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Surviving Betrayal

Romantic betrayal is traumatizing, says psychologist Joshua Coleman. But couples can learn to trust again.

JANICE THOUGHT SHE HAD A GOOD marriage. While she and her husband didn't have much of a sex life after they became parents, they enjoyed each other's company and liked parenting their two young children. Janice believed their marriage was grounded in a solid love for one another.

But this all changed when Janice picked up Robert's cell phone and saw a text message saying, "I can't wait to see you again. Last night was amazing."

She read through a series of texts revealing that he had been having an affair with a woman co-worker for at least several months. "I felt like someone hit me in the head with an axe," said Janice, a patient of mine whose name and details have been changed. "Really. I had to lie down on the bed because I felt like the floor was about to drop out below me. Everything I believed to be true was suddenly called into question."

Discovering a partner's affair can be devastating because it strikes at so many aspects of one's identity. It can cause the betrayed person to doubt their own attractiveness or judgment in people, and it can raise fundamental questions about the inherent goodness of the world.

This is because our relationships are built upon the fragile agreement that those about whom we care most deeply will behave, in large part, as they have always behaved. A betrayal can shatter that trust and open the door to the possibility that things in one's small, intimate world may not be as they appear.

The roots of these feelings stretch back to childhood, when we need predictability in the care we receive. A great deal of research suggests that when a baby's need for predictability is not met, that baby can grow into an anxious and distrusting adult. As children, we will even irrationally blame problems on ourselves instead of our parents as a way to make the world feel more orderly and predictable.

And to a degree, trust always entails the suspension of disbelief. This is, in part, why betrayals can be so psychologically traumatizing. It's as if one's entire view of the world has been proven false. In fact, studies show that psychological traumas like discovering an affair have the capacity to affect brain functioning long after the event occurs. One of these changes is the development of a hyper-vigilance to further assaults. This makes sense from an evolutionary perspective, in that the hyper-vigilance may protect us from haplessly wandering into another psychological injury.

Unfortunately, hyper-vigilance is not a great discriminating device. It exists primarily to put the individual on global red alert that danger is afoot. It creates a suspicion of future betrayals and tempts us to look for lies elsewhere—in other family members, co-workers, or spiritual leaders. Indeed, studies reveal that going through a divorce reduces trust in other people as well as institutions.

Yet this distrust is often misplaced. What's more, it limits the strength and the number of our social connections, often leaving us isolated from the rest of the world. This is why it is urgent for us to learn how to trust again, even if one's relationship is destroyed. Trust isn't just essential to relationships; it's necessary for a happy, meaningful life.

I see a lot of couples in my psychotherapy practice whose relationships have been rocked by infidelity or other forms of betrayal. While many of these relationships end, often in bitter divorce, I've learned quite a bit about how people on both sides of a betrayal can work to restore feelings of trust, and so repair their relationship. While this is rarely a quick or simple task, couples who commit to working on their relationships often find they are much stronger as a result. Just as importantly, no matter the outcome of their relationship, I've seen people learn to restore their trust in the world around them.

Rebuilding trust

If you are the person who has been betrayed—whether it's by an affair, losing

savings to your spouse's gambling, or learning that your spouse spoke harshly about you behind your back—rebuilding trust can be staggeringly difficult. But it can also bring several rewards. While not every betrayal is caused by a problem in the marriage, the betrayed person can use the crisis of betrayal to better understand his or her partner, and this understanding can help reduce the probability that the traumatic behavior will occur again—a vital step toward rebuilding trust.

This isn't just about maintaining a romantic tie. It's also about friendship. Marital researcher John Gottman has found that couples who retain a strong friendship throughout their romantic relationship are the ones who have the most lasting partnerships. Friendship demands that partners be willing to understand each other's inner world—their needs, desires, motivations, and sense of well-being.

A key part of marital friendship is taking responsibility when you make mistakes, whether those mistakes are small or huge. As a couples' therapist, I have observed that the most important predictor of rebuilding trust after an affair, other than love, is the capacity for *both* members of the couple to take some responsibility for what happened. This can be a bitter pill to swallow if you are the person who was betrayed. Yet it is a step that must be taken if the relationship is to be saved.

This was illustrated by Janice and Robert's behavior after she discovered his affair. It became clear that it wouldn't be enough for Robert to end the affair with his co-worker, rededicate himself to Janice, and repair how hurt and humiliated she felt. It was also necessary for Janice to admit that she had shut down sexually since she had become a mother and had ignored Robert's complaints about their sex life. Janice had to acknowledge that Robert, in his own way, felt hurt and betrayed by her turning away from him and neglecting what had been an important form of connection with her.

