

Dirty laundry: Infidelity in gay relationships

BY BRIAN VAN DE MARK

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I's an issue that dogs politicians on the campaign trail. It recently made the cover of *USA Today*'s "Money" section. No, it's not the stock market. It's infidelity: the age-old story of girl-meets-girl, girl-cheats-on-girl and girl-takes-girl-back.

Since 60 to 75 percent of couples stay together after infidelity, the issue isn't so much infidelity, as intimacy after infidelity, however.

Oakland, Calif.-based authors Steven Solomon and Lorie Teagno have written a book about just that. Clinical psychology Ph.D.s, they are co-authors of *Intimacy After Infidelity: How to Rebuild & Affair-proof Your Marriage* (2006, New Harbinger Publications, Inc.).

While Solomon and Teagno did not specifically study gay and lesbian relationships in their research for the book, the authors say there is strong reason to believe that the same-sex couples' behavior with regard to infidelity is no different from that of heterosexual couples.

"In many ways, relationships are relationships, and infidelity is infidelity, regardless of the gender of the partners involved," Teagno says.

In fact, Teagno says, it's far more relevant to look at infidelity using the late Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' model of "Death and Dying" than to view it in terms of sexual orientation.

In the 1960s, psychiatrists adopted the Kubler-Ross model to approach treatment of major losses in a person's life, such as loss of job, income or loved ones. The model also evolved as an approach to treating the stages of grief that a terminally ill patient typically experiences. These include denial, anger bargaining, depression and acceptance, which parallel the process a betrayed party to infidelity experiences, the authors say.

"In many ways, infidelity is the death of the relationship as the betrayed has known it," Teagno explains. "Life has been going along, a plan is in place, and the something is either discovered or revealed that threatens that plan, and the whole thing is shattered."

Solomon and Teagno say there are three primary feelings that fuel infidelity: fear, loneliness and anger.

Infidelities of fear

Phil, 42, of Kensington, says he grew up with the "best little boy in the world syndrome: There was always pressure to be the best at whatever I tried," Phil remembers.

“When I was in school, I tried really hard to please my parents and be the straight-A student,” Phil explains. “In high school, I was on the track team and I always felt the pressure to run the fastest, jump the highest, all of that. There were these really high expectations and criticisms from my parents, which, in some way, I guess were really from me, to be the all-star athlete-scholar.”

These expectations and criticisms seemed to follow Phil wherever he went, he says – including into relationship after relationship after relationship.

“I would meet a guy and everything was awesome,” Phil explains. “We would be going out for a few months and then something would happen, and I would cheat on him.”

Phil’s experience is not uncommon, Teagno says.

“Infidelities of fear happen with people who come from a family with a lot of criticism or threats, who might not be secure in the love and attachment they received from their parents,” Teagno says. “There are these high expectations and insecurities, the typical identity crisis of any child between 8 and 16, and then you throw in the homosexuality component and now they’re realizing, ‘You know what, this is not going to be a pretty picture.’ It’s twice as difficult, really.”

Solomon and Teagno explain that every relationship goes through stages: the symbiotic phase, the honeymoon phase, and then, around three to nine months, there is the real-world disappointment – the acknowledgment of flaws that were in many ways ignored at the onset. It is at this stage, where the reality of the relationship starts to infringe on the fantasy, that some commit infidelities out of fear.

“At that point, they might think, ‘Maybe that’s not the person for me,’” Teagno says. “It sort of sets off bells and whistles. Maybe the person is wonderful, bright and honest, but they don’t deal with feelings so well, and so that elicits in me, either consciously or not, a lot of fear.”

Like most people who commit an infidelity, Phil wasn’t aware of how his dissatisfaction was motivated by his past or of the resulting behavior patterns it generated.

“I would always meet another guy, and he would be totally into me, and so I would think, like, ‘Hey, this guy’s the right guy, not the other one that I was supposedly dating for four months,’” Phil explains.

Solomon and Teague say infidelity that occurs this early in a relationship is most often the result of such unconscious fears. They add that people who cheat in a young relationship are actually trying to avoid unresolved disappointment suffered as a child.

Self-intimacy

The key, therefore, to breaking a pattern of infidelities motivated by fear is what Teagno calls “self intimacy,” or getting in touch with feelings that tell you what you want and need, and also what your partner wants and needs.

