Healing the Wounds of Infidelity Through the Healing Power of Apology and Forgiveness

Brian Case

SUMMARY. This article focuses on a treatment model for couples dealing with the consequences of an extra-relational affair by one of the partners. The model is based around a multi-dimensional process of apology and forgiveness, in which each spouse works toward the restoration or relational trust through specific tasks. Examples from the author's private practice are used to help clarify key concepts and aid in application across various situations. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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Brian Case, PhD, is affiliated with Psychological Counseling Services, Ltd., Scottsdale, AZ 85251.

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I have always told myself, my friends, and my husband Tom that if he ever cheated on me–that would be it, no questions asked. And yet although I'm not sure why, I'm not quite ready to walk away.

This statement, in so many words, has been repeated by numerous clients over the past 7 years that I have been specializing in working with couples facing the aftermath of one partner's extra-relational affair, or ERA. Indeed, most of my clients report that they assumed they would be meeting with a divorce attorney, not a marital therapist, following the discovery of an affair. When a couple begins therapy following one partner's infidelity, it can be difficult for the marriage and family therapist to know where to begin. Nevertheless, because of the prevalence of this presenting problem, a treatment format through which the post-affair couple can find healing, and possibly a renewed sense of commitment and trust, is of great value.

The following article presents one means of doing so, specifically through a comprehensive, interactive process of reconciliation focused on apology and forgiveness. The steps or "tasks" of the processes of forgiveness and apology as outlined here have been developed over the past 10 years through a combination of a detailed review of literature on forgiveness done for my doctoral dissertation, and clinical experience as a full-time therapist in private practice. Key literature regarding the conceptualization of forgiveness as a process includes Donnelly (1966), Rosenak and Harnden (1992), Smedes (1983), Hargrave (1995), Enright (1989), and Simon and Simon (1990).

WHY APOLOGY AND FORGIVENESS?

When a couple seeks counseling after an affair, they face a wide variety of intense emotions and difficult decisions. One of the most common questions is whether or not trust can ever be restored, and if so, how? For the betrayed partner, it may seem an impossible journey to move from anger to forgiveness, from mistrust to reconciliation, and from broken heart to healing. One client expressed this sense of being overwhelmed in saying "one minute I feel incredible sadness and rejection and the next I feel like ripping his head off. . . . I can't imagine this pain ever ending!" Furthermore, I frequently hear clients say "I can't believe I didn't see this. . . how did I let this happen?" They feel vulnerable, defective, and unable to trust themselves as well as their partners. In her book, *After the Affair*, Spring (1997) describes how betrayed part-

ners suddenly feel as if they've lost, among many things, their identity, sense of "specialness," self-respect, and sense of purpose. For the involved partner the journey can also seem impossible. He or she is likely dealing not only with the damage to his/her primary relationship, but is also going through a grieving process as the affair has come, or is coming, to an end. Therefore, for each partner there is a need for a specific plan of action that allows for the healing of existing wounds, the prevention of future wounds, and the restoration of trust and vitality to the relationship.

FORGIVENESS DEFINED

Work in the areas of apology and forgiveness allows couples to accomplish these three goals. Forgiveness is defined here as a complex, multidimensional, multi-modal process consisting of at least four distinguishable levels or degrees, including:

1. Ceasing to Seek/Demand Justice or Revenge
2. Ceasing to Feel Anger/Resentment
3. Wishing the Other Person Well
4. Restoring Relational Trust

Initially then, forgiveness is about choosing to not actively hurt the other person back, demand or suggest that somebody else hurt him/her, or to hope or perhaps even pray that the person suffers somehow. The ancient Chinese proverb that "he who chooses revenge as an option has need of digging two graves" clarifies one benefit of this level of forgiveness. The second level involves working through the hurt, pain, anger and resentment to the point where these emotions have dissipated significantly. The benefits of the 3rd level of forgiveness are at times difficult to see, and yet are critical nonetheless. Indeed, as Hope (1987) points out, when anger and perhaps hatred are replaced with compassion or well-wishing for the other person, the "giver" of this gift is usually the one most benefited.

These first 3 levels can be experienced regardless of how apologetic the offending person is. However, when significant betrayal has occurred such as in the case of an ERA, the 4th level of forgiveness is usually dependent on the degree to which the partner engages in some process of apology. It is forgiveness work geared toward this last level that is the focus of the remainder of this article. In the following sec-

tions, I will present comprehensive processes of forgiveness and apology that may be used with the post-affair couple.

