Surviving Infidelity — Couples Therapists’ Best Practices
By Nadine M. Hasenecz in Social Work Today

In light of Tiger Woods’ recent admission that he cheated on wife Elin Nordegren with multiple women—16, at last count—Social Work Today asked couples therapists to discuss best practices for social workers who counsel partners after a serious infidelity. But just what is serious infidelity? Mental health professionals suggest that the level of seriousness is determined by examining a variety of factors, including cause, an unfaithful partner’s motives, and the length of an affair.

Because Woods was promiscuous, his situation is more serious in terms of health, says Del Rey Beach, Fla.-based Donna R. Bellafiore, MSW, LCSW, author of Infidelity Reflections From an On-Line Support Group. Woods’ situation involves sexual drive and impulse control, she says, while a one-time affair could stem from myriad factors, including loneliness, unmet needs, an inability to communicate with a partner, falling out of love, infatuation, or the death of a loved one. “Many times people sexualize instead of dealing with internal emotional pain,” says Bellafiore.

Emily M. Brown, LCSW, director of Key Bridge Therapy and Mediation Center in Arlington, VA, and author of Patterns of Infidelity and Their Treatment for mental health professionals, has created the following typology of affairs:

• **conflict avoidance**, in which a couple can’t stand up to each other because they fear conflict;

• **intimacy avoidance**, in which the partners constantly fight;

• **sexual addiction** (see below);

• **split self**, in which both partners have neglected their own needs to tend to another’s;

• **exit affair**, in which one has decided to leave the partnership; and

• **entitlement affair**, in which a partner has devoted so much time and energy to success that he or she is out of touch with the emotional self.
Woods’ affairs, as well as those of politicians Eliot Spitzer and John Edwards and former president Bill Clinton, were the entitlement type, according to Brown, who conducts workshops for mental health professionals and offers infidelity-related consultation to workplaces and telephone therapy with individuals. “They’ve had so much success, they think anything they do will work,” she says. “They see something they want, they think they can have it, and they go after it.”

Like many who turn to affairs, Woods was attempting to fill an inner void, but his actions were also fueled by his narcissism, says Maya Kollman, MA, a certified master trainer in Imago Relationship Therapy. “It could happen to anyone when you’re treated and used that way by the public as some kind of icon,” Kollman says. “There’s an emptiness to a life when people want you for what you represent but have no interest in you as a human being. All these people want to chew on him but don’t really give a damn about him. The way he chose to fill it is not exemplary but is understandable.”

Perhaps serious infidelity can be defined only from the point of view of the partner who perceives the betrayal. “Infidelity is in the eye of the beholder,” says Michele Weiner-Davis, MSW, LCSW, director of The Divorce Busting Center in Boulder, CO, and Woodstock, IL.

The perception of serious infidelity is idiosyncratic, she says, referring to a wide range of her own clients, including betrayed partners who recovered after multiple affairs and others who could not mend following only one.

All infidelity is serious in that it severely impacts the betrayed partner, adds Brown.
“The hurt person is shattered; they are in excruciating pain,” says Bellafiore. “They may have had a part in the breakdown of the marriage, but they didn’t say that the other person had to handle the situation in that way.”

Healing Is Possible
The good news for couples is that all of the therapists interviewed for this article agree healing is possible and a partnership can survive infidelity. Some note that a partnership can work only if the unfaithful partner ends the affair. Others venture to say that a post-infidelity partnership can be healthier than prior to the indiscretion.
Through Imago Relationship Therapy, the partnership “will be 10 times better than it was before,” says Kollman, and will be characterized by “deeper, richer understanding; commitment; and a deeper humility about what it means to be a human being on this planet and be in a relationship.”

While this list is by no means exhaustive, the following best practices can be incorporated into your work with couples undergoing counseling for serious infidelity:

• **Maintain a nonjudgmental attitude.** Topping the best practices list among those interviewed are maintaining neutrality with a couple and demonstrating a nonjudgmental attitude toward the partner who strayed. “Examine your own feelings about infidelity,” says Bellafiore. “If you do have certain biases, work through it.” After participating in workshops or undergoing therapy, if you determine that you can’t be unbiased toward the unfaithful partner, refer the couple to another mental health professional. Bellafiore suggests simply telling the couple they would benefit from a counselor who is more experienced with their type of situation.

