. Rutherford's special areas of research and consultation are in infidelity, holistic therapies, wellness, humor, and the healing emotions.

Women are often controlled by men and very few societies exhibit an equalitarian relationship. One paramount way in which men control women is through sex and sexual power. Physician Bleier, a professor of neurophysiology and Women Studies (1984) emphasized, "It is precisely because sexuality is so charged for women with psychic and emotional significance...that it is so powerful a weapon for the social control of women." As slaves, concubines, and one of multiple wives, women are viewed as *less than*. This practice of viewing females as flawed or diseased is seen in childbirth, birth control, hormone replacement, abortion, or menopause. Often medicine (including the crooning brunette advertising Cialis on TV) is about women living and medicating to satisfy men's needs. It is much about control. Our courts and legal system place men at the head of the family and it is often the women's job to stay within the family as the man sees fit, regardless of what he does. Bassoff (1991) tells us that "sexual exploitation of girls is a longstanding tradition" and so it is with infidelity...in American and in SubSaharan Africa...

Infidelity is a patriarchal way of controlling women. My work with infideled clients is very sad and thus, I share what I have professionally and personally learned: the basic premises of infidelity, the resultant trauma symptoms, infidelity's abusive patterns, the societal acceptance of infidelity, and suggestions for counselors who work with infideled clients. My research is substantiated with interviews, an extensive bibliography selection, a trip to SubSaharan Africa and the results of a recent Women Studies class. In each section I compare the patriarchal control of women in America with that of SubSaharan Africa and

the growing AIDS problems. As I tell my clients...there is almost always more to the story and it is usually not a pretty picture.

I first list the basic premises of infidelity, its unexpectedness, non-simplicity, and its seduction, deception and trauma. I speak as a woman, and in the female voice.

Premises of Infidelity

Most people who are in a mental and physical relationship expect their partner to be in love with them, meaning faithful in spirit and in body. *Infidelity is not expected.*

There is *nothing simple about infidelity*. It is a planned experience entailing a mindset of patterns. The unfaithful knows what he is doing and allows it to happen. Often the infidel wants a simple life-to have sex easily and without responsibility-and though this may be viewed as simple for him-"It just happened"-it is not simple for those he has involved.

Seduction is an active plan with massive deception, including the infidelity and the subsequent lying.

"Sex is the most seductive possessing way to exert power and control and the most effective and abusive way to control women psychologically, physically, with degradation and humiliation, and her subjection to a man," says Bleier.

"Our body feels deception," author Harriet Lerner (1993) shares. The infideled feels that something is not right, something has gone astray. Often the betrayer and the betrayed will get physically sick as their bodies seek the truth. The infidel cannot relate to his partner in a sincere way at this time and the infideled often can do no right. The betrayed's body will signal her if she lets it, e.g., it responds in unusual ways, by not wanting to make love, not being able to orgasm, or being unable to fall asleep next to him, etc. Infidelity creates a traumatic situation and I define it as follows...

PTSD-Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

PTSD trauma symptoms often result for the victim of infidelity and Glass and Wright agree in their work *Reconstructing Marriages after the Trauma of Infidelity* (1997). The victim is often in shock with incessant, recurring thoughts of her partner with another. She will often lose weight, become a detective

sleuthing for details, suffer from insomnia, and experience extreme loss of self-esteem. She may become manic and disorganized since she cannot face her terror or pain.

One seventy-six year-old client of mine told her ex-husband, when he finally apologized for his philandering twenty-five years previously, "I still have nightmares." Yes, this is PTSD. Her symptoms parallel those of other types of abuse...

I call this post-infidelity time *Bloody Sundays* and Hillary Rodham Clinton describes her bloody August when she and the world found out about Bill's betrayals.

I feel it is very important for the infidelity victim to know that she can "be real" at this point, to "hurt so good" as a sobbing frump (my personal terms as to how I felt when it happened to me). Grief is necessary. She may feel as though her soul has been stolen, stopped dead, and frozen in its tracks. Bloomfield, et. al. (1976), list the following to express these feelings in their book *How to Survive the Loss of a Love*:

This longing may shorten my life.

He asked if seeing him was a drain.

Seeing him is not a drain. It's a sewer.

"The pain center of the brain responds to the shock and distress of a rejected lover's broken heart like it does with physical pain. Our body becomes physically distressed when abandoned at the loss of a love affair. Personal rejection, especially one with a connotation of shame, inferiority, or failure in the eyes of others is especially potent and an unwilling separation initiated by another doubles the chance of developing depression (Eisenberger, 2003).

One of my clients put his right hand over his heart and lamented, "I was so lonely I could feel physical pain from my hurting heart." I believe him.

Starting over seems too big a task and often the victim feels as though she cannot live without her once-true other. Infidelity shatters her assumptions of what her life once held true. The one who was her security is now her source of danger. When safety is threatened, we have abuse...

Infidelity Is Abuse

Infidelity is abuse because the characteristics of the unfaithful are like those of a batterer and the symptoms of the victim are like those of the battered. Sitting in on battered women's groups, I heard the same things-women wanting to go back, full of anger and rage, saying they'd rather be beaten than wonder where their partner was sleeping at night.

The infidel has a sense of narcissistic entitlement exhibiting a pattern of behaviors that encompass more than just "the incident." The damage he causes-to partner/s, children, family-never seems to hit home for him. He continues to blame her, something, or someone. He feels his actions are not his fault. He uses phrases that absolve him of responsibility and portrays innocence, "I'm holding her but loving you," "She came on to me," or "I need to have my needs met." In actuality, it is *all about him*. He can only go to his own hurt, not others'. Some feel that infidelity is caused by sexual compulsion...

