

## The Psychological Impact of the Affair

There are nine different types of losses that you, the hurt partner, are likely to experience. All are variations on one very basic loss, one that goes beyond the loss of your partner: the loss of self. It may be hard for you to recognize this loss in any of its forms because none of them is tangible. But though you look the same to others, inside you're likely to be hemorrhaging. Suddenly, you feel you've lost your:

- 1) Identity
- 2) Sense of specialness
- 3) Self-respect for debasing yourself and forfeiting your basic values to win your partner back
- 4) Self-respect for failing to acknowledge that you were wronged
- 5) Control over your thoughts and actions and feelings
- 6) Fundamental sense of order and justice in the world
- 7) Religious faith
- 8) Connection with others
- 9) Sense of purpose – even the will to live

### Loss of Identity: "I no longer know who I am."

The discovery of your partner's affair forces you to redefine yourself in the most fundamental way. "If you, my life partner, are not the person I thought you were and our marriage is a lie, then who am I?" you ask. Suddenly, you see yourself as fractured, disfigured, different from how you've ever known yourself before.

In the past, you may have described yourself as capable, independent, funny, bold, friendly, warm, stable, loving, generous, attractive. No more. Now you experience yourself in a hundred negative ways:

- Jealous
- Enraged
- Vengeful
- Out of control
- Petty
- Diminished
- Bitter
- Frightened
- Lonely
- Physically ill
- Defiled
- Ugly
- Mistrustful
- Socially disgraced
- Disillusioned
- Broken hearted
- Disposable
- Seething
- Boiling
- Easy prey
- Vigilant
- Furious
- Simpleton
- Naïve
- Stupid
- Blindsided
- Demeaned
- Discarded
- Betrayed
- Malicious
- Abandoned
- Disregarded
- Unimportant
- Weak
- Broken
- Demoted
- Tarnished
- Cheapened
- Gullible
- Shocked
- Judged
- Not fair
- No where to go
- Not needed now
- Misunderstood
- Need and fear of partner
- Needing comfort
- Massive change

- World upended
- Exhausted
- Huge adjusting
- Playing catchup
- Disoriented
- Revolted
- Unprepared
- Reacting, not proacting
- Images come to mind
- How to cope with distress
- Mental energy
- Space and time altered
- Guarded
- Adjusted
- Confused to new partnership
- New life
- Overwhelmed
- Conflicting emotions
- Drownproof
- Drowning
- Stressed due to positive changes
- Dependent
- Fearful
- Childlike
- Want partner involved and not
- Help to organize life
- Relief
- Failure
- Afraid
- Total freedom
- Not to care for a while
- Just for me
- Just to abandon my feelings
- Fear of partner's reaction to your anger
- Not be concerned or be the hurt one (victim)
- Feeling like you won't get the time to heal
- Feeling like you won't get the support and patience to heal all the way

Blinded by your partner's deception, you lose sight of your familiar self and doubt your goodness, your desirability, your basic ability to negotiate with the world.

The loss of your basic sense of self is an injury that cuts much deeper than the infidelity itself. What could be more distressing than the experience of being stuck in skin that feels alien to you, disconnected from that core self you always counted on to tell you who you are?

**Loss of Your Sense of Specialness: "I thought I meant something to you. Now I realize I'm disposable."**

Swept away with your sense of self is your conviction that you and your partner were meant for each other, that no one could make your partner happier, that together you formed a primal and irreducible union that could not be shared or severed. The affair marks the passing of two innocent illusions – that your marriage is exceptional and that you are unique or prized.

When you lose your specialness and feel like a ghost of the person you once were, it's important to realize that your perception of yourself, filtered as it is through your partner's infidelity, shouldn't be trusted. Your ability to see yourself clearly right now is likely to be at an all-time low.

## **Loss of Self-Respect for Debasing Yourself and Forfeiting Your Basic Values to Win Your Partner Back: “I’ll do anything to keep this relationship together.”**

Nothing may seem more unforgivable to you than the way you prostrate yourself to win your partner back once the affair is revealed. Your desperate acts, you realize, violate your core values and principles. Not only has your partner abandoned you, *you’ve* abandoned you.

Jane’s story is a poignant example of the extremes to which you may go to wrest your partner back – extremes that later fill you with shame and rage.

