

## **Couples and betrayal of trust**

I work with many couples that are struggling and in emotional pain because one partner has betrayed the trust of the other. This can be by having short and long term affairs or perhaps a one night stand or accessing online chat services and porn websites. It is heart breaking for the non-cheating partner and often shame fuelled denial and later regret for the cheater.

One of the most common bones of contention is that some men, (or women, I will use for convenience 'male' as cheater and female as partner of, it can be either sex who cheats) will insist viewing porn or going on live sex chat lines is not being unfaithful as they have never had sex in 'real life' with anybody else. This can be a sticking point for huge arguments or silent withdrawals ultimately getting the couple no resolution of the problem. Often a man will be dragged along to an appointment for 'me' to sort him out!

My job is not to take sides with either of the partners and I quickly communicate this. Both must feel in a safe place in order to open up enough to look at tough feelings and have a difficult conversation. I can't be seen as just another woman who is siding with his wife and I also can't be seen as someone that is blaming the wife for his decision to cheat. It's a fine juggle to walk the line. An easier way to think of it is that I am working with their relationship as my client, whilst holding each partner's individuality in mind.

Research has shown that women can't compartmentalise love and sex in the way that some men can and therefore 'it didn't mean anything' as protested by a cheater, can't be understood or believed by most woman. Research has also shown that cheating emotionally and physically, including with people online, causes the same emotional pain as in 'real life,' no matter how much the man protests. When the betrayal on a continuum of occurrence sits at the addiction end of the behaviour, the partner (and many others in the general population) will believe addiction is being used as an excuse for bad behaviour and that the man just has e.g. a high sex drive. Often the man will also be in denial about his own behaviour and this so often will lead to fiercely defended lies about that behaviour. Again, through research it has been shown that it is the continual lies told by her husband and the putting of blame onto the wife e.g. 'you are exaggerating', 'I told you I was going out tonight you are always forgetting things', 'why are you so suspicious I told you nothing was happening' etc that does more damage than the actual behaviour that the man carries out. Every time the woman asks – is that all, is there anything else I should know, and the man promises that there is no more to be told and then more is discovered by the wife – the bigger the emotional trauma in the wife. This promising that nothing is wrong or that all information is known and then blaming the wife when she has suspicions, only for more information about behaviour to be found out, is called gas lighting. Gas lighting can cause women to be so traumatised that they suffer effects like PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). Women in this category

usually say that it was easier to forgive the behaviour than the lies and the attempts at making the woman believe she is at fault, followed by further discovery of lies. You may well imagine that there could be no way forward for a couple in this situation. The man may attempt to use his wife's 'behaviour' to justify why he 'acted out', e.g. 'you are too wrapped up with the children, you never have time for me' or 'you never want to have sex – it's 6 months since we had sex'. These situations/behaviours can be included in the list of things that need to be understood and resolved, but it was ultimately the man's 'choice' to respond to a problem by cheating. He could have chosen not to cheat but to try to understand and solve the problem – but he did not. Often at the very heart of problems is poor communication and/or different expectations of e.g. a trusting relationship or how sex will be when married or in a long term relationship, or with children now in the family and what either believes to be behaviour that is cheating.

It is my job to help the couple to have an honest conversation about what has happened. Feelings are usually very raw and often one or both partners can be experiencing symptoms of depression and/or anxiety. I must take everything into consideration and help both to move away from 'blame' and towards understanding (which doesn't mean forgiving or forgetting). Maintaining and repairing a broken relationship takes commitment and hard work, but if partners still love each other and want the relationship to continue, then it is possible for that to happen. Often people will say, 'I just want all this crying and anger and emotion to stop – I just want us to go back to normal'. Well.....'normal' didn't prevent cheating, nor did it promote understanding of each other. The truth is that the relationship will never be the same again....but it can be better. Communication and understanding can be much improved and when the man takes positive action to show he can be trusted (a long term activity) and the woman can finally believe this – there is hope for the future.

If you are having trouble with any of the issues that I talk about here and you want some help to navigate the minefield, please email me and we can begin the process of unravelling and finding a way forward for you.

Best wishes to you all.