

**Repairing the Relationship Following the Affair:  
Application of Relational Life Therapy  
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Couples who seek therapy after the discovery of an affair are often traumatized, scared, confused, angry, and exceedingly ambivalent. Despite the ambivalence, couples present for treatment when there is a wish to explore remaining in the relationship. The issue is whether a reasonable future together is in fact possible. Trauma and hurt and betrayal *can* be overcome. For there to be successful repair, however, the parties must confront the underlying individual and relationship issues which created the bedrock for the breakdown of the marriage. The pain from the betrayal and abandonment implicit in an affair can very well be too massive for successful recovery. Further, the resiliency of the couple may be too brittle to overcome the pain of the betrayal. Damage control might be the best that can be accomplished and partners then need to be counseled on how to separate. What I hope to do in this paper is describe some of the dynamics involved in working through the affair. I would also like to discuss how Relational Life Therapy (RLT), developed by Terry Real (2003, 2007) might be a useful therapeutic model to help repair the underlying deformities or dysfunction in the marriage.

**Considerations and Counter-Indications of Working through the Trauma:**

There are few events in life more traumatic than finding your husband or wife involved in an affair. The range of emotions following its discovery can be likened to the initial shock and grief arising from the death of a close attachment figure. The affair can feel to partners as a symbolic death: the end of trust, innocence, safety, security and feeling “felt” by the other as deeply loved and esteemed. This being said, the first task of therapy is to assess the level of damage or degree of traumatic stress experienced by the hurt party. Concomitantly, the therapist must make an assessment of the degree the unfaithful can experience true remorse, tolerate the “heat” in the therapeutic kitchen, if you will, and make the necessary amends. If the unfaithful cannot experience empathy for the hurt party or in the language of RLT, *come down from grandiosity*, the future is not bright for overcoming the myriad challenges ahead.

For there to be any hope of a successful outcome, the couple must possess the cognitive and emotional capacity to interact productively in the same room. If the aggrieved party is suffering profound symptoms of stress, depression, and anxiety that cannot be mitigated in a reasonable amount of couples’ sessions, the couple work must give way to individual work. The goal of this individual work here would be to restore a functional level of emotional equilibrium and working boundaries so the couples’ work could be re-visited. Similarly, if the unfaithful cannot experience appropriate remorse or shame, the work is doomed. What makes for the possibility of progress in these cases (and effective treatment) is to have the two parties in the room able to stay in their *functional adult* mode (the rational, integrating, and mindful aspect of the self). The ability and capacity to stay anchored in functional adult mode allows for the attending to the emotional carnage of the affair and, when the time is right, the ability to confront the underlying

dysfunctional personal and marital dynamics. As the therapy progresses, less time is spent on the details of the affair per se and more time on the deformities in the relationship which predated the affair and will continue unless corrected. The therapist attempts to help the parties hold on to some hope that the painful effort at recovery might be worth it as he directs the focus from the traumatic hurt and infidelity to what has been long broken in the relationship. How to fix it then becomes the therapeutic task. The goal is to recover some semblance of trust, respect and connection so a future together is possible and the family can survive.

### **Why People Have Affairs:**

Pittman (1989) defined infidelity as “a breach of trust, a betrayal of a relationship, a breaking of an agreement. We might define adultery as a sexual act outside marriage, while we might define infidelity as sexual dishonesty within the marriage.”

In terms of the repair process or couple’s work, the important issue is not the adultery or sexual act per se (though this certainly stirs up many feelings) but the infidelity; the violation of the basic trust, agreement and boundary which creates the foundation of the “coupledom,” the basic building block of the family. This boundary allows for the development and maintenance of emotional security and safety necessary for deep attachment and emotional investment. Our emotional health is actually built on the presence of and expectation of attachment to significant others – from the onset of birth to death we depend on our close connections. In the development of our species, fidelity has great evolutionary survival value; it assures the integrity of the couple bond and hence the security and consistency of attachment figures. Having secure attachment to figures that are consistently present is strongly associated with healthy childhood development (not to mention future success in adult relationships). Keeping the boundaries in a marriage is a mechanism for helping assure that those responsible for parenting will be there for the long haul. Given this evolutionary perspective, we can better understand the implication of having secure attachment compromised by infidelity. The context for assuring that basic psychological and emotional needs for the individual as well as the family integrity is threatened. It is no wonder then the pain and conflict that results. So if infidelity is so threatening to the integrity of the family and ultimately painful and destructive, why is it so commonplace?

Peggy Vaughn (1989) provides useful categories to help us understand why people have affairs. The first category she labels as forces within the individual that *pull* the person toward the affair. These include attraction (sex, companionship, admiration, and power), novelty, excitement, risk, challenge, curiosity, enhanced self-image, and falling in love. The second category she labels as forces that *push* the person towards the affair. Included is boredom, the desire to escape or find relief from a painful relationship, desire to fill gaps in a relationship or punish one’s partner, or the desire for attention. Vaughn describes a third *societal factor*; for instance, how affairs are glamorized in the media.

