

INFIDELITY IN RELATIONSHIPS

UNDERSTANDING THE **FIVE STAGES** OF GRIEF

BY TED LEAVITT, RCC



Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, author of *On Death and Dying*, was instrumental in understanding the human experience of grief and loss. While her book focused on the grieving process in relation to mortality, the five stages of grief she outlined — denial, bargaining, anger, mourning, and loss — are equally applicable to a wide-range of loss experiences: the loss of health, opportunity, a job, a role or responsibility, identity, and a host of others. Here, I will focus specifically on a form of trauma and loss with which I am all too often asked to assist — infidelity in relationships.

The meaning of the word “fidelity” may be debated with regard to the line between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in relationships. Regardless of how it is defined, fidelity is a contract, the terms of which are decided by the people involved in the relationship. It is not for me to define fidelity in a particular relationship or for me to say which forms of infidelity are worse or more painful; that is for each affected individual to determine.

However, despite infidelity’s multidimensional aspects, once it has been revealed, the partner of the person who has acted in such a way will usually respond within a certain range of expected behaviours and feelings. By understanding these behaviours and feelings in terms of the stages of grief, individuals may be able to recognize where their own experiences are along the path from trauma to recovery. They will be able to see that their experience is not unique to them, that they do not suffer alone, and that there is a predictable outcome to their suffering.

It is important to note that Kübler-Ross repeatedly clarified that these stages are not necessarily a progressive concept: individuals don’t necessarily start at stage one and proceed in order to stage five. In fact, this may only

occur in a minority of cases. But while individuals may follow unpredictable patterns in terms of the order of the stages, the stages themselves are almost universal. Different types of social and emotional support, prior-loss history, emotion-regulation ability, and existential spiritual beliefs may function as mediators in the impact of loss.

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1 DENIAL

The most common way denial appears after infidelity is what I call “premature optimism.” After the initial shock of discovery or revelation, the partner may effectively go numb. They may appear relatively unfazed and may speak optimistically about their hopes of reconciliation, of seeking professional relationship help, or of their forgiveness and understanding. They may also “talk tough” about how the relationship is over and generally try to appear like they are ready to move

on. While sometimes this optimism is genuine and appropriate, it is often premature in that it is not based on a sound understanding of what has transpired, its true emotional impact, and its ramifications for the future. The benefit of this stage is that by rushing to focus on solutions, the injured partner is able to avoid painful feelings and make it through the day.

This is a very subtle form of denial. In some cases, denial is much more flagrant: the injured party may simply shrug their shoulders and assume there is nothing they can do except let it go. The most flagrant form of denial is the actual denial that anything has happened. Making excuses for the offender, finding alternate explanations, or saying “I don’t want to know,” all serve the same purpose as more subtle forms of denial: to prevent painful emotions.

2 BARGAINING

Kübler-Ross originally included this stage as preparatory to death or dying, and in that context, it makes more intuitive sense that someone would try to bargain to avoid an unwanted fate. However, when the loss has already occurred, bargaining doesn’t seem to be a natural fit. After all, we can’t go back in time to make something unhappen. So how can we bargain with respect to infidelity?

Simply put, the bargaining stage entails a lot of 20/20 hindsight coupled with self-blame: “If only I had done this or seen that... How could I not see this coming? Where did I go wrong? What did I do wrong? If only... I should have... They should have ...” These all express a desire to change undesirable circumstances after the fact. Of course, we cannot actually do this, but what we can do is imagine ourselves



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acting differently. As far as the brain is concerned, this is the next best thing. The brain cannot easily tell the difference between what is imagined and what has actually occurred. The bargaining stage of post-traumatic grief is an unconscious attempt to inhabit a different reality than the one we are confronted with. Denial serves this same end but at a greater distance from the pain. The bargaining stage acknowledges that things are not good and attempts to live in an imaginary world where things are better.

3 ANGER

The anger stage after infidelity is easily recognized. Anger may be directed at the offending partner, a third party, or even at oneself. While anger is recognizable and understandable as a response, it is not immediately apparent that this anger is part of the grieving process. Generally, we associate grieving with sadness, but it is more complex than that. Adding to that complexity is if the relationship was rocky prior to the infidelity, which

often means infidelity A) was not entirely unexpected, B) may offer a way out of a relationship, C) is still hurtful, D) removes the veil of denial from the state of the relationship, E) may be a relief... and so on.

The anger stage of grieving also gives the traumatized partner the strength and energy to face the logistical challenges that present themselves if a separation results. This may include becoming a single parent, a single breadwinner, continuing in essential routines connected to both roles, etc. While there is an initial survival benefit of this response, it is also important to recognize the benefit wanes over time.

