

# Intimacy, Loneliness & Infidelity

Ami Rokach<sup>1,2,3,\*</sup> and Gwenaëlle Philibert-Lignières<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>York University, Canada

<sup>2</sup>Walden University, USA

<sup>3</sup>Canter for Academic Studies, Israel

**Abstract:** This article explores the experience of loneliness in intimacy, with a special focus on infidelity. First, the notion of intimacy and love are examined and related to the concept of loneliness. To be in love is often thought to exclude being lonely but research shows otherwise. Loneliness is exacerbated when intimacy is shattered by interpersonal events like infidelity. A review of recent literature regarding infidelity is presented. The concepts of depression, social support, self-esteem, and betrayal as a result of infidelity are examined and linked to loneliness. Also included, is a small discussion regarding the psychological distress and loneliness of the adulterer, before and after the revelation of infidelity. It is further asserted that loneliness is a two-way construct when speaking of infidelity; not only is it a salient product of infidelity, but also a strong predictor of its occurrence.

**Keywords:** Betrayal, depression, infidelity, intimacy, loneliness, marriage, social support.

People are social animals, and have a basic human need to belong, to be part of an intimate, lasting, caring relationship with a partner who is close and deeply concerned about us. Yearning to fulfill that need, we establish close contact and develop intimate relationships [1].

## THE NATURE OF INTIMACY

Intimacy is a multifaceted concept and is composed of *knowledge, caring, interdependence, mutuality, trust, and commitment* [2]. Partners, in an intimate relationship, possess extensive personal, confidential, and private *knowledge* about each other. That rich information, which the partners usually share with one another, may include their histories, preferences, and desires that they would not be so ready to reveal to other people. *Caring* is a hallmark of intimate relations. Intimate partners *care* about each other and feel affectionate towards their partner. Intimate partners' lives are intertwined and they affect each other continually. The extent to which they need and influence each other, i.e. their interdependence, impacts their partner meaningfully and does so in many areas of life, in different ways, and over long periods of time [1]. Intimate couples often exhibit *mutuality*, thinking of themselves as "us" [3] and seeing themselves as overlapping in various respects. Trust and intimacy are closely related. So, trusting relationship is established when the partners know that it is safe to open up and that their partner will be there to support and respond to their needs [4]. Finally, intimate partners are *committed* to their relationship; they expect them to go on indefinitely and

for that they are ready to invest time, effort, and the resources at their disposal.

Establishing and maintaining close, intimate relationships with a significant other has been recognized as a fundamental human motivation [5]. In that context, marriage is perceived as the most intimate adult bonding, serving as a primary source of affection, love, and support [6]. Research repeatedly indicates that long-term, committed intimate relationships are essential to physical and emotional well-being [7, 8]. It was documented that people who are in intimate relationships suffer from fewer stress-related symptoms, they recover faster from illness, and usually have a lower probability of relapse or reoccurrence of stress than those who do not have intimate relationships [9]. Intimacy is a close relational reciprocal phenomenon, as Kouneski and Olson [10] observed "either both partners are intimate or neither is". (p131)

## LONELINESS

Loneliness is a natural human experience that shows no cultural boundaries [11, 12] and has been well documented for the past five decades [13-18]. Perlman and Peplau [19] characterized loneliness as the subjective experience of one's perception of insufficient or limited social interaction, or as it is often described in the literature, "an unwanted discrepancy between relationships one has and the ones one would like to have" [20], p91. As social animals, individuals need human connections. Not having those connections results in social isolation, which creates pain and distress [21, 22]. The negative effects of loneliness on our physical health are now well-established [23-26].

\*Address correspondence to this author at the York University, Canada;  
E-mail: [arokach@yorku.ca](mailto:arokach@yorku.ca)

## LOVE & LONELINESS

Love and loneliness, by definition, are not supposed to go together, but many times they do. Rokach [27, 28], who observed that we experience loneliness when we feel unneeded, unwanted, emotionally disconnected, and not important to others, remarked that being in a love relationship, where we expect to be cared for, and for our lover to share her experiences with us, could also be terribly lonely.

Love and relationships can be harmed and damaged, by the process of time, but also due to various pitfalls, and hazards such as hurt feelings, ostracism, jealousy, lying, and betrayal [29]. We want to be loved by our intimate partners, and we hope that our relational value—the degree to which our partner considers our intimate relationship valuable, important, close—is as high as we perceive it to be. It is painful and hurtful, if our partner perceives our value as lower than we would like it to be perceived by him or her. Should we no longer be thought of as positively as before, we experience pain, anger, hurt, and loneliness (see also [30, 31]. People, even in a close, intimate relationship may experience ostracism when their partner gives them the “cold shoulder” and ignores them [32]. The “silent treatment” not only threatens our need to belong, but may also damage our feelings or self-worth. When their belongingness is threatened and when their feelings of alienation intensify, people may either work hard to regain their partner’s regard, or start looking somewhere else [33].