For anyone who feels like Jed or Jane or Ruth, it’s important to understand that your basic values haven’t changed but that this emotional maelstrom has temporarily shattered your ability to make thoughtful decisions in defense of your best self. In time, you’ll develop a clearer and more compassionate picture of what you’re going through and why you’re acting the way you are. If you feel you’ve lost yourself, be assured that you are not alone and that your response is exactly appropriate to your injury. The emotional shock makes virtually everyone behave in ways that engender self-hatred and regret. If you can accept how deeply the infidelity has altered you, both physiologically and psychologically, perhaps you can learn not to judge yourself so harshly.

## **Loss of Self-respect for Failing to Acknowledge That You Were Wronged: “Why didn’t I draw the line?”**

Your self-respect may crumble when you look back at those days before the secret was revealed and realize how you hid from your suspicions or kept them to yourself. “How could I have accepted my partner’s denials so meekly?” you wonder. “How could I have been so stupid and cowardly that I didn’t confront my partner with the truth?”

Obviously, not all suspicions are justified; some people mistrust obsessively and imagine what isn’t true. Often, however, the clues are unmistakable.

Dave, Betty, Tom – all of them muzzled their voices and stopped trusting what they knew at some level to be true. To preserve their illusions, they denied the legitimacy of their suspicions. Their failure to process or protest what was happening compromised their greatest asset – their authentic selves. “The loss of self coincides with a loss of voice in relationship,” Dana Crowley Jack points out in *Silencing the Self*. “Voice is an indicator of self.”

Once the affair is out in the open, you can expect to swing to the other extreme of hypervigilance. Your suspicions are likely to be so visceral, so relentless, that whatever your partner says or does, you can no longer distinguish truth from fiction. Not only can’t you trust your partner, you’re unable to trust your own perceptions. “What’s my partner hiding from me,” you wonder, “and what am I hiding from myself?”

On some level, this transformation from blindness to watchfulness is adaptive; the mind retains the memory of the injury to protect you from future

harm. Should you and your partner split up, your mistrust is likely to follow you into other relationships. Should you stay together, it may lessen if your partner proves to be dependable but it's unlikely ever to completely disappear.

### **Loss of Control Over Mind and Body: "How do I turn my head off? How do I stop myself?"**

As you try to unscramble what has happened to you, both your thoughts and actions may spin out of control. You're likely to become more obsessional, dwelling on your partner's lies, the details of the affair, the events that lead to it. You may also become more compulsive at work and play, pushing harder and more frenetically to diffuse your anxiety. None of these responses, however, will give you the relief you seek. Let's look at a few of them and see why.

#### *Obsessive Thoughts: "How do I turn my head off?"*

The mind has a mind of its own and, at times like these, refuses to be controlled. Your obsessions take over, and you find yourself staring off into space as images and your spouse and the lover bombard your consciousness, interrupting your sleep or concentration.

From the day Lynn learned about Mark's affair, she became fixated on it. "I keep thinking the same thoughts – like a broken record, like a broken head," she told me. "I have endless, imaginary conversations with him: 'I was always there for you, Mark,' I tell him; 'I was always there.' I wake up at 3AM, dreaming of him and this woman in bed together, wondering how she touched him, how he thrilled her. I keep playing it through my head, trying to make better sense of it, but all I do is make myself sick."

Another hurt partner, Steve, spent every free moment piecing together the clues to his wife's deception. Alone or with her, he kept playing the same mental tape.

"As much as I hate being cheated on," Steve told me, "What really gets to me is how my mind's been contaminated. I never used to think like this."

Don't be surprised if you find yourself conjuring up scenes of violent revenge against your partner or the lover. The viciousness of these images may alarm you – they're so uncharacteristic of the way you normally think – but under the circumstances they're not abnormal.

"I used to consider myself fairly laid back," a hurt partner told me. "Now I'm consumed with hate. I hear myself hurling insults at my wife and her boyfriend, wanting them to suffer, too. Yesterday, when I saw him crossing the street, I thought of running him over. In the end, it's *me*, of course, who suffers. They couldn't care less how crazy I've become."

The most you may be able to do right now is to step back and observe your obsessions with compassion. Though they lead nowhere fruitful, they're your mind's way of imposing order and justice on your world and giving yourself a sense of control.

### *Compulsive Behaviour: "How do I stop myself?"*

Your mistrust will cause you to behave compulsively, reflexively – without reason or restraint.

"I still rifle through my husband's mail," Marge told me. "It's been six months since I found out what was going on with his assistant, but I can't stop myself from picking through his telephone receipts and credit card statements – his jacket pockets, briefcase, diary, desk drawers, car, you name it. I listen in on his phone conversations – I've gotten really good at lifting the receiver so quietly that he can't hear. Or I plaster my ear against the door of his study and try to listen in. When I'm not home, I rely on an electronic device which monitors his calls. I walk by restaurants and hotels where I know he used to take his girlfriend – I found out about them by reading his Visa bill.

