

## Practitioner Perspective

# Can Relationships Survive Infidelity?

By Brendan O'Shaughnessy



*The hurt caused by infidelity is often deep and long-lasting and the decision to work through the betrayal a fraught and emotional one. Instead of trying to return to the pre-affair relationship, accepting the pre-affair relationship as dead and committing to a new, more rewarding relationship can lead to a better understanding of individual needs and expectations*

## Introduction

As a therapist working with couples for 27 years, I have noticed an increase in the number of couples presenting with the issue of infidelity over the past few years. This is probably not surprising when we consider a national survey of 1,000 people conducted by Millward Brown Lansdowne (2012) found

that 40 per cent of respondents admitted to having been unfaithful in a relationship. At the same time, I have become aware of different reactions to affairs than I had previously seen, which challenged me to examine my own thoughts and feelings around the possibility of relationships recovering from infidelity.

In this article I will detail how I have altered the way I work through infidelity with clients in the following steps: Review of my initial process view; a detailed explanation of each step; and how my process was revised based on new learning.

The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines infidelity as: “[an act of] having sex with someone who is not your husband, wife, or regular sexual partner”. Although this definition has broadened to include emotional infidelity, especially in the context of online interactions, all couples I have personally worked with fell into the former definition.

For the purposes of this article, we will follow the story of a fictional couple, Chris and Pat, who have been in a committed relationship for five years and married for two. In the last year, Chris felt that Pat was taking their relationship for granted. Chris confided in a sympathetic work colleague and an affair began. When Pat found out about the affair, Chris and Pat presented for counselling.

## Process View

In my experience, the general pattern I have seen with couples is outlined in Figure 1. At each stage, clients assess whether they want to continue to the next stage or come to the point where they want to end the relationship. From a process point of view, each stage needs to be worked through at some point, and it was useful for me to have a concept with which to work. Of course, each couple is unique, and their experiences did not always result in the linear flow shown in the diagram. However, each stage was usually touched on at some point throughout the counselling process (Figure 1).

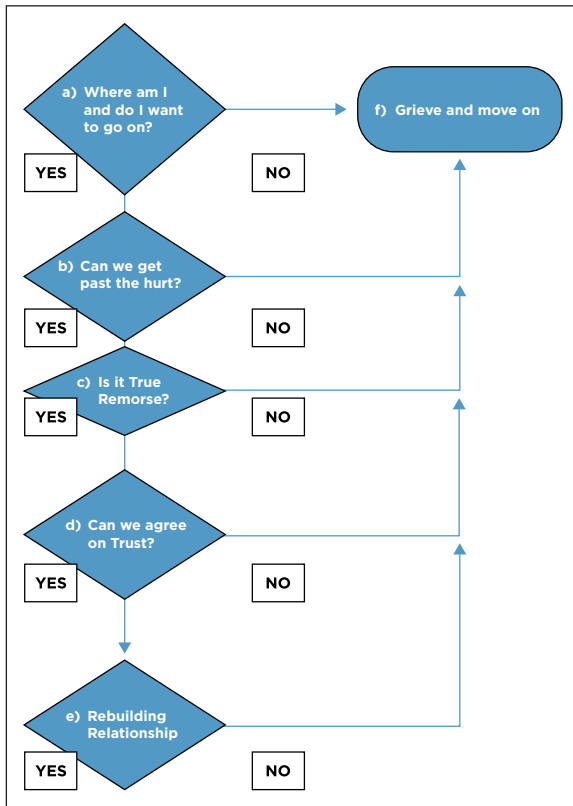


Figure 1: Process View

**a) Assessment phase**

The purpose of the assessment phase is to clarify where each person is now and what they want from counselling. During the initial assessment, I ask couples to individually fill out a questionnaire asking them to rate where they are in their relationship, see Table 1.

In my experience with couples, both parties tend to score low in questions 1 and 2. In our example, Chris rated low in the third question and Pat in higher numbers. Two typical responses in the case of Chris and Pat can be seen in the scenarios shown in Table 2.

This visual representation can be used to open a discussion around the future of the relationship and the purpose of counselling.

In scenario one, while it is a difficult situation for them now, both Chris and Pat can see a reasonable chance of working

towards a different future and are interested in doing so. In scenario two, Pat appears to have given up hope and/or has been so badly hurt by the betrayal that it may be necessary to name and work on ending the relationship as painlessly as possible.

**b) Addressing the Hurt**

When couples present with infidelity, I encourage them to name and experience the hurt and devastation of the betrayal. Failure to do so and focusing on the past (pre-affair) or the future can be viewed as minimising or disregarding the impact of the deception. I sometimes use the analogy of a car crash, where Chris is guilty of dangerous driving.

Discussing how and when they got into the car and how they intend to replace

the damaged vehicle is not relevant while Pat is lying hurt on the road.