• **Refrain from swaying a couple in either direction.** All interviewees also stood firm against swaying the couple in either direction—splitting up or remaining together. As Mick Jones sang in the popular 1981 song by punk rockers The Clash, “should I stay or should I go now?” must be determined by the partners without interference from anyone, including a therapist.

Each person is in charge of his or her own destiny, according to Bellafiore. “As long as they’re comfortable with their choices, their eyes are wide open, and they know why they’re making a decision,” she says, even if the decision is deemed unhealthy by others, such as when a wife stays with a husband for financial security because she’s afraid to be alone or believes her children need a father in the household.

• **Instruct the couple to stop talking to family and friends about the situation.** Furthermore, the couple should be instructed to stop talking to and subsequently influenced by family and friends who may have good intentions but can do damage by taking sides and demonizing one partner. “If they can’t talk to each other, they need to call you. I encourage them to write a lot or call me,” says Kollman, who runs intensive private or group workshops for couples and has
authored several articles, including “Helping Couples Get the Love They Want: Imago Relationship Therapy With Gay and Lesbian Couples.”

• **Teach a couple to access and share emotions.** Of course, the partners should be encouraged to talk to each other. And each can be taught to access his or her own emotions and share them with the other. “A lot of people who have serious affairs don’t know their emotional self very well,” says Brown. “Social workers must make them learn what a feeling is.”

Partners sharing feelings is more than simply using “I statements” and avoiding “you statements,” notes Brown. It’s about putting feelings into words that a partner can hear and understand—a feat accomplished only when individuals are attuned to their own emotional selves, she says.

An especially effective way to delve beneath the surface and reach deeper feelings, Kollman believes, is via Imago Relationship Therapy’s “Imago Dialog,” a talking and listening skill that allows partners to share pain without criticizing, shaming, or blaming. This type of communication helps partners transcend the presenting struggle—in this case, infidelity—as well as reactive and dramatic behavior while moving toward understanding underlying triggers. “Imago therapy is about helping people grow up and behave as what we believe maturity looks like,” Kollman says, which includes impulse control and awareness of the impact of one’s actions on another person.

• **Quell the betrayed partner’s ruminations.** Getting down to gut level and tapping one’s emotions, says Brown, can help the betrayed partner control obsessive thoughts or ruminations about the cheating partner’s actions with a lover. When rumination gets out of hand, Weiner-Davis says she teaches thought-stopping techniques that consciously shift mental images from negative to positive. In addition to conducting workshops for therapists and intensive therapy for couples, Weiner-Davis has created a variety of resources for couples and therapists, including books, kits, CDs, cassettes, and downloadable audio, such as “One Foot Out the Door: Working With Couples on the Brink.”

• **Avoid secrecy.** It’s important that a therapist be honest, which includes refusing to keep a partner’s secrets because doing so is tantamount to colluding with one partner against the other.
If an affair hasn’t yet been disclosed, Brown recommends coaching the unfaithful partner about how to broach the topic with his or her partner. If you must hold the secret while you determine how to get the unfaithful partner to talk, it should be for no more than a few weeks, Brown cautions.

To avoid secrets, Kollman says she generally conducts therapy sessions with the partners together rather than apart. On the occasions when she counsels one partner at a time, she informs each that whatever she is told will be revealed to the other.

- Obtain a thorough history for both partners. A comprehensive family history is required of both partners, even the one who was not unfaithful. Brown suggests talking with the partners about their parents, their childhood, and the ways in which they dealt with problems in their family of origin. The therapist must uncover the coping mechanisms that each partner used as children. “What coping patterns were needed back then that get in the way now?” asks Brown, citing examples of children who tune out emotionally and hide physically to escape a raging parent. While that coping method may have been effective in a childhood situation, Brown notes, it’s not conducive to a strong partnership.