While some mixture of all the above factors can play a part in the drama of the affair, it would be more helpful in terms of recovery or treatment to dip below the surface and understand in a deep way the underlying personal motivations as well as the couple dysfunction that created the vulnerability to the push/pull forces Vaughn describes. This is the contribution Relational Life Therapy (RLT) makes to understanding and then treating couples following the affair.

### **Relational Life Therapy (RLT): Its Take on the Affair**

My experience and the data bear out (see Kinsey, 1959, Vaughn, 1989) that in most affairs the unfaithful is likely to be the man. When a woman acts out in this way, it is often after many years of unhappiness and loneliness. The couple may be “walled off” and unable to convey to each other simple affection and there is no emotional intimacy. At the risk of gender stereotype, when women step outside the marriage they tend to be looking for love, attention, and a relationship where some validation can occur. On the other hand, men often will be “pushed” by unresolved issues which propel them to seek what is missing in the relationship such as attraction, novelty, excitement, power, need for self-esteem, or attention. In RLT, we would define the infidelity and subsequent secretive and deceptive behavior, no matter what the gender, as evidence of *grandiosity* (or *shameless* behavior). That is, the person acting from the *one-up* position and being empathically disconnected from the consequences of his/her behavior on the relationship. In the language of RLT, *riding in the one-up*, or when one is *grandiose*, ethics, good judgment, doing the right thing, being relational, being honest and authentic matters less than getting your way. Real (2002) suggests that grandiosity is much more common in men because of what he describes as the social learning that is inherent in what he labels as *psychological patriarchy*.

In short, *patriarchy* describes the transmission of certain cultural values through the family and other institutions (schools) which influences behavior, in this case, interpersonal behavior. *Patriarchy* is the message we have internalized of the values, attitudes, and behaviors associated with being men versus women. Boys get different messages or conditioning about what is right or wrong behavior and how to act and there is pressure to conform starting in early childhood (see William Pollack, 1998; Carol Gilligan, 1982). The messages for boys (the “*Boy Code*,” according to Wm Pollack) can be about the pressure to achieve and perform in order to be esteemed. Boys also receive information about how appropriate it is to express emotions other than anger. It is not typically acceptable in the boy group to express vulnerable feelings, to cry, be sad, feel scared, or be worried. You “suck it up” and be strong and act stoic. To be expressive, soft or vulnerable it follows, is to exhibit “feminine” traits and this is to be avoided at all costs or be seen as “girlie” or heavens forbid, gay. According to the laws of psychological patriarchy, boys must be strong, successful, achieve, perform and stoic. A “real man” does not show weakness, hides his hurt, or risks the ire and rejection of the peer group. The social learning for girls, on the other hand, provides reinforcement for emotional expression and much less for performance or achievement in the world. Girls are taught to look nice and be nice so as to fit in and conform. Girls are at risk for “losing

voice” (see C. Gilligan’s work) during adolescence as the premium is on being liked and being popular.

Let me try to apply this to the problem at hand, that of recovery from the affair. The typical presentation is the case where the man is acting out from the state we have described as *grandiosity* and has been blatantly *shameless*. If the unfaithful is acting *shameless*, his behavior is hurtful to others and he demonstrates no appropriate remorse. His partner (hurt party) may have been avoiding confronting her partner with his obvious blatant behaviors (“loss of voice”) until such denial became impossible and the discovery is made of the extramarital involvement. There has been a long pattern of disconnection and lack of emotional and communicative intimacy. Their sex life is unsatisfactory or non-existent. The grandiose man, unable to verbalize his conflicts or pain (being *needless and wantless* - “boy code” here) and emboldened and entitled by his grandiosity, breaks the boundary of marriage looking for what is unresolved within or missing between. Since his conditioning has taught him to ignore or avoid his inner feelings of hurt, pain, and vulnerabilities, when these feelings come up in the context of a long term relationship or marriage, there is a push to get away from the feelings, and find an external solution to the marital problem (as opposed to expressing emotions).

RLT does not set out to blame men for the grandiose behavior. The shameless behavior is seen as the result of having been on the receiving end of patriarchal values perpetrated through family of origin dynamics. Early in the sessions, the therapist tries to identify the specific dysfunctional behaviors that are problematic for the relationship whose origins might have been replicated in the family of origin. As the therapy progresses, the family of origin connection is fully explored and present day non-relational behaviors traced back to their etiology. Shame and its toxic effect are often reduced when the trans generational nature of the behavior (and emotional/physical abuse) is fully explored. This *carried shame* is “given back” to those in the unfaithful past that acted *shamelessly*, thus reducing the unfaithful’s feelings of defectiveness and giving them the ability to be accountable for their actions (see Pia Mellody for a full discussion of this).