Another key component of this stage is the realization that, at its roots, anger is fear; it is simply one side of the fight or flight response. No matter which way we follow, the underlying message of the brain is the same: you are in danger and your defenses must be mobilized. Reinterpreting anger as fear allows us to get to the bottom of the issue faster instead of getting waylaid in draining resentments. Asking the question,

“What am I afraid of?” also serves as a catalyst for moving to the next stage.

4 MOURNING

Kübler-Ross originally called the fourth stage “depression,” but it is now more commonly referred to as “mourning.” Albeit subtle, the critical difference between these two terms is that the fuel behind depression is hopelessness. It is one thing to be sad that something happened and quite another to feel there is no hope for improvement.

At this stage of grieving infidelity, the feelings expressed are usually along the lines of “I can never trust him/her again” or “I can’t trust anyone” or “I’ll never be able to forget and move past this.” These are absolute, concrete, black-and-white statements and project a future based on the present. We know past behaviour can be an accurate predictor of future behaviour, but this is not absolutely true. It is true to say that right now, trust seems impossible, but it is not necessarily true forever. If people work through their issues, learn

to communicate better, learn how and who to trust, then trust can once again become a part of their lives. If nothing changes, however, then nothing changes.

When someone is in this stage of grief, reassurance has very little effect. Telling someone in the throes of betrayal that they will be able to trust again one day is like telling someone who is freezing to death that it's not really that cold. But for them to recognize that these feelings are a natural response, that many people have gone down this road and come to this spot but eventually moved past it, is crucial to their progress. We allow someone to make this progress when we do not pressure them to get there faster. We cannot rush trust.

What is being grieved in this stage is not necessarily the loss of the person or even the relationship but the loss of an ideal. It is disturbing to think my partner has betrayed my trust, but much more disconcerting is realizing the reality that partners sometimes betray trust. If the foundation of our expectations of relationships includes an assumption of loyalty and fidelity and that has now crumbled, we have lost much more than one relationship; we have lost trust in our own expectations.

5 ACCEPTANCE

Referring to acceptance as the final stage is somewhat misleading: it gives the impression that the other stages are over and done with. If only that were true. However, once we have resolved this stage, it does make it much easier to handle and recover from regressions. Coming to some acceptance of what has happened provides a different context in which to deny, bargain, get angry, and mourn.

Coming to a place of acceptance with infidelity doesn't indicate that we condone it, that we are not hurt by it,

or that it doesn't affect us. It certainly doesn't mean we are happy about it or tolerant of it. But it does mean we have stopped trying to avoid the truth and we are working to put it in perspective.

With regard to infidelity, acceptance may involve accepting that you no longer trust your partner. It may involve accepting that you now look for evidence of recurrence. So many people battle this part of the process: they don't want to be suspicious and checking on their partner. I tell them it's okay to engage in this behaviour and that it's not uncommon. One of the reasons it is difficult to accept this evolution is because we struggle to see what has happened as a trauma. But if we can recognize it as such, it gives us perspective to understand our responses and have compassion for ourselves. If you were in a traffic accident where someone ran a red light and caused you serious physical harm, no one would begrudge you for having anxiety at intersections. It is an understandable artifact. Why should it be different with trusting your partner? How can we begrudge a person for being overly cautious with their trust when it was already betrayed?

Acceptance may also mean terminating the relationship. Not all relationships are salvageable, particularly if only one of the parties is interested in making changes. Acceptance may mean recognizing our own contributions to the situation while still holding our partner accountable. Ultimately, acceptance is about incorporating what has happened into our lives without letting it define our lives from here on out.

From acceptance, we can move into a realm of post-traumatic experience, referred to as post-traumatic growth, which allows us to find purpose in our pain and, ultimately, to heal. ■

PUBLIC POLL*

10%

About **10 per cent** of Canadians say they have cheated on their spouse, but **22 per cent** have seriously considered it.

6%

Six per cent of Canadians do not find sex with someone outside their relationship to be illicit and **eight per cent** feel the same about sex with a sex worker.



13 per cent of men and **8 per cent** of women admitted to cheating, while **20 per cent** of women and **23 per cent** of men said they have considered cheating.

*SOURCE: National Post, August 27, 2015. "22% of Canadians have seriously considered cheating on their spouse, poll finds," by Sadaf Ahsan. Statistics by Mainstreet Research for Postmedia News. Mainstreet polled a random sample of 2,459 Canadians across the country. The poll has a margin of error of plus or minus 1.98 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

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