

Infidelity and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

What it's all about and what you can do about it

by

Joyce E. Smith, MA, MFT, Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist

Dealing with the betrayal of infidelity is a life changing experience and can feel especially scary. Armed with the understanding why you've been feeling the way you have, combined with using some of the techniques mentioned in this report, it is possible for you to ultimately come to a place of acceptance and achieve a sense of peace.

Infidelity and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) – What it's all about and what you can do about it

This report has been adapted from a three-article series written for [Emotional Affair Journey](#) by Joyce E. Smith, MA, MFT, Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist. You can visit her site at: www.joycesmithmft.com

When you first found out you were betrayed by your partner, it probably felt like the rug has been pulled out from under your feet. Everything you knew to be true and valid in the world, suddenly had no meaning. You started doubting yourself, your judgment, your perceptions. Nothing was as it seemed. Your world was turned upside down. Your perceptions of the world were shattered.

Everywhere you went, there were constant reminders (called triggers) of the affair. EVERYWHERE! Even though you logically now know (hopefully) the affair is over, you can't seem to shake this panicky, anxiety-ridden feeling. All too often your heart is pounding, your brain is fuzzy, your memory is shot to hell, you cry at the tip of a hat. Your sense of trust has been violated, and when that goes, you start questioning, exactly what is safe? Anything??? You might be thinking you are going crazy, but most likely you're experiencing a form of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD. (There are physiological reasons that pertain to this as well, fueled by your inherent survival mechanism, which I will explain more in the next article of this series.)

According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, Text Revision* or DSM-IV-TR, a manual used by therapists to diagnose psychological issues, PTSD occurs when a "person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or other." In addition, "the person's response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror." Now I'm guessing you're probably saying to yourself "my partner's betrayal had nothing to do with death or physical injury, but that second part – were there cameras recording me?"

Well, I believe there's a case to be made there HAS been a death – the death of your relationship as far as what you previously perceived to be true. With all

deaths, according to Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, there are five distinct stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance; which don't necessarily have to occur in this exact order. Are you beginning to see a correlation? In order to heal completely from the pain of betrayal of infidelity, eventually you will need to go through all of these stages.

Now back to the betrayal and PTSD analogy. I'll bet previously you had thought only something akin to soldiers returning from a war could cause PTSD, right? Wrong! Many people experience PTSD and have no idea that's what's going on – AND there's a pretty substantial chance this may be exactly what you've been going through.

Let me go over some of the other required criteria (somewhat paraphrased here) for a diagnosis of PTSD contained in the DSM IV-TR. See if this sounds all too familiar to you:

1. The trauma is persistently re-experienced in one or more of the following ways:

- Recurrent and intrusive distressing recollections of the event, including images, thoughts, or perceptions
- Emotionally and/or physically reacting more intensely than the situation calls for (as if the danger of an attacking tiger is still in the room, right in front of you)
- Making attempts to ignore or suppress the intrusive thoughts, impulses, or images by trying to divert your attention with another thought or action
- Intense physical reaction to anything either internal or external that reminds you of the traumatic event
- Intense emotional reaction to anything either internal or external that reminds you of the traumatic event

(Beginning to see a pattern here? As if someone has been inside your brain?)

2. Persistent avoidance of anything associated with the trauma and numbing of general responsiveness subsequent to the trauma (as indicated by 3 or more of the following):

- Efforts to avoid thoughts, feelings, or conversations associated with the trauma
- Efforts to avoid activities, places, or people that arouse recollections of the trauma
- Inability to recall an important aspect of the trauma
- Markedly diminished interest or participation in significant activities
- Feeling of detachment or estrangement from others
- Restricted range of affect (i.e. unable to have loving feelings)
- Sense of a foreshortened future

3. Persistent symptoms of increased arousal subsequent to the trauma (as indicated by two or more of the following):

- Difficulty falling or staying asleep
- Irritability or outbursts of anger
- Difficulty concentrating
- Hypervigilance
- Exaggerated startle response

In addition, there are a couple other requirements in the DSM IV-TR, such as a continued duration of over one month. Given most people seem to take an average of 2-4 years to heal from the betrayal of infidelity, I'd say this condition is fairly prevalent!

So, now that you've gotten the basic gist of what PTSD is all about, what do you think? If you've come to the conclusion that this pertains to you, we're going to next try to help you to understand why you might be reacting the way you are.

You may be asking "Why do I need that? Just skip right to the stuff that tells me how I can heal from this!" Well, our main goal in presenting this is to give you some tools to help alleviate your current pain. Making sense of things is a vital component in healing, so when you understand what is causing your reaction to things, it becomes easier to instead consciously make a choice to "respond" – which puts the control back in your hands – a vital component in regaining your emotional stability and sense of self.