For Phil, it was a matter of learning how to recognize those moments in which he began to feel disappointment or fear, or in which the reality of the other person’s flaws and idiosyncrasies became apparent. Developing such self-awareness enables a much greater chance to prevent infidelity, the authors say.

According to an April 2005 article by June Machover Reinish, Ph.D., executive director of The Health and Science of Human Sexuality Institute, 96 percent of gay couples who participated said they were committed for a lifetime, and half of those couples said they had been through some kind of a commitment ceremony. This is compared with 92 percent of lesbian couples who reported that they were committed for a lifetime. On the other hand, exclusivity agreements were broken four times more often in male relationships than in female relationships because, although exclusivity was preferred by male couples, they tended to accept more exceptions to the rules.

Phil now says he wants an exclusive relationship, and he thinks he may have found just that. Now in the second year of a new relationship, Phil says he hasn’t strayed. “Not that the temptation hasn’t been there, but when the temptation is there, I have learned to see that it is my fear, not hormones, that is driving that situation,” he says. On those days, Phil says he goes home to his partner and talks to him about his fears. “He’s someone who will actually talk about those fears and disappointments and work through them.” Phil says.

The most effective way to combat a pattern of infidelities of fear is to confront the root causes of that fear. This can best be done by developing a strong sense of “self-intimacy,” Solomon explains.

“One of the most common problems in long-term love relationships is that a person refuses to take responsibility for the feelings that led them to betray their partner in the first place,” Solomon says. “You really have to work on overcoming those weaknesses, those fears that came from early and, often, continued high expectations and

criticisms – both one's own and one's loved ones' – to work on one's own demons, so to speak. When a person is in a pattern of finding someone, and leaving that someone because they have found someone who doesn't have all the problems the first person suddenly seems to have, then likely that person hasn't dealt with his or her own issues, and those fears will continue to reappear until they are addressed."

Infidelity of loneliness

If partners in a couple don't work through their individual issues, there is a greater chance that one of the partners will commit an infidelity down the line, not so much out of fear, but out of loneliness. Because, besides fear, the second feeling that fuels infidelity is loneliness, say Solomon and Teagno.

"The typography of a relationship where there is an infidelity of loneliness is when, if you meet the couple nine months before the affair, both will tell you they are happy," Teagno explains. "Little by little, dissatisfactions creep in, and try as they might, they have not been able to talk about these dissatisfactions, and over time, there is an erosion of the deep love and commitment they both shared. And neither is aware of how deep the rift is."

Sara, 41, and her partner, Jillian, 44, have been together for 12 years. By all accounts, they say their relationship was right where it should have been. Sara teaches first grade and Jillian is an account manager for a major insurance company. They own a home in University Heights and have often discussed having children.

"We never saw it coming, barely saw it when it hit, and couldn't stop looking for it after it passed," Sara says. The "it" in question was Jillian's affair three years ago.

It began simply enough: Jillian, who works in a large industrial complex where there is an atrium coffee kiosk, explains.

"Every morning around 10:30, I would head down to refill my coffee," Jillian recalls, as Sara sits next to her, holding her hand. "One day, I realized that I must have said hello to this particular woman nearly every morning. As weeks went by, we continued to chat, and months passed, and the conversations became a bit more personal, a bit more affectionate, I guess. I really didn't even notice what was happening."

This pattern is hardly surprising, Teagno says. "As there is an erosion of a connection, this becomes an erosion of the commitment, and the couple is largely unaware. "A woman goes to Starbucks or wherever week after week and sees the same person, and they become acquaintances. And one day, that acquaintance isn't there, and the woman in the relationship finds herself looking for her friend, seeking her out. There is an energy, and she finds herself feeling alive, an aliveness that is not felt in her primary relationship. This is the slippery slope of infidelity."

Like Jillian, most people don't seek infidelity. But "one day, it just hit me," Jillian says, shifting in toward Sara. "I had somehow come to have feelings for this woman, and I had no idea how to tell Sara."

In some cases, Teagno says, the betrayer leaves a path of clues, and the partner discovers the infidelity. In a large percentage of those cases, the person having the affair is relieved to be discovered, because he or she doesn't know how to end what's started.