After establishing mutual responsibility, a big part of rebuilding trust is regaining a sense of control. It is based upon the principle that we are not hapless victims of our partner's whims, nor are we victims of our own mistakes; we can actually *do* something to improve the relationship. Thus the betrayer must be willing to give the betrayed a sense of control, while the betrayed person must try to find that control.

Beyond these two key steps—sharing responsibility for what happened and regaining a sense of control—I've also found the following to be essential for the person who was betrayed.

Avoid humiliating your partner. It will be tempting to watch your partner squirm at the end of a hook for making you suffer. However, at some point you have to decide whether you want revenge or a relationship. You can't have both—at least not for very long. If you fail to allow your partner to make sincere amends, there's a greater chance your relationship will end. John Gottman has found that when individuals don't allow their partners to repair the damage caused by marital conflict, they increase the chance of divorce.

Separate out complaints from criticism. Your relationship will heal more quickly if you communicate your complaints in a way that makes your partner motivated to re-establish trust. Shame, humiliation, and criticism are counter-productive because they cause the other to shut down, avoid, and retreat. Researcher Martin Seligman advises that people try to think of their partners' flaws in non-absolute terms. For example, try to see the affair as a terrible mistake, one which you may or may not have had some complicity creating. If, on the other hand, you see the betrayal as evidence

"We are never so defenseless against suffering as when we love."

of a permanent character defect, such as an anti-social personality disorder, you will be less likely to move toward forgiveness. You may be right that your partner is certifiably suffering from a personality disorder, but if that's the case, you may be better off leaving the relationship instead of remaining critical of your partner, and so torturing both of you.

Isolate the times that you talk about the betrayal. It is tempting for a betrayal to become a 24/7 topic of conversation. This can be damaging to both parties. Don't underestimate the power that positive distraction has in creating a happy life and relationship. Agree upon a time to check in on the topic every day for 15-20 minutes. The person who has been betrayed should make the decision about when to reduce the frequency of the conversations.

Evaluate whether you have the capacity to forgive your partner. It is possible that the wound is too deep and that the betrayer too flawed to ever again be worthy of trust. In order to determine whether you should work to restore trust in your partner, ask yourself: Is this a new behavior, or part of an ongoing pattern of untrustworthiness? If it's not part of an ongoing pattern, there may be good reason to take the risk of working with your partner to heal the betrayal.

You should also ask if your partner seems genuinely motivated to change, or just motivated not to feel guilty. Your hurt and angry feelings may make it difficult for you to read him or her correctly. In addition, the fact that your trust was violated may make you less able to take your partner's words at face value.

However, there is nothing more precious to us than our ability to trust our perceptions. You have the right to regain a sense of control, even if it infringes on the usual rules of relationships. After betrayal, it is legitimate to be able to look at phone records, emails, and cell phone logs in order to feel reassured that there is congruence between what your partner says and does.

That may seem radical, but all bets are off after a serious betrayal. I even encourage some of my clients to hire a private investigator if they're truly unsure. Feeling there's consistency between what your partner says and does is critical to rebuilding trust and maintaining your sanity. However, this is a short-term strategy and shouldn't be considered a substitute for the harder part of negotiating true, long-term trust.

Get help. After a romantic betrayal, it is common for people to avoid reaching out to their usual support system because they don't want to share their shame or humiliation. As a result, betrayal begets isolation. This is why most couples aren't able to contain the potential damage of a betrayal without professional help. It's not just about preserving the relationship: If you have been betrayed, you might need help to control the damage caused to your individual identity, your self-esteem, and your feelings of security in the world. A betrayal may be especially damaging if it was preceded by other betrayals over the course of your life. In that case, you may be tempted to experience a recent betrayal as an expression of your fate, instead of plain old bad luck.

Making amends

What if you are the betrayer? Most people who have betrayed someone they love feel plagued by feelings of guilt, sadness, shame, or remorse. Your own capacity to hurt a loved one may also damage your own self-esteem and identity.

If you have betrayed someone you love, the following steps are crucial.

Take complete responsibility for your actions. No matter how driven you felt to have the affair, nobody made you do it. The more you blame your partner, the longer it will take him or her to believe that you are trustworthy and to want to forgive you.