The Neurobiology of PTSD - You're Not Crazy! There's a Physiological Reason Why You're Feeling the Way You Are.

Ok, so we've talked about the psychological correlation between your feelings of betrayal and posttraumatic stress syndrome, or PTSD. Now we're going to deal with the physiological side. Hopefully after reading this, you'll understand why you're not crazy!!!

For some of you, it may be several months (or even years!) since discovery day of your partner's affair. No matter how hard you try, you just can't seem to shake the residual anxiety and stress. You keep getting triggered over and over again – sometimes by what appears to be the smallest thing. At this point you may be beginning to think you're doomed to be an emotional wreck for the rest of your life. There IS hope, and you CAN heal from this, which we'll be discussing in a bit.

First, let's first break up and define the words of PTSD. From the first word, posttraumatic, we get “post”, meaning after, and the word “traumatic”. An easy way to define trauma is something that is either too much too fast, or too little for too long. In the case of betrayal of infidelity, I'd say it's a bit of both. While the infidelity was occurring, something was probably lacking in your relationship, i.e. too little for too long. This was probably (at least in part) due to energy being funneled into the affair, which your partner should have been channeling into their relationship with you.

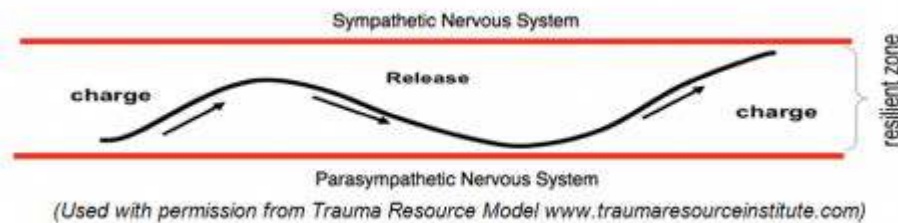
Usually with the betrayal of infidelity, the much greater part of the trauma is associated with the initial discovery – which is WAY too much, WAY too fast, right? Even in slow motion, it would *still* be too fast. In fact, I'll bet if you could rewind to that exact moment and delete it, you'd be first in line!

Next, we come to the word “stress”. If you're reading this, I'm guessing you've got a pretty good idea what stress feels like, so let's move on to “syndrome.” According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, syndrome is “a group of symptoms that consistently occur together, or a condition characterized by a set of associated symptoms.” So, putting all this together, basically what PTSD is referring to, is a residual feeling of stress (and anxiety) that continues to be triggered long after the discovery of the betrayal.

So now you're probably saying “Well, duh – I know the affair is over and I'm still getting triggered, but why???” Let me side step a bit and give you a very brief

description of something called our [Autonomic Nervous System](#), or ANS. As the first part of the word “auto” implies, this is something that happens automatically. Think of it as something akin to breathing – most of the time we don’t give it a second thought. It’s purely instinctual, and there’s nothing conscious about it.

Contained in our ANS are two branches: the Sympathetic Nervous System or SNS, and the Parasympathetic Nervous System or PNS. The SNS (think stress) gets our organs ready for action, causing an increase in our breathing rate, blood pressure, heart rate, stress hormones, sweating, and our pupils to dilate. Our PNS causes a slowing down in the same areas. Under normal circumstances, there’s a gentle ebb and flow between the two, which looks something like this:



When we experience trauma, our SNS kicks into action when we perceive that in order to survive, we must either physically defend ourselves, or get out of there fast!!! This is referred to as “fight or flight.” There is also a third component which most people are not familiar with called “freeze.” This results when we perceive we’re not able to “fight or flight”. When this occurs, we’re usually left feeling a tremendous amount of guilt and shame. All those times you find yourself asking “Why didn’t I?”, “I can’t believe I didn’t!”, etc. *It’s because you physiologically couldn’t!*

When there’s a traumatic event (like discovery of your partner’s infidelity), or any trigger of that event, our ANS goes nuts, ping-ponging out of control. In addition, sometimes you might become “stuck on high”, filled with rage, anxiety or always feeling on edge. Other times you might become “stuck on low”, better known as depression. This can happen when you burn out from being “stuck on high” for too long. Below is an illustration of what all of this might look like.



(Used with permission from Trauma Resource Model www.traumaresourceinstitute.com)

Are you starting to feel a little less crazy? Let me explain some more about the circus of our neurobiological hijacking.

