

**SURVIVING INFIDELITY**  
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You've just learned that your spouse or partner has been unfaithful – or perhaps you and your partner are arguing about whether his or her behavior is truly cheating - now what?

Infidelity is a serious, yet all too common problem in relationships: while 90% of those surveyed in a Gallup poll said they disapprove of extramarital affairs, nearly a third of all marriages will experience one (and the percentage is even higher among non-married couples).

First, let's settle that argument: infidelity is defined as *a betrayal of trust*, in what was supposed to be a monogamous or sexually exclusive relationship, which may occur whether or not a couple is married. It involves *any intimacy of a sexual nature with someone besides your partner, whether or not actual physical contact takes place* – for example, engaging in sexually explicit phone conversations, or sharing of sexual fantasies in an online chat room.

**Myth #1: “Online affairs aren't really cheating.”** The Internet has spawned a whole new category of infidelity: the online affair. These can be especially insidious, because they can go on literally under the other partner's nose, as the person sits typing away on their computer in the family home; and they may be just as destructive to the marriage or primary relationship.

**Myth #2: “As long as they're not having sex it's OK”.** I often hear about the “just friends” relationships, which may occur with a co-worker or family friend known to the other partner. Why should you object? Maybe because the person who's supposed to be your beloved partner is spending most of their time and energy thinking about, making plans for, and having intimate conversations with, someone else (the “emotional affair”). Emotional affairs often become physical, but even if they don't, they can still jeopardize the primary relationship.

**Myth #3: “It's the other partner's fault.”** Contrary to popular belief, infidelity doesn't always mean the primary relationship is unhappy, or even that there's a lack of sexual satisfaction.

People (women as well as men) can be unfaithful for a variety of reasons: 1) due to immaturity or an inability to handle emotional intimacy; 2) to numb inner pain or feelings of emptiness; 3) to boost their ego; 4) to punish their partner for some perceived wrong; 5) to provide an exit strategy if they believe their marriage is ending; 6) in response to an existential crisis, like facing the prospect of aging or losing a loved one; or even 7) by accident, if drunk or drugged.

The impact of infidelity on a relationship is often devastating: the betrayed partner may feel rage, anguish, despair, fear, disgust, or hopelessness. She or he may become physically ill. And on the other side, the betrayer may feel guilt, shame, confusion or remorse. Occasionally, the main feeling is one of relief, when what's been kept secret is brought out into the open.

**But an affair is not necessarily fatal to the relationship.** I have counseled many couples and individuals who have found that *infidelity is survivable*, and if handled right, may even make the relationship stronger. Many couples are motivated to work through the crisis, especially if they have children, but also if they share values, beliefs and interests, and/or have invested time and effort to build a life together. Counseling, either spiritual, psychological, or both, is essential in order to deal with the feelings of betrayal, and to begin to build trust again.