*Jealousy* is a relationship spoiler. The three emotions that define jealousy are hurt, anger, and fear. Hurt follows the perception that our partner may not value us enough to honor their commitment to the relationship, and fear and anxiety are the result of the dread we may feel at the prospect of being abandoned, and being left alone and lonely. Consequent anger may even turn to violence, which may, in some cases result in abuse or worse [34, 35].

Jealousy may be of two types: *reactive jealousy*, which may be aroused when there is an awareness by one of the partners of an actual threat to the relationship, or *suspicious jealousy*, which may even occur while one’s partner has not misbehaved and without any indications that the relationship may be threatened. The problem is that suspicious jealousy often results in mistrustful vigilance and following or spying, as the jealous partner is attempting to validate his suspicions [36]. *Deception* and *lying* can also spoil a good and loving relationship and result in intense loneliness. Deception is conceptualized as an intentional behavior that creates an impression, that the deceiver knows to be untrue, while *lying* is one form of deception, people may—as part of their deception—simply conceal information or divert attention from vital facts in order to avoid discussing what they consider “touchy” subjects. Another form of deception is telling half-truths that are misleading [37].

*Betrayals*, which are most closely related to loneliness, are probably the most hurtful of relationship spoilers. Sexual and emotional infidelity and lying are common examples of betrayal, but so is every other behavior that our loved one exhibits that violates the norms of kindness, loyalty, respect, and support that relationships, especially intimate ones, are

believed to uphold [38]. When we are betrayed, we end up feeling that we and our relationship are less important to our partner than we would like to believe. Jones, Doss and Christensen [39] found that betrayal, of some form, occurred in half of all the intimate relationships, and thus concluded that it is common in close relationships.

What, then are the consequences of such relational problems, dissatisfactions, and wounding troubles in the couple’s paradise?

Betrayal, infidelity and divorce, are salient amongst them [40-42], and are amongst the top three reasons for attending marital therapy [43]. They may also lead to domestic abuse and violence [44]. Infidelity, for its part, can very quickly escalate into relationship dissolution as well as bring about psychological distress. When marital status, which is considered a high demographic predictor of mental health, is challenged by tensions, lies and deceit, serious distress ensues [45-48]. In the following pages we will examine the role of loneliness in depression, social support, and self-esteem as it relates to the experience of infidelity.

## INFIDELITY

Drigotas and Barta [49] defined infidelity as “a partner’s violation of norms regulating the level of emotional or physical intimacy with people outside the relationship”. (p177) The concept of exclusivity, including sexual exclusivity, is the socially accepted norm in serious intimate relationships, such as marriage and long-term romantic commitment [50]. The betrayal of this exclusivity and this idea of unity in intimacy is done through lies and deception, two defining features of adultery [51]. Non-monogamy established by the mutual consent of both parties in a relationship cannot be classified as infidelity since there is no attempt at deceiving the other person of other sexual and/or emotional activities [52]. As Levine [53] explains, flirtation is how a person may set the field for future infidelity. Known as non-verbal expressions of attractions, flirtation becomes “dangerous” when the other person involved positively receives the flirtation and show interest to partake in intimate activities.

Infidelity, which can also be referred to as adultery, cheating, or unfaithfulness, certainly has a negative and immoral connotation in our society. The adulterer or perpetrator is often seen as a deviant of socially established norms concerning monogamy [50]. Clearly, it is limited to our knowledge of the western culture. Furthermore, even in the western culture, infidelity of men and women are not judged under the same moral values, though in general we can state that infidelity is frowned upon. In a study which examined the attitudes towards adultery, it was found that approximately 97% of the general public agrees that engaging in extramarital affairs is wrong [41] and 94% to 99% of people expect monogamy in their intimate relationships [54]. It may consequently suggest that the prevalence of infidelity in committed relationships is low but the statistics indicate otherwise. Research that focused on married couples, reported a rate of prevalence between 20-25% of extramarital affairs over the course of their marriage [55]. Of this percentage, it was reported that at least 20% of married men and at least 10% of married women committed

adultery [53]. Furthermore, when including not only marriage but also dating and “marriage-like” relationships, the prevalence rate soared to between 30% and 40% of incidents of extradyadic activities [56]. Donovan and Emmers-Sommer [57] found that approximately 22% of people admitted infidelity with their current partner, while 50% of all respondents admitted to cheating in a relationship at least once in their lifetime. It is important to note that those estimates are likely not accurate as research in the field of infidelity is largely flawed due to the nature of the topic. Self-report and retrospective studies are the main methods used in these studies and are therefore highly unreliable. People will often attempt to conceal it due to social desirability which hinders the accuracy of these statistics [50-51].