The path to recovery begins with first aid for Pat, where the quality of care and remorse from Chris can be viewed as a starting point for regaining trust. First aid consists of recognising the hurt and facing into the storm of emotions that encompasses it. It is important to stress that this takes time. Rushing to solutions can cause more anguish as it minimises the impact of the betrayal and can be seen as an escape from responsibility by Chris. For Pat, the recognition of the damage being experienced is vital in the early stages towards recovery.

**c) True Remorse**

At times, clients have expressed that while

Table 1: Questionnaire asking couples to rate where they are in their relationship.

<b>1. Where am I now in this relationship?</b>	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	Can't get any worse				So, so			OK	As good as it gets		
<b>2. Where do I think I can reasonably get to?</b>	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	Can't get any worse				So, so			OK	As good as it gets		
<b>3. How committed am I?</b>	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	Not committed				So, so		I will try		I will do anything		

Table 2: Example of typical scores from the Relationship Rating Questionnaire.

	Scenario one		Scenario two	
	Pat	Chris	Pat	Chris
Question 1	2	4	1	3
Question 2	5	8	3	6
Question 3	6	9	3	6

there may not be full remorse for having the affair, there is deep guilt for the hurt caused. Clients have stated they felt their relationship was in a rut, they were being taken for granted, or their life was going nowhere and the attention of another person brought excitement and was a welcomed distraction. Chris was candid about not fully regretting what happened, but was intensely ashamed of the hurt caused to Pat. Honest admissions like this are much more likely to be heard than an unconvincing “sorry” expressed in an attempt to bury the issue in the past.

The most important measure of remorse is not the statement of repentance, but the actions that follow. I have listened to people relate how sorry they are, but then not want to hear the true impact or fail to change the behaviours that remind their partner about the affair, for example, returning to the same place where the affair began, or continuing to work in the same company or department with the person they had the affair with. Remedial actions are the true measure of remorse.

#### d) Regaining Trust

In our second session, Chris asked Pat to trust again, with a view to putting the past behind them and working on restoring their relationship. One of my questions to Chris was “what percentage of trust are you targeting to earn?” Chris explained that it would take time but thought they could get back to 90% at some point in the future. Pat was adamant 90% would never be possible. We drew a graph of this to visualise the gap that exists between them in relation to trust expectations and limits (Figure 2). The challenge is to see if they can live with this gap or not. One of the purposes of

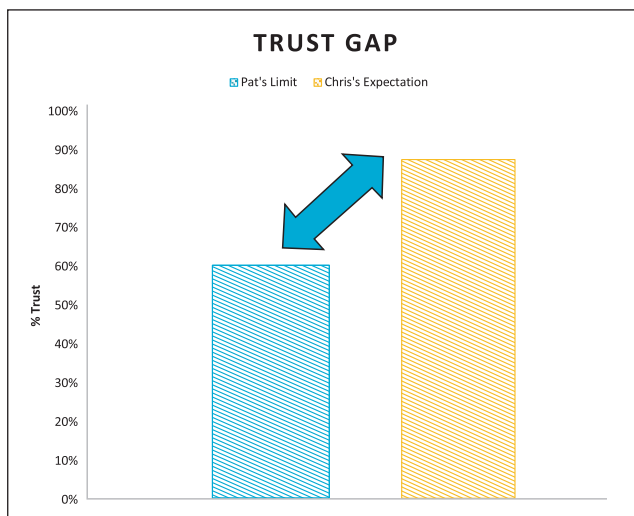


Figure 2: Trust gap showing limit and expectation

this discussion was to move the expectation/work from Pat being *required* to trust Chris, to Chris working to *earn* that trust, within Pat's limit.

#### e) Rebuilding the Relationship

Assuming Chris and Pat worked through the first three stages, they then began to work on rebuilding the relationship. In their case this was during their fourth session. Part of the work involved one session devoted to Pat being able to ask, and Chris committing to answer, any questions about the details of the affair. The purpose of this exercise was to allow Chris the opportunity to regain trust and to allow Pat to ask questions that needed answering. Invariably, issues in the relationship prior to the affair came into focus and these were then worked on to see what each of them could commit to change and see if this was a basis for moving forward.

#### f) Grieve and Move On

If the preference of either person is not to rebuild the relationship, then the grieving needs to be well under way before making practical decisions. The often quoted ‘Resentment is like taking poison

and waiting for the other person to die’ is relevant here.

#### Revision of Approach

Throughout the course of my work, numerous couples challenged my approach. One couple were not interested in ‘staying with the hurt’ phase and were

more focussed on the future. They quickly assessed where they were, recognised that their relationship before the affair was not nourishing for either of them and wanted to develop a new one. Two additional couples followed with similar approaches.