I recently heard a police psychologist refer to a client's sexual addiction as self-soothing behaviors-a definite euphemism for dangerous acts which expose victims to much physical, psychological, emotional, verbal and spiritual abuse. "Chronic infidelity is abuse," therapist Bancroft (2002) reminds us (I say *any* infidelity is abuse), and "twenty-five percent of abusive men cheat on their partners."

Jennifer and Burt Schneider (1991) say the sexually addicted person numbs out with sex, blames his partner when she is not sexually satisfied, and his bedroom is usually "a nightmare" for he will not let her sleep until his needs are satisfied. Bancroft disagrees with the label sexual addiction and tells us, "Infidelity is not sexual addiction or compulsion, it is sexual abuse."

The Shunning and Societal Acceptance

Society treats the woman victim as she is/was not enough and they blame her as well. Patriarchy reigns, as he was not "getting enough." Glass and Wright (1997) say he was most likely not investing enough. She is ostracized, shunned, disregarded and viewed as gone before she leaves. She becomes a detective because no one will tell her the truth and heaven help her if she does (like Linda, Monica, Kay or Hillary) she becomes the brunt of many jokes, brought to her knees in atonement for being a strong, self-made woman. Then, why do women want to go back to their abusive partners? Because society does not often support them enough to help her stay away. The family clan rallies for the infidel, their brother because she mistreated him, she's so angry (hell hath no fury like a woman scorned), and what else could he do?

He, whom they have protected from harm and responsibility? So, he chooses others...the best way to work on a relationship is to have another one?

SubSaharan Africa is dangerously patriarchal and often polygamic. Twenty-eight million cases of AIDS, a volatile, extremely abusive-to-women situation. My Peace Corps daughter writes about her host, "He says, 'Move the salt shaker so I can reach it and give no snacks to the Peace Corps worker,'" and then insists upon his daughter's genital mutilation, kicks the dog, and saunters down to the neighbor woman."

"Infidelity is regarded as man's inalienable right," Leonard Pitts, Jr. writes in *On AIDS, Silence Is not an Option: Black America, Where is your Sense of Urgency?* (2005). He asks us to awaken to the problem of Africa's AIDS especially after Mandela announces his son's death from AIDS by saying, "Let us give publicity to HIV/AIDS and not hide it."

Sengalese author Marimba Ba (1989) and her best friend tell their stories...both have husbands taking second wives. Her friend says "...there is no union of bodies without the heart's acceptance...clothed in my dignity I walk away," but Ba cannot leave. She, who carried his child twelve times over, sees the sordid side of love but cannot stop loving him...a most poignant tale of women without power or safety from infidelity.

I go to Africa to work with AIDS and abuse and present at the second ever national African counseling conference in Rwanda, to post-genocidal survivors. I am humbled and horrified. And for those counseling clients affected by infidelity...

Suggestions for Counselors

1. Listen to her story-for the 1,000 times she will need to tell it.
2. Believe her story. Patriarchy and society rarely support her; her self-esteem will be all but gone and shame takes its place.
3. Tell her not to sleep with him-very directive but necessary- for safety. She will want to sleep with him to keep him; he will have convinced her it was lack of sex that made him do it.
4. Suggest a Clarissa Pinkola Estes's wolf pack of solid supporters who know and understand-those cunning, wary, feral, observant.
5. Respect her grief-she cannot make it smaller than what it is to her.
6. Encourage unforgiveness to keep her safe at first. Wade and Washington (2003) say forgiveness is not always the answer-dignity

and self-respect come first.

7. Let her anger be her strength, for it says, "Stay away from me."

8. Remind her that infidelity is not simple; it is dangerous and it is abusive.

Infidelity is complex, traumatic, dangerous, patriarchal and contributes to the spread of AIDS in America and in Africa.. We must deal with it as such, with the infidel and the infideled. When safety is threatened, abuse must be considered.

References

- Ba, M. (1989). *So Long A Letter*. Oxford, OX2 8EJ: Richard Blay Ltd, Heinemann Educational Books.
- Bancroft, L. (2002). *Why Does He Do That? Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men*. New York: GP Putnam & Sons.
- Bassoff, E. (1991). *Mothering Ourselves: Help and Healing for Adult Daughters*. New York, NY. Dutton Books.
- Bleier, R. (1984). *Science and Gender: a Critique of Biology and Its Theories on Women*. New York: Pergamon.
- Bloomfield, H., Colgrove, M. & McWilliams, P. (1976). *How to Survive the Loss of a Love*. Allen Park, MI: Mary Books/Prelude Press.
- Eisenberger, N. (2003). Does rejection hurt? An fMRI study of social exclusion. *Science*, 302, # 5643, 290-92.
- Glass, S. & Wright, T. (1997). Reconstructing marriages after the trauma of infidelity. *Clinical Handbook of Marriage and Couples Interventions*. (Eds. Halford, K. & Markman, H.). West Sussex, England: John Wiley & Sons.
- Hill, C. DeChellis. (1978). *An Unmarried Woman*. New York: Avon Books.
- Lerner, H. (1993). *The Dance of Deception: Pretending and Truth-Telling in Women's Lives*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Pitts, L. Jr. (2005). *On AIDS: Silence Is not an Option*. Des Moines Register, Miami Herald. 1-11-05.
- Schneider, J. & Schneider, B. (1991). *Sex, Lies and Forgiveness: Couples Speaking Out on Healing from Sex Addiction*. New York: Hazeldon: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Wade, N. & Washington, Jr. E. (2003). Overcoming interpersonal offenses: Is forgiveness the only way to deal with unforgiveness? *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 81, 343-355.