SETTING THE STAGE

When a couple has stated that they want to somehow recover from the affair and stay together, I will introduce the topics of apology and forgiveness by exploring their thoughts and feelings on the topic, and then sharing with them ways in which such work might be helpful. If agreeable to both, I will then provide information on the processes of apology and forgiveness as outlined in Table 1, and ask each to start an on-going letter to his/her partner based on the tasks identified in the handout. The betrayed spouse will be using the Process of Forgiveness as an outline, while the involved spouse will use the Process of Apology.

I explain that the idea is to work on the letters over the course of therapy, as the work of healing unfolds. I clarify that by the time they actually share the letters with one another, several weeks to months, and a lot of "blood, sweat, and tears" will have come and gone. In this sense the letters are not the means to healing and reconciliation, but a final concrete representation of the journey taken, the work done, and the healing experienced.

Recognizing/Acknowledging the Injustice(s)

For many clients, the work of recognizing and acknowledging how they have been hurt through their partner's affair is done long before

TABLE 1. The Process of Forgiveness

1. Recognizing/acknowledging the injustice(s).
2. Choosing forgiveness as an option.
3. Getting in touch with feelings of hurt/anger.
4. Expressing the feelings in non-hurtful ways.
5. Gaining insights which allow for self-protection.
6. Gaining insights which allow you to focus on the behavior, not the person.
7. Recognizing your own role in the "bigger picture" of hurtful behaviors in the relationship.
8. Using new information to change how you view and treat the hurtful person.
9. The overt act of forgiveness and restoration of love and trust.

therapy begins. However, there are many situations in which the betrayed partner does not yet know everything about the affair, or has not yet felt the full impact of what is already known. Therefore, the focus of this task is to make sure all of the "wounds" have been identified so complete healing can ultimately occur. Too often, perhaps motivated by a desire to minimize pain, parts of the ERA which constitute significant hurts within the overall betrayal of the affair go unaddressed. For instance, the seemingly steady progress of one couple was delayed after the husband disclosed to his wife for the first time that his sexual involvement with the other woman had resulted in a pregnancy which was terminated through abortion. For her, this was the more difficult act of betrayal to overcome.

Therapists can help each partner identify these different levels of betrayal asking questions regarding how the affair came to the knowledge of the betrayed partner, whether or not the relationship was on-going or short term, whether or not exchanges of "I love you" or plans to "run off together" were made, whether or not money was spent on the other person, whether or not intimate details of their relationship were shared with the other person, or whether or not sexual protection was used. The degree of harmful impact on the betrayed partner is also influenced by factors such as where and how did the betrayal take place? For one betrayed spouse, the most damaging blow was the fact that her husband left the hospital after their second child was born to sleep with his girlfriend. For another, it was the fact that his wife had been sexual with her lover in their lakeside cabin, a place both had seen as their "sanctuary."

Choosing Forgiveness as an Option

Through the work of uncovering layers of betrayal, many betrayed partners begin to lose their desire for reconciliation. For this reason, the work of the next task, choosing forgiveness as an option, is likely to be revisited throughout the entire process. Helping the betrayed partner understand the levels of forgiveness as outlined above can be helpful. As therapists, we can point out that choosing forgiveness initially is not necessarily a commitment to stay in the relationship no matter what, but is instead a decision to give healing a chance. Clearly, it is not only the betrayed partner who has to decide whether or not to try and reconcile. Many of the couples I work with are facing the extremely difficult task of trying to rebuild trust when one of the two still has strong feelings for another person. When present, this challenge needs to be identified and discussed openly in either individual or couples sessions.

Getting in Touch with Feelings of Hurt/Anger

In order to recover from an affair, each partner has to be willing to face the painful emotional work inherent to the journey. Indeed, the task of getting in touch with emotions is the easiest part of forgiveness work for many individuals. They do not need to be encouraged to "get in touch with their anger" but instead feel as if they are about to explode with rage (if they haven't already done so!). However, many clients will present in a state of emotional disconnect due to the shock of the affair. Furthermore, there are a surprising number of people who remain emotionally disconnected due to long-standing coping mechanisms in which intense, "negative" emotions are avoided at all costs, often outside of their conscious awareness. The emotion of anger in particular is often repressed by the betrayed spouse due to fears of rejection and abandonment. This is often accompanied by engaging in "outreach" instead of "outrage," a pattern I frequently see in which intense feelings of love, appreciation and sexual desire are expressed despite the recent crisis.

Therefore, in-session interventions are often necessary to help clients begin the emotional work of forgiveness. These can include pointing out patterns of emotional repression when present, providing education about and "normalization" of intense emotions, and encouraging the exploration of emotions through journal writing, bibliotherapy, or talking with friends or family members. Experiential therapy techniques can also be helpful in both the identification and healthy expression of feelings surrounding the affair.