Checking up on your partner is only one form of excessive behaviour. Smoking, drinking, shopping, redecorating – these are all ways of trying to reduce your anxiety, dull your pain, and reward yourself in the few ways you have available to you.

You may also find yourself becoming more sexual, sometimes in irresponsible or inappropriate ways. Sexual acting out -

Another common form of compulsive behaviour is excessive exercise and dieting – activities that, you hope, will give you more control of your life, make you more attractive to your partner, and restore your self-esteem.

Another type of compulsive behaviour is seeking out people who have influence over your partner and exhorting them to help you get your partner back.

Some of you are likely to find yourselves moving compulsively between extremes, determined to save your relationship one minute and end it the next. "My mood keeps changing," a hurt partner named Tina explained. "I wake up wanting to have nothing to do with my husband and stay as far away as I can. An hour later, I love him to death and want to spend every minute with him. I'm constantly asking myself, 'Is he really worth fighting for?' When I answer yes, I act as sweet as possible, work on looking great and cook him his favorite dinners. I'm not going to make it easy for him to leave me. But then I wonder, 'Do I really want this guy; he's hideous,' and I make an appointment with the attorney and arm myself to fight for my rights. It's not that I can't make decisions, I can't *stop* making them."

### **Loss of Your Fundamental Sense of Order and Justice in the Universe: "The world no longer makes sense."**

You may have thought that you understood how the world works and that, through this understanding, you could exert some control over your life. "What goes around comes around," "As ye sow so shall ye reap" – these and other maxims you once lived by may have seemed unassailable. When you learn of your partner's affair, however, your belief in the order and justice of the world gets blown apart and with it, your assumption that you are good, and that the world is fundamentally safe and meaningfully ordered.

When you suffer a personal violation of this magnitude, you're forced to confront your basic ideas about what's fair and just in every aspect of life, including love and marriage.

"I've become cynical and selfish and I doubt I'll ever see people as good or love as good again."

Before the emotional anarchy of the affair, you probably held certain common assumptions about how relationships work:

- "I have some say over how my marriage goes."
- "If I'm basically a good and loving person, I'll be loved in return."
- "If I'm a decent partner, marriage will be safe."
- "I know what to do to make my partner happy."
- "I can trust my best friend."

Depressed, confused, you may assume either that the world doesn't work according to the principles you once took for granted (a condition that leads to outer chaos), or that *you* don't measure up (an idea that leads to inner chaos). Not now perhaps, but later on, you'll see that both of these perspectives are exaggerated and over generalized. You don't really have to crucify yourself, or the world. Life is not so random, nor you so foul.

### **Loss of Religious Faith: "Why has God forsaken me?"**

Some members of the clergy will spoon out the old religious platitudes, telling you, for instance, that if you forgive, you shall be forgiven. Others, concerned about contributions and church attendance, won't want to take sides. Many will be sensitive and supportive, of course, but, given how wretched you're feeling, it's possible that no one can console you right now.

### **Loss of Connection with Others: "Who can I confide in? Who's there for me?"**

One moment you're craving confirmation that you're a likable human being, and clinging to anyone who will listen to your story and acknowledge that you've been harmed. The next, you're withdrawing into isolation, driven by a sense of pride, a fear of ridicule, and a perverse sense of responsibility for protecting the very person who deceived you.

When Mary's husband continued to play around, she allowed herself to seek the support of allies. "Let him worry about his own reputation," she said.

"Will their knowing make future family gatherings unbearable? Will turning them against my partner make it more difficult for my partner to stay? Do I really want my parents to know my relationship is in trouble? Do I want to be dependent on them – to be cradled by them – again? Can I deal with their pity, their disapproval, their condemnation? Do I want to share with them the messy, humiliating details of the affair? Once I've become their child again, how will I break away?"

If you're a parent, you're bound to agonize about telling your kids. "Is it wise to burden them with the ugly truth?" you ask. "Are they too young to understand?" You long for their compassion, but worry about turning them against their other parent.

"Do I want them to grow up with an incomplete or warped sense of self? You ask. "What will the truth do to their ideas about themselves? Will they be more likely to have affairs when they grow up? Will they be afraid to commit to intimate relationships of their own? Will they blame themselves for what happened?"