

The impact of marital infidelity on the offended partner: Gender differences in a religious population

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Demographics

- 17 participants, 7 men, all identify their faith as extremely important
- 16 were either divorced or divorce was pending/likely
- Cause of marriage dissolution- infidelity
- Women stayed in relationships with infidelity longer than men

Relationship to divorce

- At times it was difficult to determine how much stress was from divorce & how much was from infidelity
- The group was divided in respect to some seeing the divorce as a relief and others struggling with both the divorce & infidelity

Infidelity as trauma

- All reported that the infidelity was one of the most traumatic incidents of their lives
 - Most experienced PTSD symptoms
 - Insomnia
 - Irritability
 - Difficulty concentrating
 - hypervigilance

Gender differences

- Women with children still living at home had more difficulty coping
 - Result of gender role differences
 - Men experience trauma of infidelity as abandonment of them. Women experience abandonment of them and their children
 - Women didn't enter new relationships while children were at home

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Gender differences

- Women with children still living at home had more difficulty coping
 - Women never considered who would maintain custody.
 - Caring for children became the focus of their lives and a reason for being
- Men in some cases became less involved with fathering
 - One case reported increased relationship with children

Gender differences

- Men were more resilient than women in resolving the crisis
 - Men remarried
 - Reported the experience as a growth experience
- Women used emotion-focused coping men problem-solving coping

Religious coping

- All but one used positive religious coping (major finding)
 - Identified this as the source of their strength
 - One who used negative religious coping was closest to trauma
- Women used emotion-focused coping men problem-solving coping

Religious coping

- Negative experiences with protestant churches (minor finding)
 - Divorce stigma
 - Negative divorced church members
 - Excommunication from church for extramarital involvement after the divorce
 - More traumatic than the infidelity

Religious coping

- Negative experiences with Catholic churches
 - All (3) Catholic subjects expressed concern about:
 - Annulment: cost, invasion of privacy, denial of reality of long relationships
 - Threats of not being able to volunteer or take communion
 - Pressure to remain in the marriage in spite of the infidelity

Other coping strategies

- Similar for men and women
- Friends & family
- Individual counseling
- Medication, journaling, taking a college class, moving, long walks

Positive and negative counseling experiences

- Marital counseling not useful in any of the situations
 - One partner already decided to leave
 - One blamed secular counselor
 - Other felt the counselor didn't know how to help

Positive and negative counseling experiences

- Individual counseling useful in most situations
 - Consistently with a Christian counselor
 - Found support and shared values helpful
 - One counselor recommended meeting with 3rd party, after divorce
 - Useful for that client (might not always be useful, especially early on)

Positive and negative counseling experiences

- Individual counseling that wasn't useful
 - Minister didn't have time, brushed her off
 - Another minister didn't ask for her side of the story, tried to get husband to say that he loved her
 - Minister suggested weight loss as the solution to infidelity problem, very offensive

Impact of study

- Challenge for marital counselors to realize that it is often not effective for couples where there has been infidelity
 - What is success?
 - Critical importance of listening to both partners
 - Lecturing the offender may not be useful
 - Preventive education prior to infidelity valuable

Impact of study

- The burden for caring for children is an added stressor for women whose husband's are unfaithful
 - Work to increase father's parenting involvement
 - Lessen couple conflict by helping them set aside their anger and focus on the best interests of the children

Impact of study

- Positive religious coping is a strength that should be built on
 - Encourage involvement with church members who will offer spiritual strength not just emotional support
 - Intervention around negative religious coping is important in decreasing stress