Expressing the Feelings in Non-Hurtful Ways

While a great deal of emotional expression may have already taken place before therapy began, it is likely that not all qualified as "non-hurtful." For instance, in one of our weekly "Anger and Forgiveness" group sessions, a 52-year-old woman told of how she emptied her husband's side of the closet by throwing his expensive clothing out the window of the two-story home, onto the wet, winter grass which had recently been fertilized with cow manure. Other group members cheered her on, and I myself had to fight off a smile at the thought of this usually quiet and very "appropriate" woman exacting her revenge. However, her behavior was aggressive and shaming, and in the long run did not contribute to healing for her or for the relationship. (It in fact later became a part of her apology work within the relationship!)

Therefore, it is critical as therapists to help the betrayed partner express anger and other intense emotions to his/her partner assertively, rather than through verbal or physical aggression. Techniques for expressing feelings while alone should also be identified. For one client writing raw, unedited letters on the computer and then deleting them afterwards was very cathartic. For another, smashing inexpensive dishes (purchased at a garage sale for that very purpose) into a large metal trash can in their backyard helped her work through anger triggered by mental flashbacks of walking in on her husband and his girlfriend.

Gaining Insights Which Allow for Self-Protection

While forgiveness work involves working through considerable pain, it is not about creating it. As Hargrave (1988), emphasizes, there is room for appropriate self-protection within the forgiveness process. Many of my clients wonder out loud, "how could I have let this happen?" or express that they "feel like such a fool!" They may have ignored intuitions about something being wrong, concluding that they "must be crazy." The loss of trust in self as well as in the partner often leaves the betrayed partner in a state of confusion and overprotection.

Indeed, many people are hesitant to seek forgiveness as an option for fear that to do so will result in a greater likelihood of getting hurt again. Therefore, the main goal within this task is for the betrayed partner to learn the specific ways in which his/her partner was able to "pull it off." As therapists, we can also encourage and support the betrayed partner to identify ways in which he/she may have enabled the affair unknowingly. These insights can then inform decisions about what boundaries need to be in place in the name of assertive self-protection. These boundaries, unlike "emotional walls," allow for both connection *and* protection.

Gaining Insights Which Allow You to Focus on the Behavior, Not the Person

For betrayed partners, there is a strong tendency to see themselves and/or their partners as "damaged goods." "Only a monster could do something so hurtful," or "I'm obviously not good enough for him/her" are common sentiments. Therefore, the task here is to look at the betrayal within the context it occurred. Doing so helps the betrayed partner recognize that while the involved partner's infidelity was personally damaging, it does not have to be "taken personal." I knew one client had

discovered this for herself when after weeks of feeling "less-than" as a woman, she emphatically claimed, "It wasn't about me, it was about his unhealthy need for validation by other women. . . I think he could have been married to a supermodel and still ended up sleeping around."

It is also important to help the betrayed partner recognize how the involved partner's family background, learned coping mechanisms, insecurities, cognitive distortions, etc., have factored in to him/her engaging in such hurtful behaviors. It can help to asks questions such as "which of his/her life experiences, if different somehow, might have resulted in him/her being less likely to make such hurtful choices?" Through such a question, and his subsequent openness to learning more about his wife's sexual abuse background and personal struggles with shame, one client was able to release his desire to, as he put it, "rub her face in it daily."

Recognizing Your Own Role in the "Bigger Picture" of Hurtful Behaviors in the Relationship

A focus on the relational context in which the affair occurred can often be helpful in the reconciliation process. The work of this task is for the betrayed partner to make an honest acknowledgement of his/her own weaknesses and need for forgiveness. One betrayed wife experienced a change in heart as she more fully recognized how, although she could never see herself cheating, she had created considerable damage over the course of the relationship through abusive name-calling, being active in her eating disorder, and being shut-down sexually. These behaviors were coupled with her unwillingness to go to counseling, despite his frequent requests.

Using New Information to Change How You View and Treat the Hurtful Person

The work of seeing the affair within context helps lay the groundwork for a shift into the third level of forgiveness, "wishing the other person well." While this shift into compassion may occur naturally throughout the forgiveness process, it may be necessary to help clients along through gentle reminders to focus on themselves and not on their partners. One husband I worked with summed up the importance of eventually "cleaning up his own side of the street" in saying to his wife "I now realize how much I was controlling and belittling you. I can see why a part of you wanted to get away from me and be with someone

who treated you with more respect." He was able to acknowledge this, while still holding her completely responsible for how she chose to deal with her hurt, anger, and sense of loneliness.

