

Are You Ready for Infidelity?

Self Assessment, Evaluation, and Treatment for the 3 Stages of Infidelity

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Dr. Ellyn Bader is Co-Founder & Director of The Couples Institute in Menlo Park, California. As therapists, workshop leaders, authors, and speakers, they are dedicated to helping couples create extraordinary relationships. For more than 30 years they have trained therapists in couples therapy and transactional analysis throughout the United States as well as Europe, Asia, South America, and Australia.



Both served as Clinical faculty at Stanford University. Ellyn is a past-president of the International Transactional Analysis Association and a recipient of the Clark Vincent Award for an outstanding literary contribution to the field of marital therapy from the California Association of Marriage and Family Therapists. Dr. Bader and Dr. Pearson are frequently invited to speak at national and international conferences. They co-authored the books, "In Quest of the Mythical Mate: A Developmental Approach to Diagnosis and Treatment in Couples Therapy" (Brunner/Mazel) and "Tell Me No Lies: How to Face the Truth and Build a Loving Marriage" (St. Martin's Press).

Drs. Bader and Pearson have appeared on numerous radio and TV shows including the "Today Show" and "CBS Morning Show." They have been married to each other for 35 years and have worked together for 33 years, giving them continuous opportunities to practice what they preach.

I. Self Assessment

What does it take for a therapist to work really well with couples after infidelity has been revealed?

This was a hot topic at a recent professional conference. Specifically, therapists wondered how soon to ask the partners to begin interacting with each other vs the therapist maintaining more control by talking individually with each partner.

Are there special skills for couples in crisis that can be identified and taught?

Reflecting on that, Pete and I say yes, theory can be learned and interventions can be practiced. But also there is personal development and resilience in the therapist that is required.

I remember my first experience seeing a couple dealing with infidelity. The wife was enraged and obsessing about every detail. I was young, unmarried, and inexperienced with couples.

All I could think every time I saw them was, “Am I up for this? Shouldn’t they be seeing someone older and wiser than I am?” And in retrospect, someone who had more of the personal/emotional development in our continuum below probably would have served them better.

I’d like to share with you our thoughts about the capacities of personal development needed for therapists. I hope you find them useful when working through the hurt and anger after the betrayal of infidelity.

1. Tolerate intense interactions in the office without intervening when it is mostly to calm myself.
2. Manage my own anxiety and take charge in an active way, providing leadership.
3. Recognize how personal experiences with infidelity in my own life may impact my interventions with a particular couple. I am not afraid to address this squarely with myself.
4. Recognize my own moral judgments and manage those without imposing them on the partners.
5. Identify and recognize intense emotional ambiguity.

I. Self Assessment (cont'd)

6. Elicit expression of complex feelings and do not put pressure on partners to prematurely resolve these feelings by finding a black or white solution. I am able to resist the call for too rapid resolution.
7. Resist the urge to insist that terminating the affair is a requirement for therapy to take place. If the “betrayed” lies to the spouse, they will lie to me, too, and feel even worse about the therapy because of their increasing amount of deception.
8. I can hold two realities: that of each partner. I can facilitate a deep understanding of each partner’s understandable reality.
9. And finally, I am not afraid to get consultation or make a referral if a particular couple is too tough or is triggering too many of my own issues. This is not failure or inadequacy. It is honestly acknowledging my own limitations!

This list reveals the importance of the emotional strength of the therapist. Working well with enormous pain, hurt, and anger after infidelity is rewarding. Those rewards come to therapists who stretch themselves emotionally and don’t look for simple answers!

II. Evaluation to Determine Significant Treatment Issues When Handling an Affair

To evaluate the meaning of an affair and how to handle it therapeutically means taking all the following into account:

- Historical evolution of the relationship
- Attachment styles of each partner
- Developmental stage of the relationship
- Individual dynamics of each partner
- Timing of the affair
- Type of affair
- Length of the affair
- Number of affairs
- Type of betrayal
- Type of deceit

In order to assess an affair effectively you want to know about the historical evolution of the relationship. Get a sense from the couple of how long they've been together and what was the strength and quality of the initial bond. Was the commitment clear? Also, is there a previous history of any affairs or infidelity?