Tucked inside our brain is a little area called the amygdala which registers fear. It's also in cahoots with our inherent survival mechanism. In order to survive in the world, it's important to stay away from anything that threatens our existence. So....., when there's a perception of something endangering our sense of safety, our inherent survival mechanism kicks into action with a laser like quality. Its sole task is to make sure we recognize and avoid anything remotely related to the original trauma so we never have that experience again.

In order to educate our own personal mental swat team, in the moment of trauma, our brain takes a snapshot-like photo of everything thing related to it – and I mean *everything!* It could be a color, a smell, the time of day, a specific word, a blond woman, or any woman for that matter. Oh yeah, and what about your partner. Do you think they just might be a trigger too??? You get the idea. Much like shards of broken glass, each individual trigger is filed away in a separate compartment of our brain, in the “to deal with later” section, all tied together by the word “danger.”

If this is getting a bit too technical, hang with me just a little bit longer, as I'm about to tie this all together.

The left side of our brain contains our rational and logical functions. This part has a timeline, and is able to correctly put things that have occurred in the past, in the past. Now the right side is a different story. This side ties into your emotions *and* your inherent survival mechanism. When you're triggered, this side takes over before you can blink. Your rational thinking instantaneously goes into shut down mode and is temporarily inaccessible. Think about it. If there's a tiger staring you in the face, is your first thought going to be "Hmmm, what should I make for dinner?" or "GET ME OUT OF HERE!!!" (Gee, do you think this just might have something to do with why your memory appears to have gone on strike?)

When we're triggered by something, it's generally either related to something in the past, or something we're afraid is going to happen in the future. Unfortunately the emotional or right side of our brain doesn't have a sense of time, and reacts as if there's only NOW!!!! When we sense any one of those triggers, our brain and nervous system screams **DANGER!!!** Suddenly, faster than the speed of light, we're teleported back to the exact moment the trauma occurred, as if frozen in time – like we're stuck in some vicious time warp. You may not be able to currently see any evidence of the trauma, but you'll have a tough time trying to convince your nervous system.

I hope by now you're beginning to understand why the betrayal of infidelity has been staying with you like a nagging mosquito that won't go away. In addition, if you've had any prior traumatic experiences, (i.e. been raped, been physically or sexually abused, a car accident, have grown up in an alcoholic household, etc.) each one of those events has its own collection of individual triggers. If there's anything in common with your experience of being betrayed, ALL of those neuro-networks light up together, like one giant nuclear explosion. Yikes!!!

At this point you may have forgotten in the beginning of this I said "*there IS hope and you CAN heal!*" Stay tuned as now we'll get into the methods of how to cope and heal from PTSD caused by an affair.

Methods to Help You Cope and Heal from PTSD Caused by the Betrayal of Infidelity

At this point, you've probably come to the conclusion you've been experiencing PTSD and you now know that there may have been two things that occurred. If I

explained it clearly enough, on the positive side, you gained a greater sense of clarity regarding the physiology that's controlling your reactions. On the not-so-positive side, it may have left you concerned that you were always going to remain in that state. Not so! Now my intention is to give you hope that you CAN heal and feel in control again! I'm going to give you a number of specific tools you can use on your own.

First let me explain why you're probably currently shooting yourself in the foot and inadvertently reinforcing the WRONG neuro-connections. When a mosquito bites you, there's often a constant irritation drawing your attention. You're compelled to itch it, which ultimately really doesn't make it feel any better. In fact, it usually continues to itch even more! Well, our brains function in a similar manner. For example: when you think about any elements of the betrayal, the more you ruminate about it, the more you strengthen those neuro-pathways – ultimately creating a direct hotline to exactly what you'd rather not be thinking about! YIKES!!! If you're able to exercise a bit of control (which, bottom line, is what you're probably seeking in the greater scheme of things), switching your focus and traveling down a different mental path can make ALL the difference in the world!

How to Cope With PTSD - 7 Suggestions for Reclaiming Your Life!

Below are seven suggestions for how you can accomplish what probably currently feels like an impossible task – reclaiming your life! Hopefully contained in these techniques are a few methods that can help you regain control and give you some relief. Just remember, healing is a process. With enough time and patience, you WILL get through this!

1. Grounding

Earlier I described how when your fear center takes over, your rational brain goes into emergency shut down mode. Well, the name of the game here is to engage your cognition and bring your brain back on board and in the room!