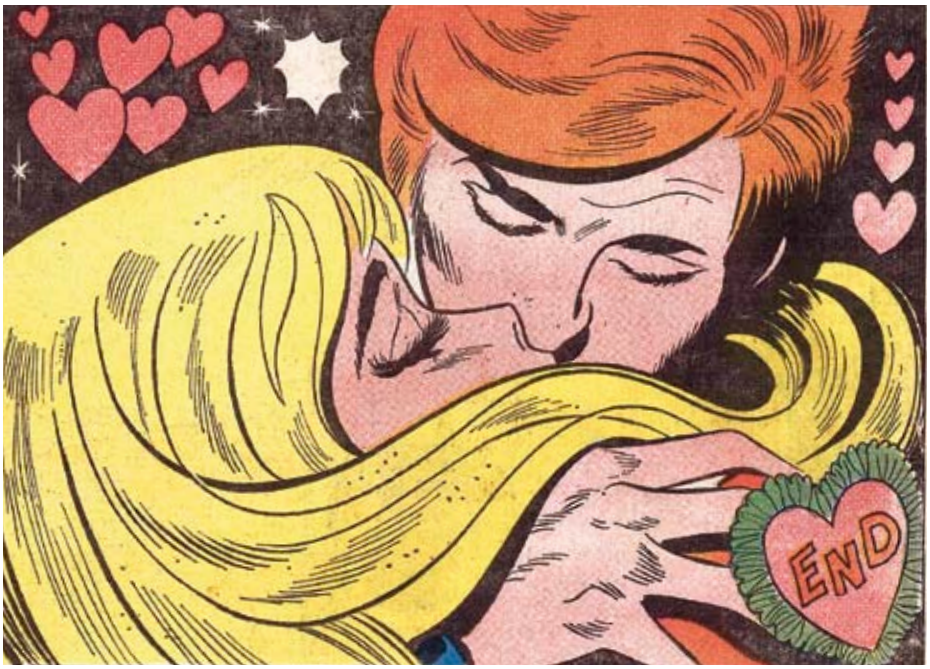
Assume it will take time for your partner to heal. Your feelings of guilt, shame, or humiliation may make you reluctant to raise the topic of the affair or, when raised, cause you to close down the conversation prematurely. Don't. Assume that it will take at least a year for your partner to be able to trust you again. You should be prepared to maintain ongoing, sometimes painful conversations about your betrayal. You may also need support from close friends or a therapist.

Be empathic. Your guilt and shame may make you uncomfortable listening to how badly you've made your partner feel. However, it is critical that you show empathy and make amends for how much hurt you've caused your partner. This is because empathy is an expression of care and concern. Showing that you are willing to bear your feelings of guilt, remorse, or fear of losing

your partner—without blaming back or cutting off the conversation—will go a long way to proving that you are someone worth trusting again.

Respect the need for new limits or rules. Your partner has good reasons to be more suspicious than he or she was prior to the event. Accept that there should now be more transparency around emails, phone logs, and so on. The less defensive you are, the more quickly your relationship will heal as trust is re-established.

Show enthusiasm for change and repair. Your partner may doubt that you want to change. If you really want to show that you are worth trusting, you will have to demonstrate that you are in it for the long haul. It may not be enough just to get into individual therapy or couple's therapy. As psychologist Janis Spring Abrams observes in her 1997 book, *After the Affair,* the person who committed the betrayal may have to change jobs or even move out of the area as a way to show his or her dedication to saving the relationship.



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Who do you love?

Ultimately, we have to take full responsibility for who we choose to love and who we choose to trust. If you frequently fail at finding people worth trusting, it may mean that early in life, your instincts were damaged by those entrusted to make you believe that the world is a safe place. If you come from a family where you were betrayed through incest, abuse, or other serious violations of trust, you may be unconsciously drawn to someone who is more likely to betray you. If that is the case, you may need professional help to understand how to leave your relationship and choose healthier partners.

On the other hand, you may create what you most fear: Your childhood traumas may have damaged your ability to know when to trust and when to be suspicious. Your vigilance against being betrayed may be so high that you are unable to get a clear read on who your partner is and what he or she is up to.

For example, one patient of mine was constantly belittled and rejected by everyone in his family. As a result, he entered his marriage with low self-esteem and an acute fear of abandonment. The weight of these emotions made him overly sensitive and angrily reactive to the slightest criticism or complaint from his wife. His terror that she would replace him resulted in his wife's feeling so burdened by his insecurities that she fulfilled his worst fears and left him for another man.

In other words, just because you *feel* that you were betrayed doesn't mean that you were. You may be tempted to believe that your partner has betrayed you if he or she doesn't live up to your unrealistically high expectations. It isn't your partner's job to repair your childhood traumas, and it is not necessarily a betrayal of you if they fail to do so. In addition, hurting those we love and getting hurt by them is part of the inevitable, even necessary, give and take of intimate relationships.