“Most of the time with infidelity, the partner who has not been unfaithful also has a coping mechanism or defense mechanism that leaks energy out of the intimacy of the couple,” says Kollman, citing the example of a new mother who doesn’t pay attention to her partner. Although a mother in this situation is rarely morally judged, her action—or inaction—can have the same impact on the marriage as infidelity. “It keeps people from being connected,” she says, “and makes the relationship vulnerable to other things.”

- Provide each partner with tasks. In her Healing from Infidelity workshop, Weiner-Davis teaches programmatic tasks that must be accomplished by both partners for their relationship to heal. “I put the lion’s share of work squarely on the shoulders of the person who’s been unfaithful,” she says, “because it was their choice that got them into the situation.”

But that doesn’t mean the betrayed partner is off the hook. For example, she teaches the betrayed partner a gentler way to question the partner who cheated. When a partner feels anxious about the other’s whereabouts, an accusatory tone can result. “If a husband is late for dinner, it’s 21 questions when he walks
through the door,” says Weiner-Davis. “That’s almost always met with defensiveness and anger—the exact opposite of what is really needed. I validate the partner’s need to know, but I teach a kinder way to ask the questions so that reassurance is the response.”

The unfaithful must be willing to do whatever it takes to reassure the partner—including showing empathy, sharing details, and remaining patient with a partner’s ups and downs—during what can be an arduous and lengthy process, says Weiner-Davis. “Especially in the beginning, most betrayed partners really want to know a partner’s whereabouts because they’re feeling insecure. Whether it means laying out details about the schedule for the next week, frequent calls home, or calls from the office phone rather than from a cell phone, I insist upon this,” she says. “Occasionally, I’ll have an unfaithful person say, ‘I feel like I’m in jail.’ I’ll say, ‘Yes, this is not a way to run a marriage. You won’t have to do it for the rest of your life, but you’re in a crisis situation, and you have to do things now that you wouldn’t otherwise do.’”

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What Is Sexual Addiction?

Sexual addiction has recently come into the spotlight because of Tiger Woods’ treatment for it. However, not all infidelity results from sexual addiction. “A betrayed spouse may think because somebody has one affair that they’re sexually addicted,” says Emily M. Brown, LCSW. “But that’s not true.”

Although it can be challenging to distinguish a sexual addict, he or she “certainly isn’t everybody who’s been unfaithful or even everybody who’s been unfaithful more than once,” points out Michele Weiner-Davis, MSW, LCSW.

Sexual addiction is “a persistent and escalating pattern or patterns of sexual behaviors acted out despite increasingly negative consequences to self or others,” according to the Sexual Recovery Institute, a California-based outpatient facility founded in 1955. When repeated or out of control, maintains the institute, the following behaviors are among those that may indicate sexual addiction: masturbation, simultaneous or repeated sequential affairs, viewing pornography, cybersex, phone sex, multiple anonymous partners, unsafe sexual activity, partner
sexualization or objectification, visiting strip clubs and adult bookstores, prostitution, and sexual aversion.

Therapists maintain that sexual addiction is similar to alcoholism. Donna R. Bellafiore, MSW, LCSW, refers to sexual addiction as a brain disease that must be controlled through a 12-step program. A sexual addict may want to stop the behavior but is unable to do so, she says, even when the behavior contradicts his or her own value system.

“There is a compulsive quality with sexual addiction that does not exist in people who have had a few affairs during the course of their marriage,” says Weiner-Davis.

She illustrates with a story of a sexually addicted client who led a double life by having an affair with a coworker for 10 of his 12 years of marriage. “Even though he was having sex on a daily basis with his coworker, he was so compulsive with his sexuality that he was masturbating up to five hours a day at work to the point that it would hurt him, but he couldn’t stop,” she recalls. “Everybody yuks it up about how much fun Tiger Woods is having, but I’m here to tell you that, for this man [in the story], it didn’t even feel good physically.”

— NMH