You want to look at the attachment styles for each partner. Are they avoidant, insecure, disorganized or secure?

As you explore the developmental stage of the relationship, look for the following:

- Is this a conflict avoidant couple who has been stuck for a long time?
- Is this a couple with a long time hostile dependent relationship?
- Is it a couple where the affair is being used as a way to start a process of differentiation?

II. Evaluation to Determine Significant Treatment Issues When Handling an Affair (cont'd)

It's also very helpful to get an understanding of the individual dynamics of each partner. That can take a little while, but certainly when you're getting individual history you may find things like a sexual abuse history or trauma that may be contributing to the infidelity.

You may even find a replay of family patterns. There certainly are families that encouraged affairs in the whole family tree and you can go back through generations and see that as a pattern.

You also want to look at the timing of the affair. I think there are some very common times that affairs take place. Here are some of those times.

- A job change and one partner suddenly begins to travel a lot
- Right after the pregnancy or birth of a first child
- Mid-life crisis affair
- Empty nest affair

The type of affair is important too, in terms of looking at the affair on a continuum of level of commitment to the marriage.

For example, if somebody has a one-night stand, they don't want to tell the other person about it, and they're stressed about it. This actually represents a fairly high level of commitment to the marriage.

Whereas, for somebody who may have had multiple affairs and never has felt very committed, the affair is just another example of their lack of commitment.

Sometimes an affair can be a same-sex affair where the affair actually represents the person coming out. In the coming out process, they're starting their own differentiation of acknowledging that they may in fact be gay and have never been able to acknowledge that before.

The length of an affair is important. How long has it gone on? One of the most devastating examples I've seen over the years is when it came to light that for 20 years, the husband had been having an affair with his wife's best friend and both of them had kept it secret from her for 20 years.

II. Evaluation to Determine Significant Treatment Issues When Handling an Affair (cont'd)

The number of affairs, the type of betrayal, and the type of deceit all matter. Whom is the affair with? What is the type of deception? The type of deception can cover a huge continuum all the way from lies that are lies of omission to blatant lies and repeated blatant lies.

The really blatant lies are those that occur when facts are denied, even when the partner asked and may have even asked about a particular situation more than once. The amount that somebody can look a partner in the eye and lie to them is going to be very relevant both in terms of the ability to repair it and how you approach the treatment.

III. Summary of Treatment Issues When Handling An Affair – 3 Stages

1. Initial Stage

- Slow process down and outline the individual dilemma for each partner
- Confront the need to make impulsive premature decisions
- Clarify immediate threats. What is going to happen now...stop affair? Live together or apart?
- Do not get caught in the blame cycle
- Actively control communication and don't let it escalate
- Work to define individual issues of each partner that contributed to affairs
- Clarify the relationship between infidelity and dishonesty

2. Middle Stage of Therapy

- Individuals focus on their own issues and own decisions
- Partners develop an increasing capacity for tolerating ambiguity and anxiety
- Work through the anger and betrayal

3. Termination Stage

- Decision is made whether to stay together or separate
- Agreements are re-negotiated – Honesty/Monogamy

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



If you'd like to learn more about working with infidelity, a good next step would be to listen to a 1-hour training session with Ellyn and Pete about working with couples where one partner has had an affair.

[Click Here to view *Affairs in Couples Therapy* audio MP3 & Transcript](#) on our website.

To get deeper learning using the Developmental Model created by Pete and Ellyn, you might also be interested in the 3-part training course with Dr. Ellyn Bader, [Introduction to the Development Model, here.](#)

You'll learn how to integrate the Developmental Model, Attachment theory, Differentiation theory, and Neuroscience to work more effectively and confidently with high conflict and conflict-avoidant couples.

