

# Managing the Crisis of Infidelity: How to Lead Your Clients from Raw Pain to Constructive Action

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Dr. Ellyn Bader

*The Couples Institute &  
The Developmental Model of Couples Therapy*

# Our Mission:

## Prevent Premature and Unnecessary Divorces

## Train Core of Committed Couples Therapists

## Worldwide

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# Challenges Described by Therapists Working with Infidelity



Not being pulled into over-identifying with hurt partner  
Feeling stifled by rage of betrayed partner  
How to challenge the lying client without shaming them  
Not being in too big a rush to smooth things over  
Hard not to take the side of the “victim” spouse

# Affairs are not primarily about sex

In our culture, marriage carries an assumption of sexual exclusivity unless otherwise defined by the partners

- In a monogamous relationship an affair where the spouse does not know first means inevitable dishonesty and deception

- Usually they also involve self deception

- Willingness to betray a promise/commitment:  
Breaking a good faith agreement while appearing to be loyal



# Significant Issues in first few minutes - Dom



“A few infidelities”



Low on “other differentiation”



Hard to remember what matters to her



# Significant Issues in first few minutes - Arielle



He's not in  
love with her



They are not  
supposed to be  
together



Both theories  
create  
unnecessary  
pain and add  
to her grief



# What I Think About and Look For

## STAGE 1



- 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?
- Work to define individual issues of each partner that contributed to the affair and decide about couples therapy-Is there a commitment to the work?

# What I Look For and Do

## STAGE 1



- Do not get caught in the blame cycle
- Strongly and actively control communication and do not allow it to escalate
- Clarify the relationship between infidelity and dishonesty
  - Unfaithful vs. betrayal of commitment
- Explain safety needed for therapy to progress

# What We Learn from Ari

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What was once secure or seemed secure is no longer safe/secure

She's given herself and her self-esteem up

His feelings dominate



# Assessing Infidelity: What do we know

To evaluate the meaning of an affair and how to handle it therapeutically, take the following areas into account:

- Historical evolution of the relationship

- Attachment styles of each partner

- Developmental stage of the relationship

- Individual dynamics of each partner

# Assessing Infidelity



Timing of affair



Number of affairs



Type of affair



Type of betrayal



Length of affair



Type of deceit

# Infidelity calls into question the nature of the primary attachment

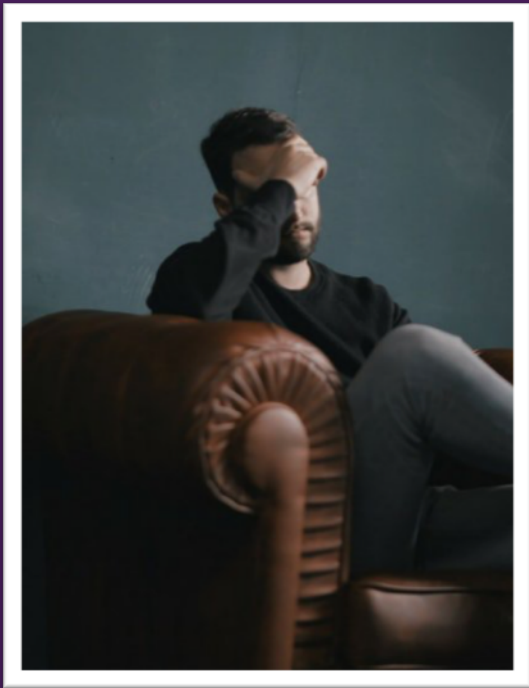
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- | What was once secure or seemed secure is no longer safe/secure
- | It involves a unilateral choice to end an equilateral decision
- | Then the nature of reality and all future decisions are now called into question. Will it happen again?

# When Infidelity is Revealed

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Each partner is confronted with a significant interpersonal and intrapsychic challenge



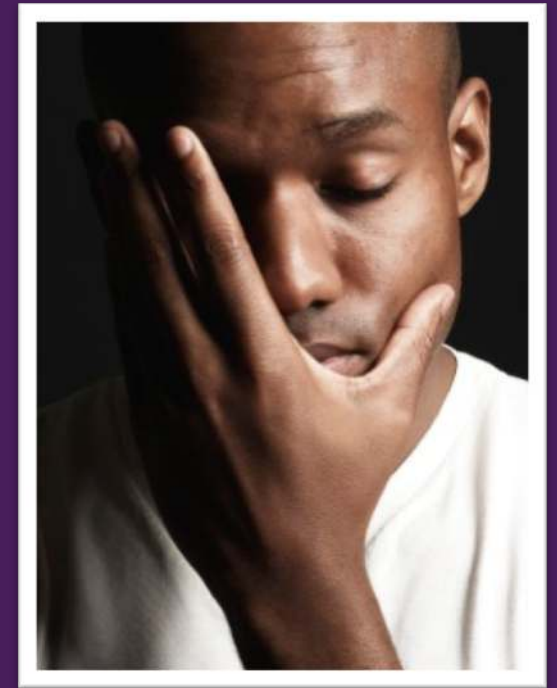
What does the affair mean?

