



Guide to Working with Infidelity: Self-Assessment, Evaluation, and the Three Stages of Treatment

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Introduction

Drs. Ellyn Bader and Peter Pearson are founders of The Couples Institute in Menlo Park, California. As trainers, 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 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 to work really well with couples after infidelity has been revealed?

This is a great question, because many therapists hate to be in early sessions when an affair has just been discovered. The intensity of the raw pain is hard to experience. And it can be even harder to make something constructive happen.

Ellyn describes her 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 me?’ And in retrospect, someone more seasoned with more personal/emotional development probably would have served them better.”

So how can you hone your skills to be the calm, savvy, seasoned therapist needed by couples facing repair after infidelity?

Here are some personal strengths needed by therapists working with these kinds of cases. Please take a moment to rate yourself below. After doing so, you’ll learn how ready you are to help your clients work through the hurt and anger after infidelity.

1. I can tolerate and facilitate intense interactions in the office without intervening when they are productive for the couple rather than to calm myself.

Never Rarely Sometimes Most of the time Always

2. I manage my anxiety and take an active leadership role.

Never Rarely Sometimes Most of the time Always

3. I 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.

Never Rarely Sometimes Most of the time Always

4. I acknowledge my own moral judgments and manage those without imposing them on the partners.

Never Rarely Sometimes Most of the time Always

5. I don’t shy away from illuminating intense emotional ambiguity.

Never Rarely Sometimes Most of the time Always

6. I am able to resist the call for too rapid of a resolution. I do not put pressure on partners to prematurely resolve feelings by jumping to a black or white resolution. I resist the urge to insist that terminating an affair is a requirement for therapy to take place.

Never Rarely Sometimes Most of the time Always

7. I can hold two competing realities: that of the partner who wants a quick resolution, and that of the partner who needs time to go slowly. I know how to facilitate deep understanding of each partner.

Never Rarely Sometimes Most of the time Always

8. I am open to getting training and not afraid to get consultation or make a referral if a particular couple is too difficult or triggers too many of my own issues. This is not failure or inadequacy. It is honestly acknowledging my own limitations!

Never Rarely Sometimes Most of the time Always

Now you see why this work is challenging for the therapist as well as the partners. It takes loads of emotional strength. But working well with the enormous pain, hurt, and anger after infidelity is hugely rewarding. The payoff is huge for therapists who take time to learn how to work with these cases, stretch themselves emotionally, and dig deeper than looking for simple answers!

Is there a roadmap for working with the crisis of infidelity?

Yes, there are guidelines and skills *that can be identified and taught.*

II. How to Evaluate an Affair

It's important to look for key information when working with infidelity. The answers will start to give you a roadmap for how to proceed.

The following checklist is a good one to bring into your next session, especially if you don't already know all the answers. Take this list to your next session to learn as much about these as you can:

- How long has the couple been together?
- Are they married? Did they have a monogamy agreement?
- What is each partner's attachment style?
- What is the developmental stage of the relationship?
- When did the affair take place?
- How many affairs were there?
- How long did they last?
- How was the affair hidden?
- What type of affair is it?
- Is the affair still going on?
- What types of lies were told?

III. What Are the Most Significant Treatment Issues for You to Address?

It's also very helpful to get an understanding of the individual dynamics of each partner. That can take a little while, but 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 also find a replay of family patterns. There certainly are families that have a multi-generational pattern of affairs in the 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. 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
- Empty nest
- After the death of an in-law

You can also look at the affair on a continuum of the level of commitment to the marriage.

For example, somebody has a one-night stand, they don't want to tell the other person about it, and they're stressed about it. This 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 a partner coming out. In the coming out process, they're starting their own differentiation, 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 a secret from her for 20 years. This represents deep betrayal by two of the people she trusted most.

The number of affairs, the type of betrayal, and the type of deceit all matter.

With whom is the affair? 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, possibly more than once. The degree to which 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 the relationship and also how you approach the treatment.

IV. The Three Stages of Treatment for Infidelity

For couples to “graduate” from therapy after infidelity, there are 3 important stages they’ll go through with you. Each stage is important to address fully before going on to the next. Part of your work may be learning how to be emotionally solid enough to hold partners in each stage for as long as is needed, and not rushing ahead to a premature solution when discomfort arises.

Here are the 3 stages and what’s included:

1. Initial Stage

- Slow the process down and outline the individual dilemma for each partner.
- Confront the need to make impulsive premature decisions, and tell them why that won’t be happening in therapy with you.
- Clarify immediate threats. What is going to happen now? Will they continue to 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 the affair(s).
- Clarify the relationship between infidelity and dishonesty.

2. Middle Stage of Therapy

- Encourage individuals to focus on their own issues and own decisions.
- Help partners develop their capacity for tolerating ambiguity and anxiety.
- Work through the anger and betrayal.
- Develop an increased capacity for honesty and authenticity in each partner

3. Termination Stage

- Work with your couple until they are ready to decide whether to stay together or separate.
- Help them re-negotiate agreements. Will they move forward with monogamy? What is their honesty policy?
- Decide how they will return to therapy if desired by either partner.