But Sara did not discover Jillian's infidelity. Instead, Jillian says she navigated two very different lives, unhappy in both.

"I finally had to come home and tell Sara what was going on," Jillian recalls. "It was the hardest thing I think a person can ever do."

Sara interrupts. "Not the hardest – the second hardest. The hardest is hearing that your partner violated your commitment like that."

Jillian nods. "I suppose you're right," she admits.

Sara recalls that her initial response was to tell Jillian to get out. In fact, Sara says, she wanted Jillian to leave immediately and not bother to come back. But couples who have just discovered an infidelity should avoid such immediate decisions. In fact, they should avoid any major decisions for about four weeks, Teagno says.

"By about four weeks, the betrayed starts to settle down and say, 'Oh, my God, this is very real, and so now what? How do I reconstruct myself? How do I reconstruct the relationship?'" she explains.

At this point, dialogue, often with the help of a therapist or counselor who specializes in relationships, can be critical.

Sara and Jillian have talked about the affair many times over the past three years, and have been in counseling for the duration of that time.

“Maybe the rawness heals, that’s what they say,” Sara says, apologizing to Jillian. “But some days are still better than others, and today, well, there are better days than today. The hard part is really working it all out together and not doing what I just did by cutting [Jillian] down. I really had to learn how to do that. It was like I tell my [students] when they have a fight on the playground, use your ‘I’ messages; talk about how you’re feeling and try to understand how the other person might be feeling. It’s just a lot harder to walk the walk.”

After all, Jillian’s affair didn’t just happen out of nowhere, Sara explains. There were months in which Sara was focused on her work at school, with a challenging class and feeling overwhelmed. For Sara, the nine-year relationship was comfortable, so she felt secure putting Jillian “on the back burner.”

Sara says she would come home after a “grueling day at work and just want to relax, push the stresses away.” Those stresses included anyone who needed her attention – including the person from whom she had drawn her strength for nine years.

“The thing is, I spend all my day with kids vying for my attention and needing me, and then I would get home and just want to escape into a bottle of wine and a quiet room,” Sara explains. “So, when Jillian would want some of my attention – attention she absolutely deserved – I wasn’t there for her. And I think after a while – no, I know after a while – she met someone who was excited to see her, who looked forward to seeing her. It was all the things we were. And all the things we had to become again if we were going to make it.”

But the first step for Jillian was ending the affair. And that, says Solomon, is virtually a deal-breaker.

“The infidelity cannot continue,” Solomon explains. “There may be loving feelings in that relationship, but it must end for the primary relationship to move forward. Those feelings toward the person with whom you were having the affair must be let go, and they will dissipate, and you must focus on your primary partner. It’s a tough thing to do, to tell your partner that you’ve cheated on them.”

But it’s just as tough, Solomon says, for the betrayed.

“Of course, you go through all of the questions like, ‘What did I do?’ or ‘Was the sex not good enough?’” Sara says.

In the end, though, Solomon says, the important thing for the betrayed to understand is that it was not his or her fault.

“It was the partner’s choice, and while you have a responsibility for what was going on in the primary relationship before and during the affair, it is important not to blame yourself for your partner’s choice to have an affair,” Solomon explains.

Conflict intimacy

For Sara and Jillian, then, it was about finding out what was going on in the relationship that precipitated the affair. Seeking counseling is one way to explore that. But making the decision to confront those issues can be a very difficult step.

Sara and Jillian had essentially had a conflict-free relationship up to that point. Picking out a house, buying a car, even deciding which family to visit during the holidays had always seemed a pretty easy path for them. But what they came to learn in counseling was that their relationship wasn’t quite as rosy as they had thought. The truth was, both were confirmed conflict-avoiders.

Teagno explains that in order to grow in intimacy, avoid infidelities and, more importantly, in order to work through the crisis of an infidelity, partners must be open to discussing conflict.

“In order to get through the inevitable differences, maybe differences about the way we feel about extended families, or sometimes seeming ignored, we have to have these conflict dialogues,” Teagno says. That doesn’t necessarily mean arguments. “It may be as simple as sitting down and being willing to be, what she calls, working on the “conflict intimacy.”