Women do not get a free pass in RLT. In recovery, the hurt party is encouraged to give strong voice to what grandiose and non-relational behaviors she has experienced before and during the affair. This is called “empowering the latent.” The therapist explores her family of origin issues, looking for connections between her role in the relationship and what she grew up with as far as attachment history goes. Often the “dance” in these relationships is between a “walled-off” woman who is depressed and withdrawn and who has issues regarding shame. “Passive aggressive” or manipulative ways of interacting are not uncommon. When the particular dysfunctional roles are identified, and the family of origin connection made, the therapy can progress to helping the couple understand how they utilize “losing strategies” (e.g. “*being right*”, *control*, *unbridled self-expression*, *walling off*) and how these lead to their typical “fight” or self-defeating interaction that is often reenacted. The RLT therapist attempts to “laser in” or get very specific about describing the particular dysfunctional dynamic that plays out in the relationship (“*stance-stance-dance*” or “*the more, the more*”). By staying in their “functional adult” mode, and being mindful about their reactivity, partners can choose to step away from

their typical knee-jerk reaction which propels or escalates the conflict. These new moves, it must be emphasized, are not learned over night and takes practice to learn and apply.

RLT, as opposed to other relationship therapies, will actually teach the new relational skills partners can use to increase their capacity for intimacy. These skills include how to *speak relationally* (with skill and moderation), how to *listen and respond* (with a generous heart), how to *negotiate with wisdom* and the skill or capacity to *cherish* your relationship or hold your relationship in high esteem despite its imperfections. This couples work is equally focused on helping partners express deep emotions and underlying attachment issues as it is in trying to teach a new skill-based model of interacting and relating.

### **Specific Issues in Healing Post-Affair:**

It is important to emphasize that treatment after such a trauma such as the discovery of an affair does not progress in a smooth, linear manner. There is a need to let the couple determine the agenda and not get ahead of the couple. The hurt party might need to return to the details of the affair itself and express more anger, sadness, grief and hurt. The unfaithful must be able to “stand in the fire” and absorb the emotional maelstrom. This is, in certain respects, the price paid for the indiscretion. The inability or refusal of the unfaithful to understand and accept the rocky and emotional road toward recovery and allow the hurt party to express hurt can be seen as another form of *grandiose behavior* and not a good prognostic sign. The question of “why” he or she had the affair is an important question but often attempts at answering by the unfaithful leave the hurt party further unfulfilled and unsettled. However, it is through the exploration of the overall history of the relationship and its dysfunction as well as the family of origin context that partners can reframe the traumatic event and create a new future together which integrates this painful event. For example, the hurt party might develop a different meaning associated with her partner’s indiscretion; from horrendously betraying abusive acts of a warped personality to, say, the unconscious acting out a childhood trauma reactions. She can see how his non-relational behavior was modeled for him by his father, for instance, himself a grandiose man. In this reframing process, the hurt party will also acknowledge how she played a role in the dysfunction that preceded the affair – not take responsibility, mind you, but see the bigger picture where both have added to the marital woe and not take so personally.

### **Relational Life Therapy and Recovery:**

The couple, once they are able to make a conscious (though ambivalent) choice to work on the marriage, RLT is a helpful roadmap out of the wilderness. The therapist is an active agent, making specific moves to ally, intervene, or confront grandiose or dysfunctional behavior that shows up in the treatment setting. For instance, the therapist will encourage the hurt party to give voice to her feelings and reactions to the unfaithful’s grandiose or blatant behavior as well as name grandiose behavior and give alternatives in

the moment. The process of recovery is equal amounts struggling with the emotional pain of the affair and what preceded it as it is learning a new model or skills for developing intimacy. The process of reconnecting is a slow and arduous process at best.

So as the therapy following the affair evolves, the focus on the shame, pain, betrayal and hurt gives way to a focus on learning a new paradigm of relating. In RLT, the therapist attempts to define what intimacy is, explain it, describe what it isn't (*losing strategies*) and then give the tools to incorporate this new method of relating (*winning strategies*). The sessions often resemble coaching sessions where there are active role plays of how a particular hot issue can be handled with these new skills. As in any skill acquisition, as a function of repetition, feedback and practice, there is gradual accretion of efficacy of the relational skills. This leads to a reduction of conflict and "wound" healing. The affair's ability to trigger a profound traumatic response is dramatically reduced because there is real behavioral change in the day-to-day relating and a clear increase of intimacy. While time may heal all wounds, I prefer to believe it is in the mindful practice of skill that creates the new reality in the relationship.

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