

Infidelity in the relationship.

Can we recover from it?

Why do we cheat on our partner? Why do some people who consider themselves in a happy relationship cheat on their partner? Does an affair automatically mean the end of a relationship?Couple and family therapist, of Belgian origin and based in New York, Esther Perel is recognized worldwide as one of the most original and relevant voices on romantic relationships. Let's see what she can tell us about cheating.

Infidelity today

If there is one thing for sure, it is that infidelity has existed since the institution of marriage has existed. But what do we consider to be infidelity? Perceptions obviously vary from one person or culture to another, and even more so depending on whether one views oneself from the perspective of the unfaithful or the deceived. For Esther Perel, there is infidelity when three conditions are met: a secret relationship with an emotional connection and a sexual dimension. This phenomenon affects 90% of people today, either because there was an infidelity in their family, or even an illegitimate child, or because they are living through or have experienced infidelity in their relationship.

While the phenomenon is as old as the world and so prevalent, infidelity never took such a toll on couples in the past. Why? If in the beginning, marriage was essentially an economic enterprise - two are stronger than one - and an institution which ensured social cohesion, marriage - or long-term commitment made outside the strict bonds of marriage - has today become a matter of the heart: it is the expression of the romantic ideal par excellence. Today's spouse is expected to be a passionate lover, responsible parent, best friend, staunch confidant, emotional companion, and intellectual stimulant. For life. That’s a lot to ask of one person for such a long time!

In the past, infidelity represented an attack on economic security, which made it generally tolerable: the purpose of marriage not being the happiness of the individuals, it was not worth putting everything at risk because of a misstep. Today, it is quite different: given the expectations placed on marriage, infidelity poses a threat to our emotional security, which has far greater consequences. If the one in whom I have invested everything in cheats on me, what is left of me? It is our integrity that is in question.

So, the revelation of betrayal is most often devastating, synonymous with complete annihilation. It comes with a deep identity crisis. *"How could I have been fooled? "Will I ever be able to trust anyone again?"*

In a world where the dictatorship of immediate happiness reigns (we will come back to this later), where everyone has the right to happiness immediately and where partners are economically more autonomous than before, the discovery of an affair often leads to radical decisions and the end of the relationship. *"Leave her / him*. *After everything she / he has done to you, you can see that she / he is not worth it!”.* We will hear this quite often. Choosing to stay, when you can leave is “the new shame”, as Esther Perel points out.

Why do we cheat?

*"If you are cheating on your wife / husband, it's either because you have a problem, or your relationship is in trouble. "*

*"Why are you going elsewhere when you have everything you need at home? "*

Of course, many infidelities find their cause in relationships which have sometimes been unhappy for a long time.

But it would be a big mistake to reduce the phenomenon of infidelity to these cases alone: ​​even happy people in a relationship sometimes cheat on their partners. So, what is it that causes our behaviour at some point to be in complete opposition with our values? We cross a line that we never imagined crossing, at the risk of losing everything. There is often a yearning behind this transgression, a yearning for emotional connection, for novelty, autonomy, freedom, for renewed sexual intensity, for a desire to re-capture lost parts of ourselves (eg adolescence which could not be lived to its fullest). The realization of this also finds an important rebound in the "right to immediate happiness ".

This infidelity is not so much about turning your back on someone as it is about turning your back on who you are or who you have become. We are not looking for another person, but rather looking to connect with another self.

Can a relationship survive infidelity?

It has been said that betrayal comes with deep wounds that take time to heal. But this event can be used to turn a crisis into an opportunity for the relationship.

How? First, it is essential to realize that betrayal is a real atomic bomb for those who experience it. To overcome this trauma, several steps will be necessary: ​​the phase of anger first, which will most often have to be expressed many times and which will require the one who cheated to listen and show patience and understanding. Infidelity is an “identity thief”: it leads us to revisit those moments in the history of the relationship that we thought we were sharing but were not experienced as such by both partners (*"And all those times when you told me that you had to stay later at the office! And I believed you, but what an idiot I was!*”). However, while the future is uncertain, the past is generally perceived as factual, a sure thing which forms our identity. The wavering of this certainty leaves us distraught and calls for "reconstructing" the past in light of this new reality.

Next, it is essential that the one who cheated express sincere regret about their behaviour. Not to fall into a pattern of excessive victimization-guilt, but because it is not possible to forgive and rebuild trust step by step with someone who does not feel any remorse for the pain that they caused.

At this stage, it will become possible to move away from the interrogation which aims to "know everything" ("*who did you cheat on me with? How many times? Where? What does he / she give you that I don't? ...* ") and move on to ask questions that are more relevant to "why*"("what could not you say or express to me in our relationship? what did this affair mean? for you? ...* ”) which will perhaps allow both people to express that they can benefit from change. This is often the opportunity for very deep discussions and an honesty that has sometimes never been achieved in the relationship before, about each other's needs and expectations, what happened to the relationship, what got lost along the way. And perhaps the beginning of a process of reinventing the relationship.

Let us also not forget that besides sexual infidelity, there are many other ways to cheat on someone. Contempt, neglect, indifference, verbal or physical violence are behaviours that are all marks of infidelity to the relationship, to what we promised each other, to our values.

Let us be clear, Esther Perel's views are in no way to encourage or promote infidelity, but simply to note that it remains extremely widespread today and to challenge us: in our adult life, most of us will have 2 or 3 relationships or marriages, sometimes with the same person.

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You may have experienced infidelity, either cheated or were cheated on. In this situation, you probably consider that your first marriage, at least as you have experienced it to this day, is over. The end of this first union sometimes means that you leave. But not always: you can also try to bounce back together, to reinvent your relationship together.

**Go further :**

To know more, we invite you to discover the book *“The State of Affairs: Rethinking Infidelity”,* by Esther Perel,published by Harper Collins.

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