This means that a couple must be open to and comfortable with having conflict dialogue. When Sara and Jillian, for example, bought a house five years ago, it seemed easy enough to do. They agreed on certain neighborhoods, a price range, what each one wanted, etc. In fact, Sara says, their friends were amazed at how smoothly the process went.

“But really, when we started going through counseling after Jillian’s affair, we really learned how much wasn’t communicated in that decision,” Sara explains. “For example, I love to cook; it’s therapeutic for me. So I really did want a big kitchen with all the top-of-the-line functions and, as we looked, we found some that had large kitchen spaces, but those were never the houses that seemed to excite Jillian. She liked the houses that had the great decks

out back and the landscaping. When we looked at houses, I was busy looking inside the house and she was busy looking outside the house. We thought at the time maybe that was good, that we were both doing our own expert things. But really, we were ignoring the whole dialogue going on for the other person.”

“There are three primary feelings that fuel infidelity: fear, loneliness and anger.”

Now, Sara and Jillian have talked through those disappointments, those potential areas of conflict. As it turns out, over time, Sara wanted to put more money into the kitchen, and Jillian wanted to put more landscaping and a Jacuzzi in the back. But every time a granite counter arrived, Jillian couldn’t really share in Sara’s excitement because all she could see was the lost opportunity to get a new outdoor built-in bench, etc.

Having spent hours working through the conflict issues that surround their house, Sara and Jillian began to take the skills they learned in counseling during discussion on the house to more intimate areas of their lives, such as how Jillian feels when she comes home excited about an evening ahead outside with her partner on the bench swing, and what it feels like when she proposes that evening and Sara responds by indicating she is too tired and would rather sit quietly in a room by herself and read.

“Whenever Sara uses the term ‘quiet time,’ huge red flags of frustration and rejection come up for me,” Jillian explains. “Now I can see those flags for what they are and can say to Sara that those words hurt because they seem to imply that I am part of the stress in her life rather than the escape. I believe a partner should draw their energy from the other partner, and now we are able to actually talk about that.”

Infidelities of anger

The third major feeling that fuels infidelity is anger, Solomon and Teagno explain.

“This is a really hard one because it’s really about one partner sort of keeping a ledger of how the other person hasn’t met their needs,” Teagno says. “It’s when one partner actually seeks out affairs as a way to get back at their partner, to get their due, if you will. It’s a desire to meet their own needs and at the same time intentionally hurt their partner. It’s really the hardest to help because the betrayer is so emotionally immature. They have the least amount of ego strength, and there is so much more work to do.”

Kevin says he should have seen it coming. Kevin, 34, had been with his partner for 11 years. The pair had met in graduate school at the University of California-San Diego’s political science program.

“We had a few classes together, and we were great study partners,” Kevin recalls. “Justin could remember all the details, and I was really good at the bigger picture stuff, so we would complement each other well. It sort of grew into this relationship where we thought we were doing just that on an emotional level.”

Over time, though, Kevin says, Justin seemed to be more and more agitated at the smallest of things.

“Mostly, it was little stuff in my opinion, like forgetting to pick something up from the store that he had called and asked me to get,” Kevin recalls. “One day, someone asked how long we had been together, and I said about two years, but Justin was able to recount the years, months, weeks and days.”

What was happening was that to Justin attention to detail felt as if he was always the one giving, and never getting back.

“Justin would say, ‘It’s your brother’s birthday, have you gotten him a card,’ and I would think, ‘Oh, not yet,’ and would sort of dismiss it. He would always huff off,” Kevin says. “I figured that it was my family and things like that weren’t so important. But, after a lot of thinking, I came to realize that I wasn’t just dismissing my brother’s birthday, I was dismissing Justin’s kindness.”

Over time, those dismissals added up to a lot of anger, Justin, 33, explains.

“It really felt like every day I would do all these nice little things for Kevin, and I never got anything in return.” Justin says. “So, it was like, ‘Why am I doing this?’ And I just built up all of this anger.”

That anger, Justin says, came at a price – the ultimate price, their love relationship.

It began slowly enough, while Justin was surfing the Internet.

“At first, it was just porn,” Justin says. “While Kevin was at work or doing something around the house, I would just sit and look at videos, and whatever. Then, I started having sexual conversations with guys online. I figured, like, hey, if Kevin really got me, he’d know that I needed something more.”