Each time you get triggered, try noticing what's going on inside your body. Are you feeling tension, and if so where is it? In your jaw? Your stomach? Your fists? Is your heart beating like crazy? The first step in gaining control is to notice exactly where in your body you feel activated. If you recall, your autonomic nervous system, or ANS, is controlled by your inherent survival mechanism. This

means your body goes into full tilt “DANGER” mode before your brain has a clue what hit it. Bit by bit, you’ll get better at detecting this sooner and sooner. Before you know it, you’ll be stepping back right into your neurobiological driver’s seat.

The next step in getting your brain back in the room is a technique called “grounding.” One method of grounding is to notice all your points of contact, i.e.: your back against the chair, the texture of what you are sitting on against your legs, how your arms are being supported, the connection of your feet being supported by the floor, the rhythm of your breathing, etc. Basically not making anything happen, just gaining awareness of what’s occurring in the moment. This is very similar to the concept of mindfulness, with the main focus on body awareness.

2. Engaging Your Cognition

A really easy way to engage your cognition and de-activate your nervous system, is to locate and count things around the room, i.e. “find 5 red things”, or “find 4 shiny things”, etc. In addition to bringing your brain back in the room, part of the purpose of doing this, is to change your train of thought. This begins the process of taking power away from your triggers. Remember the road less traveled analogy? Well, this is a perfect example of “re-wiring” your brain.

3. Positive Affect Tolerance

Positive affect tolerance describes how long our nervous system is able to hold on to a positive feeling state. When we are scanning the environment, we only take in **4%** of what we see! This phenomenon is called “selective attention.” For an excellent and fun video by Dan Simons demonstrating this concept, [click here](#).

Think back to a time you were going to buy a new car. Suddenly, everywhere you looked it seemed as if there was nothing but ads for cars. Well, if you’re looking for signs of danger and/or negative things, guess what – that’s all you are going to see!!! To add insult to injury, after experiencing a trauma that remains unresolved, your nervous system often gets used to only feeling positive for a limited amount of time – because it thinks DANGER IS JUST AROUND THE CORNER!

For people who grew up in an alcoholic household, or similar unstable environment, their autonomic nervous system, or ANS, got acclimated to what

was then considered “normal” a long time ago. Their ANS learned that without the shadow of a doubt, things were only going to stay positive for a short period of time before the rug was going to be pulled out from under them – guaranteed! Fast forward to present day. Even though they’re no longer living in that environment, their ANS is unfortunately stuck in a time warp – as if still living that life style. Rest assured, their ANS is still very much in control, and one way or another WILL make sure in today’s world they are only able to retain a positive feeling state for a brief time.

So how do you get around this? By doing something called *expanding your positive affect tolerance*. In other words, finding ways to allow your nervous system (and emotional state of mind) to feel “good” for longer and longer periods of time. So how can you do that? Just as you are currently choosing to read this article, you can also choose to focus on something else – SO FIND SOMETHING POSITIVE TO FOCUS ON! Resourcing is an excellent way to expand this skill.

4. Resourcing

Resourcing is finding anything positive to focus on. This can be as simple as noticing the smell of coffee in the morning, the way the sunlight is shining through the window, correctly completing a Sudoku puzzle, remembering a moment when you felt skilled and competent, etc. Anything that when you reflect on it, it puts a smile on your face and gives you a warm and fuzzy feeling.

If it was possible to bottle that sensation and hold on to it forever – that’s what you’re looking for. As you focus on whatever that image may be, notice where you are sensing that in your body. Focusing on body sensations help reinforce and “ground” the experience in the present. In addition, you can strengthen those positive neuro-connections by doing something called “tapping”.

Tapping is a form of bilateral* stimulation (alternating back and forth, left and right) used in Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing (phew!) or EMDR. (**Bilateral stimulation is a process used in EMDR to help connect the emotional and rational sides of your brain.*) You can do bilateral movement yourself with something called a “butterfly hug”. This is where you basically hug yourself, and alternately tap on the sides of your arms. Or if that feels too weird, alternately tap back and forth on your thighs. If you want to be super indiscrete,

do it with your toes! Dr. Laurel Parnell has an excellent book called *“Tapping In”* which lists a whole range of resources you can tap in.

I know this may sound a bit like hocus pocus, but give it a try and then let me know what you think. Many EMDR practitioners have worked with many people who prior to doing any EMDR work, thought the whole process was a bunch of baloney. After experiencing a marked decrease in their level of activation with previously troubling events, they became true believers. Also – doing tapping yourself is free! The only cost is spending a couple minutes of your time per day – and that’s even cumulatively over the course of an entire day! I KNOW you’re currently spending WAY more time than a couple minutes stressed about something, or obsessing over the betrayal!