After a few months of work, all clients revealed that while the hurt and betrayal remained, they were experiencing deeper and more meaningful conversations than they had in previous years. Some also commented that their relationship was more interesting and intense. This feedback encouraged me to find out more about not only the possibility of a relationship recovering from an affair, but the possibility that it could improve the relationship in the long term. This led me to an interesting Ted Talk by Belgian psychotherapist Esther Perel, entitled *Rethinking Infidelity: A talk for anyone who has ever loved*.

This talk, in addition to my own discussion with clients, revealed two main points:

1. The old relationship is dead, and the question to be asked is do the clients want to start a new one or not; and

- It is possible to start a new and more rewarding relationship.

The importance of these two points led me to abandon Step e (Rebuilding Relationship) in the Process View and replace it with steps e1 and g1 as outlined in Figure 3.

### e 1) Decision on a New Relationship

I have found that a recognition that the old relationship is dead because of the affair to be a much easier proposition for clients to grasp than trying to revive or recover the old relationship. It honours the impact of the betrayal and clarifies that there is no going back to where they once were. It also allows for grieving the loss of the relationship and the dreams they held for it.

### f 1) Grieve and Move On

A recognition that the former relationship is dead because of the affair honours the impact of the betrayal. It also allows for grieving the loss of the relationship and the dreams both parties had for it. If the preference of either person is to not start a new relationship,

then the grieving needs to be underway before making practical decisions. Some of this grieving, for example for lost dreams for the relationship, can be done in the therapeutic space and rituals of letting go can be a great help.

### g 1) Defining and Creating a New Relationship

Starting a new relationship gives each person the choice of negotiating new ground rules, now based on experience. While addressing the hurt is still an important element of the process and the remorse for the hurt caused, it appears that the assessment that the relationship is 'dead' validates the impact of the affair and the often deep betrayal it caused.

Unlike the way I worked in the past, where there was always a degree of looking back to what went wrong and trying to repair the old relationship, the naming of the death of this old relationship creates a freedom to explore what needs to be different in the future. All couples I worked with reported that this was more positive and led to a better understanding of their individual needs and expectations within the relationship.

Vilhauer (2016): "Working through a ruptured relationship offers you the opportunity to grow as a person and perhaps find a deeper meaning in the relationship itself" (para. 9).

I have also noted how increasingly couples appear to be able to get past an affair and wonder if this is a change in society and/or change in my perspective of the possibility to choose to start a new relationship, rather than hold on to the old. In any case, I feel more energised working with couples presenting with infidelity than I had previously and see the benefit in allowing my clients to choose the future rather than be bound by the past.

**Brendan O'Shaughnessy**

Brendan O'Shaughnessy is an accredited counsellor/ psychotherapist that has worked part-time with the Cork Marriage Counselling Centre for the past 27 years. He has a higher diploma in Counselling from UCC and has been on the board of various charities, including the National Domestic Violence Agency. Brendan can be contacted at [brendanoshaughnessy@hotmail.com](mailto:brendanoshaughnessy@hotmail.com)

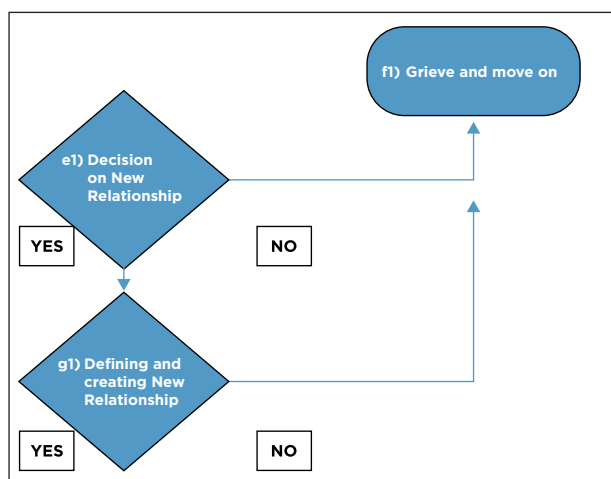


Figure 3 : Revised final two steps of Process View

### Conclusion

My experience of working through infidelity with couples has proved both challenging and refreshing. My views were challenged and subsequently changed because of new experiences with my clients and has impacted on the way I now work with them. In the words of

### REFERENCES

Millward Brown Lansdowne, (2012) Nationwide survey by Millward Brown Lansdowne for the series *Who Knows Ireland Best?*

TED. (2015, May 21). *Esther Perel: Rethinking infidelity - A talk for anyone that has ever loved* [Video file]. Retrieved from: [https://www.ted.com/talks/esther\\_perel\\_rethinking\\_infidelity\\_a\\_talk\\_for\\_anyone\\_who\\_has\\_ever\\_loved](https://www.ted.com/talks/esther_perel_rethinking_infidelity_a_talk_for_anyone_who_has_ever_loved)

Vilhauer, J, (2016, September 4). *How to rebuild trust with someone who hurt you*. Retrieved from: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/living-forward/201609/how-rebuild-trust-someone-who-hurt-you>