After a period of time, Justin began “running to the store” or “going into work for a few hours.” In fact, what he was doing was hooking up for anonymous sexual encounters, encounters that he justified by reminding himself how angry he was with Kevin.

“Every time I would [have sex with] someone, I would think about how Kevin was sitting at home, clueless and blissful,” Justin explains. “I used that anger as my excuse,” Justin recalls.

It took nearly six months of shopping trips and extra hours at work before Kevin discovered a series of email exchanges between Justin and other guys. Although Kevin says he isn’t especially detail oriented, he easily figured out that Justin had been having sex outside of their agreement of exclusivity.

Afraid of confronting Justin, Kevin was at a loss as to a solution.

“At first, I started to make sure I was more sexual, that I reached down and found the passion and affection and sexual drive that we had when we first met,” Kevin explains.

But that didn’t address the real issues. And one day, the couple’s underlying tension rose to a boiling point: When Justin said he was going to work, Kevin replied, “I didn’t know you had a second job as a philanderer.”

It was an intense moment. Kevin became angry and Justin denied all.

The denial doesn’t surprise Teagno and Solomon.

“Almost always the betrayer denies the infidelity at first,” Teagno says. “But it’s important to confront the partner and talk about your hurt. Not the outrage or anger, but about the fear and devastation. And the betraying partner owes it to the betrayed to listen. Often at that moment, the betraying partner wants the betrayed to get out, that they aren’t worthy of them, it’s a very fragile time period.”

Paradoxically, this also makes it the right time to seek professional help.

“Clearly there is an investment here, and at this moment in time, it is hard to recall the goodness, because, no doubt, there has been some,” Teagno says. “And it takes time to allow the larger reality of the relationship to come back to memory.”

Quite often, the betrayed wants the betrayer to leave, rather than to work out the rift. But Solomon and Teagno say this is the time to take a deep breath and settle down.

“If you’re really going to break off the relationship or if you are going to maintain it, that’s the crossroads that couples face,” Teagno says. “The betrayed gets an opportunity here to see how capable their partner in the primary relationship really is. You have to remember the love. If a couple chooses therapy, they are there because they are realists. It’s to help both of them, so they can see both the hurt and the love.”

For gays and lesbians, Teagno says, it’s twice as difficult.

“There are so many more complications for gays and lesbians,” Teagno says. “First, gays and lesbians are already in a minority, so the struggle is much larger than [for] a heterosexual couple because the world at large doesn’t give you the respect you deserve, and so the support base for a gay or lesbian may be much smaller than for a heterosexual partner. In many cases, the support base is limited to the other person in the relationship, because extended family may have disowned or grown apart from the gay or lesbian partner. There are just fewer people to turn to during this devastation, so when you add isolation to the mix, you really need to get professional help, get someone in there who can walk you through this.”

The two sides of passion

“It’s important to understand that there are two sides to passion,” Solomon explains. “First, there is the positive side, which is the hot, loving passion of a loving sexual relationship. It’s often why people get into a relationship in the first place. And the other side to passion is the dark side of passion, which is dealing with hot, negative feelings of anger, hurt or disappointment. Couples who don’t deal well with the negative side of passion, well, the positive side – the sexual, the emotions – will begin to wither. Couples that are able to flourish by dealing with both sides of passion make it for the long term, because they are able to deal with the dark side of passion, the conflict, constructively. They’re able to fight well, in a way.”

A modern twist

Kevin and Justin’s experience with infidelity that began online introduces a modern twist on the age-old subject: technology. While infidelity seems to result from emotion and hormones, it is today often catalyzed by a third component – opportunity. Via technology access to people is more immediate and discrete.

On the flip side, technology increases the likelihood that a cheater will get caught. There are, as Solomon says, more and more “bread crumbs left behind in a trail,” such as credit card statements, cell phone logs and Internet usage history.

Such clues were key to Kevin’s ability to piece together Justin’s infidelity puzzle.

“Seeing that first communication strand led me on a hunt for all the other evidence,” Kevin explains. “I looked at our online bank statements, Internet history and navigation, our cell phone history. It was amazing what I could put in front of Justin.”

