

I had an affair – what now?

Ashley Madison found itself in the headlines quite often in the last few months. If the media exposure around the recent data leak didn't spell disaster for some of their clients, we would argue that it was a huge failure for brand trust, and trust in relationships all over the world- quite ironic.

The exposure/uncovering of affairs has devastating effects on all people involved. So why is it that, if any topic involves sex, betrayal, and risk, that people "run" to the information channels to read about it. Perhaps the realization of an alternate reality/fantasy or in this case, nightmare, guarantees it to be an overnight sensation? Whatever the answer, Hollywood and Shakespeare built a legacy on this formula. Remember Macbeth? Or Hamlet? The reality of affairs, infidelity, or then cheating, often only surfaces/features in the counselling room. It is a reality of deep wounds, shattered dreams and regret. As relationship counsellors we are confronted with many questions: Who's to blame? Who's the victim? Who's the perpetrator? Will the pain will stop if I know who to blame?

We have found that, at a time of such vulnerability, individuals are driven by their most basic survival instinct. The interaction is raw and volatile. It is easy to sit on the side lines and label the behaviour as childish and immature. Trauma research would suggest that in this condition the level of activation in the brain makes the higher order functioning of reason and perspective impossible to access. So, to say "let's sit down and consider how your relationship got to this point", may not be very effective. Yet, once the storm is contained, this is exactly what is required. Infidelity is a relationship problem. Instead of reverting to the natural questions of who is right and who is wrong, consider for a moment the alternative question of what went wrong? Yes, one partner acted out the relationship distress by moving outside of the agreed contract. However, both parties are victims of a relationship that was unable to provide a sense of belonging to both parties.

It is because people care and love, that this is so hard to deal with. To put the emotion aside feels almost impossible, to think that you will ever be happy again, feels impossible. But it is possible. As human beings we have a deep need to connect with another person. We do this to try and meet our most base attachment needs of love, acceptance and validation. When the relationship comes under attack these needs are not met. When we are hurt we revert to the most effective, but possibly also most hurtful, means of defense which is attack. So instead of being sensitive to your partners' needs you inflict wounds through abandonment, criticism or stone-walling. Environments like this create fertile ground for an affair to happen.

We believe that a PR disaster for Ashley Madison.com could be a life line for a million relationships in distress. The discovery of the affair does not need to be the end. It can be the start of something so much deeper, richer and more real. We would like to improve on the tagline of Ashley Madison, Life is Short, have an affair. If you find yourself in a position where you need to deal with the ramifications of an affair, or infidelity, why not rather get to a place where you can use the following line- **"Life is short, in everything show you care"**. In the most difficult situations there is help. There is hope after infidelity, reach out to us, we can help.

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