The Overt Act of Forgiveness and Restoration of Love and Trust

While expressions of forgiveness may also occur throughout the process of forgiveness, they are particularly powerful when preceded by the work of the previous tasks. Overt forgiveness at this point can take many forms. For one betrayed spouse it occurred as he embraced his wife and verbally expressed for the first time, "I forgive you." For another, it was done through a note saying, "I would marry you again even after all we have been through." Helping the couple create meaningful rituals in which forgiveness can be expressed and received is often helpful at this point in therapy. The letters they started early on in therapy can be integrated at this point. Often, couples have a desire to renew vows.

The therapist can help a couple move toward greater degrees of relational trust through encouraging couple interactions that have not taken place since the affair was discovered. For one couple this was the resuming of their sexual relationship. For another, greater levels of trust became evident as she no longer felt inclined to check the computer for e-mails from his former online lover. The work of this task also includes celebrating his/her successes, wishing him/her well, and expressing love and support. I usually have clients write a separate letter of love and appreciation toward the end of their forgiveness journey, which they often report is the "corner" they needed to turn.

THE PROCESS OF APOLOGY

As stated previously, relational trust is most likely to be restored if the involved partner is actively working on his/her apology work as the forgiveness work of the betrayed partner is unfolding. Too often, the involved partner wants to help his/her partner heal, and yet is unsure about what to do beyond saying "I'm sorry," "I won't do it again," or "I hope you can forgive me somehow." The process of apology outlined in Table 2 helps him/her go beyond "I'm sorry" and to provide a format for

taking complete responsibility for hurtful behavior, and then doing everything possible to make restitution and not repeat hurtful behavior.

Acknowledge What You Did to Hurt/Offend Him/Her

Much like the first task of the process of forgiveness, the work of disclosure and accountability can be more complex than it initially appears. Many involved partners want or need the therapist's help in navigating the fine-line between secret keeping and saying too much. The disclosure is most healing when it is honest, free of blame or excuse-making, and with sincere remorse. It also needs to include any specifics that clarify significant hurtful acts within the overall betrayal. Regarding how complete to make the disclosure, I often raise questions such as, "Is this information likely to come out later, and if so, will your partner feel betrayed that it wasn't shared from the start?" Or, "what would you be upset about if it were kept from you." To further clarify I will often tell clients to "explain that you did have intercourse, but not what positions you used or how long it lasted that one memorable night."

Learn How What You Did Impacted Him/Her and Express an Understanding of That Impact

The focus within this task is victim empathy. Betrayed partners usually want to know that their partners really understand how traumatic the betrayal was. The paradox, however, is that the offending partner is not likely to ever fully understand what it has been, is, and will be like to be in the betrayed partner's situation. Nevertheless, he/she should do all possible to "get it." While there are numerous ways of gaining this un-

TABLE 2. The Process of Apology

1. Acknowledge what you did to hurt/offend him/her.
2. Learn how what you did impacted him/her and express an understanding of that impact.
3. Make restitution where needed and possible
4. Learn how and why you did what you did, and share understanding with other person.
5. Identify and share your plan of action to not repeat hurtful behavior.
6. Overtly apologize and ask for forgiveness.
7. FOLLOW THROUGH!!

derstanding, the best source is undoubtedly the betrayed partner, him or herself.

Far too often, however, the involved partner either avoids asking questions which might lead to an expression of intense hurt or anger, or becomes defensive or inattentive in response. Therefore, encouraging the involved partner to sincerely ask about what the other is thinking or feeling, to read books describing the possible impact on the betrayed partner, or to participate in group therapy in which others talk about their experience of a partner's affair, can all be helpful means for increasing a sense of victim empathy. Experiential techniques can also be helpful, including inviting the involved partner to "stand in the other's shoes" by asking him/her to tell the story of the affair through the betrayed partner's perspective. Following this particular intervention, one client expressed being "amazed at how real it became after the first couple of questions." When these insights translate into greater degrees of remorse and expressions of understanding and empathy, healing is much more likely to occur. One helpful tool for the expression of victim empathy is the acronym "VUE," which stands for validation, understanding, and empathy. I encourage clients to "Do the VUE" as often, as deeply, and as sincerely as possible throughout the process of apology.

