

Handling the 'slippery slope' toward an affair

HOMEFRONT, from Page B5
impact of the affair. Stage II involves the difficult process of determining whether too much damage has been done. Can the injured partner risk trusting again? Will the unfaithful partner sever connections from the "other" person? By the end of Stage II, the couple realizes they are at a fork in the road. Do they separate and lean toward permanently ending the marriage? Or, decide the relationship is worthy of saving?

Couples who make it to Stage III have found the inner courage to move forward (even though they may still be experiencing ambivalence) and face the trauma that has occurred. The road is difficult and long, yet possible when both are willing and able to take new risks toward healing. Healing together requires disclosing emotional wounds, and listening to each other's pain. It means tolerating the hurt that is beneath the anger, preventing further emo-

tional damage, and striving to reconnect.

Following the evaluation and the reason for the breach in trust, the couple's focus shifts to what needs to occur to make this a healthy, better partnership. For example, prior to the affair, were they two ships passing in the night? If so, a conscious daily effort to communicate may be necessary, as well as other changes toward rebuilding.

Healing includes forgiveness. Forgiveness is an extremely complicated

process for most couples. "If I forgive him, does that let him off the hook?" or, "If I forgive her, does it mean I accept what she did?" Forgiveness is not excusing or forgetting. It is a process characterized by increased understanding, resulting in letting go of negative thoughts, feelings and behaviors. Forgiveness happens in its own time and is multi-layered.

Assuming the unfaithful partner experiences remorse and is genuinely striving to repair the relationship,

and the injured partner is not invested in holding a grudge or preventing healing, forgiveness can occur. The unfaithful individual needs to come to a place of self forgiveness. The injured partner may also feel responsible for the breakdown of the partnership and therefore may also need to forgive him/herself.

The last important event for many couples in their healing process involves marking their reconciliation /recommitment to each other by renewing

their vows. The couple's wish to experience a new chapter in their marriage can be done privately, or they may prefer to have a special celebration, inviting family and friends.

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