Gambles worth taking

Trusting our emotional well-being to another is an active process. It is built on a kind of foolish, naïve notion that we can avoid heartache or calamity. As Freud wrote, "We are never so defenseless against suffering as when we love." I have worked with many adults who have been so betrayed by family members or past romantic partners that they wonder if they can ever love or trust again. Yet most are willing to try because they don't want to live their lives filled with fear and guided by the avoidance of risk.

Rebuilding trust after a betrayal is a gamble for both people. For the betrayer, the gamble is that the act of facing both his inadequacies and his capacity to hurt someone he loves will help him regain that person's love. For the betrayed, the gamble is that the act of allowing oneself to forgive, and potentially getting hurt again, is worth the risk of keeping and even improving the relationship.

Quite often, these are gambles worth taking. Rebuilding trust after a betrayal isn't easy and it's rarely fast, with many pitfalls along the way for both people. But most couples who succeed find that their relationships are much stronger for the effort. Janice and Robert used the crisis of the affair to discover what was missing in each of them as individuals, as well as what was missing from their relationship. Years later, they have healed a wound that seemed like it would always be open.

Obviously, not all betrayals end on such a high note. But whether you stay with the betrayer or deem him or her unworthy, it is critical to heal the effects of the betrayal. This is because a happy life requires us to heal the wounds of the past. It also requires a willingness to see that the future may not resemble the past at all.

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Chicago Historical Society (AP Photo)

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IN FACES WE TRUST

First impressions can decisively shape political elections, reports Anna J. Abramson. What does that say about democracy?

HIGH-STAKES DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS often boil down to a matter of trust. In this year's presidential race, for example, junior senator Barack Obama has routinely peppered his speeches with "you can trust me on that," or, "so you can trust me when I say…." Meanwhile, veteran senator John McCain has tried to convince Americans that he has "earned" their trust.

"Trust is uniquely and especially prominent this year because it's an issue that rings so loudly when you talk about experience versus inexperience," says Democratic strategist Jake Maguire, who has worked on campaigns for John Kerry, John Edwards, and Obama.

On the campaign trail, Maguire says, candidates often swap the suits and ties they wear at speeches and debates for rolled up sleeves and jeans. "Out there on the stump, the best way to look trustworthy is to seem like you're 'one of us,'" says Maguire. "The idea is: You can trust them. They're just like your neighbors, the people you know."

Indeed, political operatives have worked since the dawn of democracy to make candidates *look* trustworthy—an effective strategy, according to cutting edge studies that may change the way we view campaigns and elections. In recent years, researchers have found that snap judgments of candidates, based on nothing more than their faces, can reliably and powerfully predict the outcomes of political elections. According to these studies, it only takes a tenth of a second for subjects to decide if a face is trustworthy or not.

That means that despite the many appeals to voters' values, interests, and policy positions, the outcome of this year's historic presidential election may hinge on something that operates under the radar of human consciousness. "We make these rapid judgments from facial appearances whether we like it or not," says Princeton psychologist Alexander Todorov, a pioneer in the study of first impressions. And that, it turns out, may be a serious problem for political elections.

Gut reactions

In a series of experiments, Todorov and his colleagues have revealed the political implications of our gut instincts.

In one 2006 experiment, they gave participants small amounts of time—100 milliseconds, 500 milliseconds, and 1 second—to judge if a face was trustworthy. The researchers discovered that decisions made after 100 milliseconds were highly consistent with decisions made with longer time constraints, suggesting that only a very brief time period is necessary to make a lasting evaluation. In other words, beyond those first 100 milliseconds, additional time for reflection doesn't appear to change first impressions.

Todorov and his colleagues went on to study how these split-second verdicts might inform our political decisions. In several studies in 2007, the investigators presented participants with photographs of the winner and the runner-up of a senatorial or gubernatorial election. The researchers made sure participants didn't recognize the candidates or know which one was the winner, then they posed a simple question, "Who is more competent?"

The results: After only 100 milliseconds of exposure to the faces, participants chose the winning candidate for about 72 percent of the Senate races and 69 percent of the gubernatorial races. In other words, gut instincts were highly consistent with actual votes cast after many months of supposedly rational deliberation. Predictions were as accurate after only 100 milliseconds of exposure as they were after 250 milliseconds and an unlimited amount of time. In fact, when subjects were instructed to take their time and think carefully, their responses were *less* consistent with real electoral outcomes than the snap judgments were. What's more, judgments of competency were highly