Make Restitution Where Needed and Possible

The main focus of restitution after an affair is, of course, on trust. Restitution of other losses may seem impossible, given the fact that what was taken, lost or "broken" is intangible. However, it is possible to reestablish a sense of fairness and balance within the relationship. For instance, one client who had spent a considerable amount of money on his affair (gifts, travel, hotels, etc.) decided to give up his season tickets to a local sports team, and dedicate the money instead for something they had both wanted to do as a couple but "couldn't afford." This act is different from the purchase of a ring or other gifts to "buy forgiveness or silence" from one's partner, as sometimes portrayed in the media.

Learn How and Why You Did What You Did, and Share Understanding with Other Person

It is important that the involved partner look beyond the obvious and determine both the methods and motives within the affair. The involved partner is often unaware of, or at least hesitant to acknowledge, the elab-

orate schemes used to cover up or justify the affair. One of my clients was an expert at convincing his wife that she was making a big deal out of nothing regarding his "friendship" with a colleague. Another had secret cell phone numbers and a credit card for which the statements were sent to a P.O. box. Another simply took advantage of her husband's regular business travel and would "forget her cell phone" while running various errands.

There are a lot of reasons why someone decides to have an affair, none of which are likely to make it seem acceptable to the betrayed partner. Therefore, in identifying the underlying motives for being unfaithful, it is critical that both partners understand that it is being done for the sake of accountability and the development of a safety plan, rather than to excuse or justify. One heterosexual client was particularly confused about why she ended up in a one year sexual relationship with her best friend of the same sex. Through the course of therapy she realized that she had a deeply embedded mistrust of men from childhood sexual abuse. It was in this "friendship turned sexual" that she had first been able to feel unguarded with her sexuality. She had always been aware of the abuse, but not of the impact. From this awareness, she determined that she needed to work through childhood trauma and learn to be more open with her husband.

Once a greater understanding of the methods and motives for the affair is gained, these insights can be shared with the betrayed partner. This process helps clarify the context in which the betrayal took place, helps him/her become less likely to see the infidelity as indicative of personal worth, and helps lay the groundwork for a comprehensive plan of action aimed at creating safety and fidelity in the relationship. As therapists, modeling ways in which insights can be shared without excuse-making can be helpful.

Identify and Share Your Plan of Action to Not Repeat Hurtful Behavior

As mentioned previously, an affair is often "crazymaking" for the betrayed partner due to the loss of consistency, predictability and safety. In an effort to re-establish some semblance of safety and determine if reconciliation makes sense, he/she usually asks "how are you going to make sure you never hurt me this way again?" Therefore, it is critical as therapists to help the involved partner change insight into action. Thus, for each "how" or "why" identified in the previous task, a "what now then" should follow. The more comprehensive the plan, the greater suc-

cess he/she will have in not repeating hurtful behaviors and thus in restoring relational trust. The development of the involved partner's action plan and subsequent follow-through is central to the restoration of trust for most couples. For this reason, it is important to share and implement the plan of action and accountability as soon as possible, as it will likely become a barometer of sincerity and commitment to change.

Overtly Apologize and Ask for Forgiveness

Expressions of "I'm sorry" or "you didn't deserve this" hopefully have been made throughout the process of apology. Encouraging the involved partner to "say it again, and say it often," especially after the sincere work of previous tasks, is a simple yet effective therapeutic tool. Worthington and DiBlasio (1990) recommend couples have a "forgiveness session" in which each partner comes prepared to express apology or forgiveness. This can be an excellent time to integrate the sharing of the letters they began early in therapy. These and other rituals can be used to help the couple create positive experiences which can eventually overshadow those surrounding the affair. In a recent session, a client's simple, heart-felt, and tearful statement "will you please forgive me" following weeks of hard work in rebuilding trust with his wife was received by her with a long embrace and her own tears. We all knew they still had some rough times ahead, but they each expressed on many occasions that their relationship was ironically "much better than it was before the affair."

Follow Through!

For many betrayed spouses, the test of time is crucial. The broken promises and dishonesty that often accompany an ERA have left them focused on actions, not words. The on-going process of healing is difficult and relatively unpredictable. Therefore, it is important that as therapists we help the involved partner stay on track and not lose motivation despite occasional setbacks.

CONCLUSION

While many couples do not work toward reconciliation after an affair, a surprising number do. When appropriate, helping clients hang on to hope through this difficult journey is an important role played by marital

therapists. As we lend our perspective about how healing *is* possible despite their sense of hopelessness, many couples are able to achieve relational growth well beyond what they ever thought possible. A comprehensive, mutual process of apology and forgiveness as outlined here can help provide the post-affair couple with the roadmap they need to find the healing they are seeking, at least in part, through therapy.

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