

SPOTLIGHT

Infidelity: a complicated affair



The human mind is complex with subtle emotions that are often left unexplored by the conscious mind. But what happens when such emotions surface? Is infidelity just a phase of acting out from boredom or does it signify much deeper unaddressed emotional issues? In an interview with Mehtab Khanam, Counselling Psychologist, Star Lifestyle learns more about the dynamics of one of the most common issues for the breaking of a relationship.

FROM YOUR PROFESSIONAL PERSPECTIVE, WHAT IS INFIDELITY?

To understand infidelity, first you have to explore the dynamics of a relationship. Just being in love is not enough to make a relationship work. Both partners need to be honest, loyal, compassionate and appreciative in a relationship. From the time we are born, we seek love and validation and when the emotional attachment is missing in the long-term relationship that we are in, sub-consciously, we start looking for something to fill the void.

So, when someone else starts giving us extra attention, we tend to gravitate towards that even though we are not supposed to. Both emotional and physical attraction develops and that is how infidelity begins. There is no agreed upon definition of infidelity but it has certain characteristics like secretive relationship, sexual attraction and emotional commitment. Although it is morally wrong, infidelity has been widely practised since the invention of marriage. It is a violation of trust, which threatens the victim's core-self and he/she feels absolutely shattered.

EXPLORING RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS, CAN YOU TELL US WHY PEOPLE FALL OUT OF LOVE?

In long term relationships, feelings of desirability, appreciation and being wanted often deplete over time. Partners start taking each other for granted and the emotional connection fades away. You realise that things aren't the same as before. Perhaps, your partner isn't giving you enough time or attention. You feel that you have become invisible. One partner may start feeling that their counterpart is almost absent from the scene. Over time, you start holding grudges against each other. When things start going south and the grudge keeps on building, it's easy to play the blame game. Falling out of love is actually a lengthy process that doesn't happen in a day. It happens due to a prolonged period of emotional detachment. In the process, there is a distortion of self image peppered with deep feelings of negligence and a sense of rejection.

CAN A PERSON CHEAT EVEN IF THEY ARE IN A HAPPY RELATIONSHIP?

Defining happiness is difficult. A lot of times, one has all the elements that makes a person seem happy from the outside, and yet they can have needs they weren't aware of. Very few people can tell if they truly are happy. They often get tangled up in affairs trying to fulfil that unconscious need.

WE ARE TRYING TO LOOK INTO THE SUBTLE EMOTIONS THAT GO INSIDE THE MIND OF THE ONE COMMITTING INFIDELITY. CAN YOU SHED SOME LIGHT ON IT?

People who deeply believe in monogamy may have the yearning and longing for emotional commitment, freedom, novelty and vitality. When someone starts committing infidelity, it's not about searching for another person outside of a relationship; rather it is more about looking for another self. As it comes down, it is less about sex or physical attractions, but more about feeling important, being adored in a way that is absent in the current relationship, with a sense of fulfilment. Torn between values and actions, feelings of guilt and shame are common. However, the thrill of finding a newer side to oneself is too strong for a person to let go of the affair.

IS PHYSICAL RELATIONSHIP A FACTOR?

Sex is something that requires a lot of exploring on both the partners' part. One needs to feel safe and secure to have that physical connection. So, once that emotional connection fades, physical intimacy becomes difficult and turns into a chore. Doctors in these cases will prescribe drugs, but the problem is often not physical in the first place. A good satisfying physical relationship is not only about sex and sentiment, there has to be a combination of emotional bonding and feeling of safety.

WHAT ABOUT THE PERSON BEING CHEATED ON?

The person who is cheated on naturally thinks – would I ever be able to trust this person (their partner) again? Psychologically, the trauma of betrayal is one of the hardest to get over. The hurt stays with the person and they end up having trust issues. Bitter feelings of resentment and abandonment develop. That sense of security that you

need to feel in a relationship is gone, and soon, they fall out of love too.

BUT QUITE OFTEN, COUPLES STILL STICK TOGETHER, RIGHT? CAN YOU STAY IN LOVE WITH SOMEONE WHO'S HURT YOU LIKE THAT?

That is often out of dependency rather than love. This dependency can be financial or emotional or even both. In Bangladesh, cultural values teach women to prioritise their marriage over everything. This is sadly the unfortunate message that has been ingrained into the minds of our women. In trying to fulfil that role of a good wife, they stop thinking about themselves and end up being taken advantage of. So, even when they know that they are not going to get anything from the relationship, they still stick with them, and claim to be in love with them. Moreover, in Bangladesh, divorce is socially less accepted. This also plays a factor into forcing people to stay in dead marriages.

HOW CAN MARRIAGE COUNSELLING HELP? AT WHAT POINT, WOULD YOU SUGGEST THAT PARTNERS GO THEIR SEPARATE WAYS?

When couples come to me, there is a lot of anger and hurt built up over time. They tell me how they've tried to talk it out, and have failed since neither of them are willing to compromise. Marriage counselling consists of both individual sessions and couples' therapy. In the individual sessions, we explore the emotions of a person to ensure their emotional growth. One's social development limitations often only express themselves when one gets into a relationship. Some are too clingy or too distant. Either way, we explore the reasons behind their thoughts and behaviours. At couple's therapy, we explore the relationship. Sometimes, I try role reversal, which is a technique where the partner's switch roles and does what the other partner usually does. This helps them connect emotionally, but it is a very delicate process. Even after trying numerous times if things aren't working out, as therapists, we can never suggest them going separate ways. That decision has to come from them.

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