Should I leave/or should I stay? Do I feel trapped?

What does the betrayal of honesty mean?

Human vulnerability and character are revealed

Media uproar caters to a very superficial understanding of affairs



# Dom's Father

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Gave up on  
his marriage

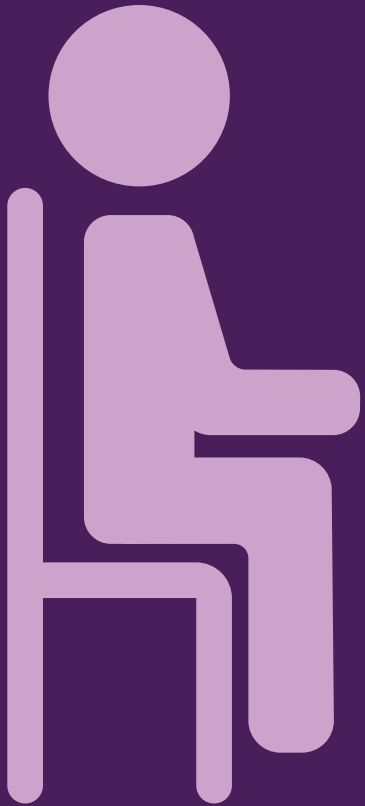


Gave up on  
his son



Gave up on  
his life

# Using Gestalt 2-Chair Work: Identify Internal Split



He wants to be different

His aspirational goal is to be a better man than his father

He aspires to more than his emotional  
brain allows him to live out



Dom has numbed himself from

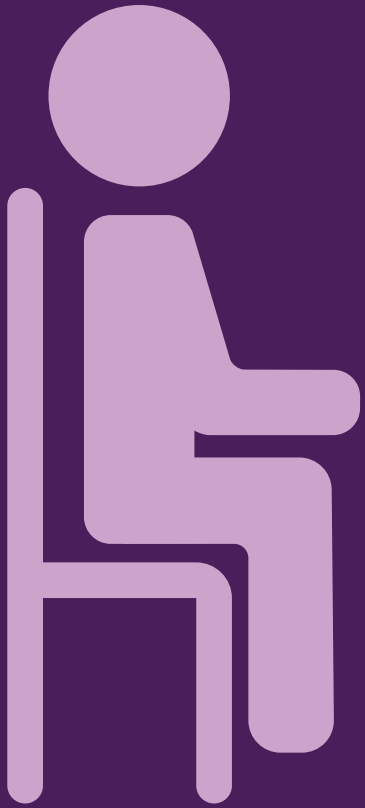
His Pain



The Pain He Causes



# Gestalt 2-Chair Work



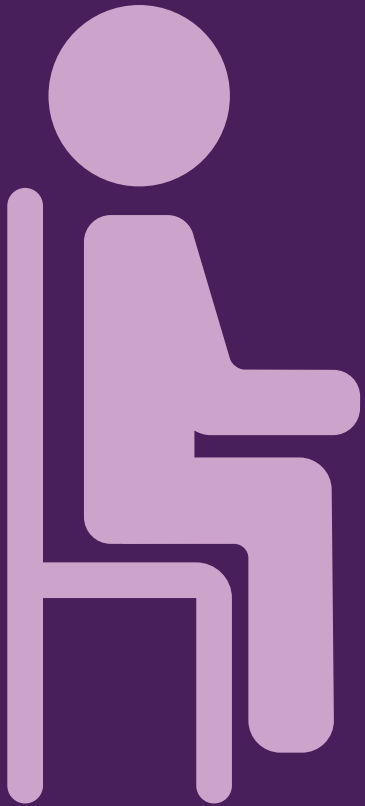
Uncover resistance so it becomes clear to both partners