That made Justin’s denial incredible, Kevin says.

“I thought, ‘You can’t believe that I would actually buy those excuses and denials?’” Kevin recalls. “But a large part of me wanted to – don’t get me wrong. I went through all the steps of, ‘What did I do? What could I have done differently? What should I do now?’ All of those self-blame things.”

Responsibility lies with betrayer

But Teagno emphasizes that it’s the betrayer’s responsibility to examine the motivating issues that underlie infidelity.

“Until the betraying partner has his or her self-intimacy and conflict-intimacies in check and under control, the affection intimacies won’t be under control. It isn’t the affection intimacy that keeps the relationship alive, it’s the self- and control intimacies that keep feeding and fueling the affection intimacy.

Justin, for example, is first to admit that if he had really understood what he needed from himself and from a partner, he never would have cheated on Kevin, or tried to hurt him. In fact, he says, if he had only been better at talking with Kevin about his own need to feel appreciated, he wouldn’t have sought retribution.

Infidelity risks more than a broken heart

One of the issues that face many gay couples where infidelity is involved is the risk of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV.

“We had an understanding that because we had been together so long, we would not need to use protection in our own intimate setting,” Kevin says. “One of my first reactions was a sinking feeling in my stomach when I thought about the past several months and how many times I had bottomed bareback with Justin. What if he had contracted HIV during his sexual outings, what would I do then?”

In fact, Justin admits, his anger clouded any concern he might have had. In fact, Justin is pretty blunt about this part of the experience.

“I thought, ‘Well, if I got something and passed it on to Kevin, it would serve him right,’” Justin recalls. “I can’t believe I became that kind of hateful person, but that’s where I was. I always had safe sex when I would go out, but you never really know, do you? And I just thought, ‘Hey, paybacks are a bitch.’”

Listening to Justin, Kevin closes his eyes, breathes deeply and says he is counting to 10. Justin slowly reaches out to take Kevin’s hand. Kevin flinches, but Justin continues.

“I know it’s hard to hear, but I have to be honest, and I am being honest now when I tell you that that’s not where I’m coming from today,” Justin says.

Teagno says she’s seen far more devastating outcomes.

“You can imagine the worst, and I’ve seen it. The betrayer contracts HIV through anonymous sex [and] passes it on to his primary partner. The primary partner ... ends up dying while the betrayer lives on. Everyone needs to think to themselves, ‘Do I want to be a death notice for the person I loved?’”

The resilience factor

Although it might seem the authors have made a career of dealing with dissolution, Teagno says her 25 years of studying relationships has taught her that love is a very resilient force.

“Everybody says they would end it [if their partner cheated on them],” Teagno says. “And we say that for two reasons, really. One is a threat to the partner to say, ‘Don’t ever do this or it’s over.’ The other reason is just our way of communicating that we don’t ever want to be made to feel that pain.”

In fact, says Solomon, that’s exactly why he and Teagno wrote their book.

“Most people would say, ‘I would be out of there,’ that they wouldn’t think twice, they have really strong feelings about that,” Solomon explains. “But what we’ve learned is that people can not only overcome the infidelity, and not

only heal from it, but they can rebuild their relationship. In many cases, they rebuild it stronger than it ever was before the infidelity.”

Unlike love, acts of infidelity are often acts of cowardice, Teagno says. And while it’s true that one must initially deal with the immediate infidelity and betrayal, at some point couples have to get to the weaknesses that preceded the six to nine months leading to the affair. At that point, the couple can begin to rebuild, to reconstruct their relationship.

Restoration

Loneliness is the most common motivation for infidelity, Teagno says, followed by fear, followed by anger. But all types of infidelity can be overcome. “That’s the resilience of love,” the authors say.

Couples should not make the mistake of assuming that a relationship compromised by infidelity cannot be one that is more loving and intimate, they say. Instead, the result can be a relationship where infidelity will never again even begin to be an option, if the partners achieve a better sense of self and relationship, which leads to greater trust and integrity.

“It’s very similar to rebuilding a life after drugs or alcohol,” Teagno explains. “The person who comes through that experience often has a much stronger sense of self, of life. Relationships are like that, too.”

To protect the privacy of sources, some last names have been withheld.

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