5. Change the Meaning of Words

Words can be exceptionally triggering. When we allow words to trigger us, we give our power away to either an assortment of lines and squiggles on a page, or just a bunch of sounds in the air. Words only carry as much power as we give them. When you hear a word like “betrayal”, and you feel re-traumatized all over again, here’s a twist on how to deal with that. Instead of letting the word carry its usual meaning, create a new one! Think about it, words are merely just a collection of letters, so why not take control and make them do what you want. Try taking the letters of the word that previously carried the zing and flip the definition upside down by turning it into an anagram. Play with it and have fun! The chart below contains a few examples of how you might do this.

BETRAYAL	INFIDELITY	AFFAIR	UNFAITHFUL
Boundless	Identify	Anticipate	Unlock
Emerging	Nourishing	Feeling	New
Tenderness	Feelings (and)	Fabulous	Feelings
Releases	Invite	And	And
Acceptance,	Delicious	Invite	Incorporate
Yielding (to)	Evolving	Release	Tenderness.
Appreciate	Love.		Healing
Love	Imagine		Fuels
	Treating		Unconditional
	Yourself		Love

6. Books

After doing lots of research looking for books that might be helpful for my clients dealing with infidelity, I ran across a real gem called ["Chatting or Cheating?"](#) by Dr. Sheri Meyers. It's the most comprehensive and user-friendly book I found. In her book, she refers to an emotional affair as "emotional sex." The whole affair cycle is covered from suspicions and discovery/disclosure, to how to process the information. In addition, a real plus is having approximately 1/3 of the book devoted to methods of healing. The material is presented in a way that appeals to both the betrayer and the person betrayed, leading to a greater understanding on both sides – a real necessity to effectively heal.

7. ALTERNATIVE THERAPIES

All of the methods I've listed above are things to help you get headed in the right direction, and begin to give you a sense of control. If you find after trying these methods you're still being triggered, and doing these techniques only feels like a Band-Aid on a gushing wound, you may want to consider investigating some non-traditional therapies that can lead to a more permanent change and rewiring of the neurobiology in your brain. Here are two such alternatives:

EMDR

Earlier, I briefly discussed how when events are too overwhelming, our inherent survival mechanism breaks down all the elements associated with the trauma, much like a pane of glass that has been broken into shards. In order to emotionally and physiologically heal, and place the event in the past where it belongs, we need to find a way to reassemble and "make sense" out of all those shards of glass, putting it back together into one cohesive memory. Once the fragments have been reassembled into one memory that "makes sense", it can now correctly be filed in the "been there, done that, and moved on" section of your brain.

A trained EMDR therapist can help you make sense of your trauma(s). Another process is to "uncouple" events that have incorrectly been neurobiologically connected due to one minor element the two events have in common. EMDR has been proven to be one of the most effective methods of healing PTSD. To find a trained EMDR therapist in your area, go to: <http://www.emdria.org>.

SOMATIC THERAPY

Somatic therapy uses awareness of your body-based sensations. It's an excellent way to help release all those impulses from prior traumas stored in your body that are adding to your current reactivity. Working with a trained somatic therapist can help you do exactly that. Dr. Peter Levine was one of the first people to work this way with what he calls Somatic Experience, or SE. [Click here](#) for a more in depth description of how SE works.

Trauma Resource Institute (TRI), created by Dr. Laurie Leitch and Elaine Karas-Miller, MSW, LCSW, also uses somatic therapy with a process they call Trauma Resource Model, or TRM. TRM has been used with survivors of trauma from Haiti, Hurricane Katrina, soldiers returning from war, as well as with the general public. [Click here](#) for more information on their work. To see a short video of some work they were doing in Haiti, [click here](#).

There IS light, hope and healing at the end of the tunnel.

There's no mistaking the reality that dealing with the betrayal of infidelity is a life changing experience. Change carries with it a mix of being terrified of the unknown, and exhilaration of the endless possibilities of where you can go. Without question, this particular journey can feel especially scary. Armed with the understanding why you've been feeling the way you have, combined with using some of the techniques mentioned in this article, it is possible for you to ultimately come to a place of acceptance and achieve a sense of peace.

My wish for those who have read this is for this journey to be a bit less confusing, and has opened the possibility for hope in the future. When you choose to make healing your ultimate goal, I think you'll find the rewards to be more than you ever thought possible. If you and your partner are able to heal together, there is a good chance you'll feel a deeper level of closeness and intimacy than ever before. If the journey of healing is a solo one, this becomes an excellent opportunity to work through old, unresolved wounds and ultimately reclaim your life with a new sense of wholeness.

For more support and information for healing and recovering from infidelity please visit Joyce's site at: www.joycesmithmft.com