Uncover the aspirational goal

The conflict is internal and the self-sabotaging part is exposed



# Advantages of Gestalt 2-Chair Work



The conflict becomes clear to both partners

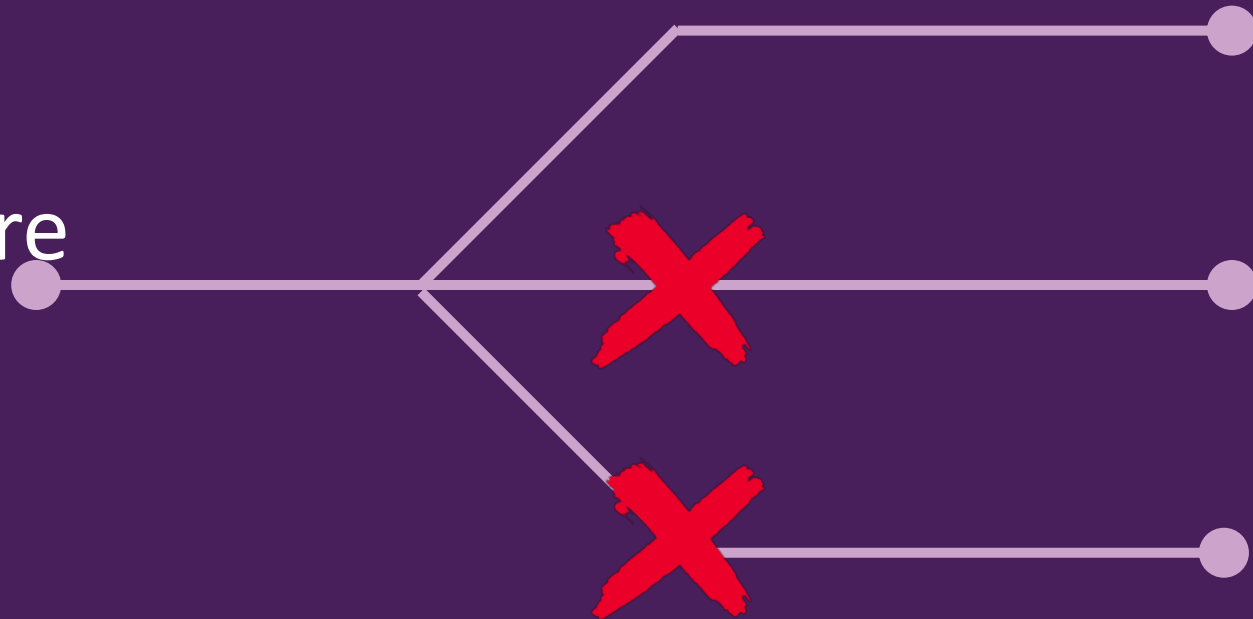
Your work is easier and more effective

Client takes more ownership of their own conflict and spouse can stop personalizing it



# What is the Anxiety Behind Commitment?

Giving up having more  
choices



# Shifting from It's Personal to It's Not Personal

When it is experienced personally, choices are very limited.  
The complexity is viewed through a very narrow lens.

Both cognitive and emotional  
flexibility are very narrow.



# Shifting from It's Personal to It's Not Personal

When it is not seen as personal, the partner can shift to curiosity about “Why are you doing this” rather than “Why are you doing this to me?”

Partner can shift from lonely, hopeless waiting to a place of self-empowerment and focus on what they actually want.



# Treatment Issues

## STAGE 2



- Individuals focus on their own issues and own decisions
- Partners develop an increasing capacity for tolerating ambiguity and anxiety
- Unanswered questions are addressed
- Partners learn to manage their own differentiation and their own emotional reactivity

# Treatment Issues

## STAGE 2



### Accountability

#### Why did I decide to deceive you?

- Is this in or out of character?
- There are relationship consequences
- Partner works through anger and betrayal and acknowledges own contributions as well
- Initiation of discussion and repair attempts from both partners

# Partner who lied

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Account for decision to deceive

Describe the significant events that impacted their decision to have the affair

Is it a 1-time occurrence or a personality trait

What was level of differentiation prior to the affair and how are they stepping forward since the affair

Address partner's feelings of reduced trust, and how the quality of the attachment has changed

# Wrapping Up the Session

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1

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No impulsive decisions

2

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Make a decision for  
each to focus on  
what was exposed

3

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Strong desire to end the pain

**Mixture of Individual and Couples Work**

# The Repair Cycle

Therapist must strongly stop negative, escalating, hurtful, defensive interactions

There must be a commitment to avoid symbiotic/conflict avoidant solutions to problems and a higher tolerance for tension for growth



# Why Use Gestalt 2-Chair Work



Makes your work easier

Makes your work more effective

Client takes more ownership of their issues

The mark of a great  
marriage is when only one  
partner goes crazy at a time.

*Heinz Kohut*