Traditionally, research in the field of infidelity only considered the paradigm of marriage. However, due to the exponentially increasing number of divorces, remarriages, and co-habitation, many long-term relationships are now considered “marriage-like” where infidelity can occur and have the same devastating effect. Another important inclusion to consider is same-sex relationships, which are increasingly accepted today and are as susceptible to adultery as any other intimate relationships [52, 58].

Vangelisti and Gerstenberger [55] established three variables to predict the occurrence of infidelity: individual characteristics, circumstances, and relational factors. Some individual traits have been found to be positively correlated with infidelity. Holding permissive and liberal values often is a contributor [59]. When examining the Big Five personality traits, high extraversion [60], high neuroticism and high psychoticism [61], as well as low agreeableness [60] seem to contribute to adultery. Treas and Giesen [54] along with Burchell and Ward [62] both reported that increased sex drives often led people to seek extra-dyadic affairs. As for circumstances that promote infidelity, it was traditionally believed that men were most often the adulterer because of their increased resources (i.e. income and work status) and their increased number of interpersonal contact as opposed to women, whom most often stayed at home [55]. However, the gap between men and women has now diminished. Women, like men, now work and have greater access to resources of their own [60, 63]. Allen et al. [64] found that if gender was no longer included as a predictor of adultery- based on greater equality of sexes- as many men as women were adulterous. The third variable in Vangelisti and Gerstenberger’s [55] definition is the relationship factors associated with infidelity. In other words, what makes a person decide to act upon their drive for extramarital affairs? Based on the equity model, one of the parties may feel underbenefited in the relationship based on their perception of what they put in it [59, 65]. Another model, the deficit model proposes that the quality of marital satisfaction [45] and the quality and frequency of sexual intercourse [66] are negatively correlated with the occurrence of infidelity. Regardless, the revelation of infidelity, whether it be sexual, emotional, or both, most often escalate in an array of emotional reactions that can include loneliness, depression, social isolation, and a compromised self-esteem.

## INFIDELITY: DEPRESSION AND LONELINESS

According to Cacioppo, Hughes, Waite, Hawkley, and Thisted [67], the occurrence of depression is an indicator of a person’s well-being and general health. Between 13% and 27% of the population will develop depression at some point in their life [29]. The revelation of infidelity, whether it be a voluntary disclosure or an involuntary discovery, has been associated with a variety of emotional reactions such as increased anxiety and depression, including suicidal ideation [68-71]. Finding out about the infidelity of a partner is among the top reasons, along threats of divorces and physical aggression, for developing depressive symptoms when in a relationship [72]. Between 38% [73] and 72% [74] of individuals who were victim of adultery will become depressed. As a result of having their self-concept, as well as their concept of romance and intimacy broken [71], individuals whose partner has been unfaithful are often plagued by feelings of shame, anger, and sadness. Those reactions often stem from the deception and lies involved in infidelity. The personal rejection felt by the deceived partner will usually result in feelings of inadequacy and unattractiveness. It is common for the victim to feel that he/she is responsible for the betrayal, which becomes an experience of self-blame [75]. Self-blame, along with harsh and negative views of ourselves, on the other hand, are common behavioral hallmarks of depression [76].

Although depression and loneliness are two different constructs [67], they inevitably go hand in hand [14, 77]. Victor and Yang [78] found that the link between depression and loneliness is present at all ages and seems relatively stable over time.

As human beings, we have several needs that must be fulfilled in order to reach optimal wellness. Ryan and Deci [79] established three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy is the sense of self-directedness, competence the desire for efficacy, and relatedness the level of connection and closeness. To accomplish self-growth and overall well-being, those three psychological needs must be present at all stages of life. More importantly, those needs act as moderator for depression, shame and loneliness [80]. In the case of infidelity, there is obvious lack of relatedness for both parties involved. The victim will see his/her concept of intimacy and closeness shattered, while the lack of relatedness will often have pushed the adulterer to seek this closeness and connection elsewhere [66]. This could explain the prevalence of depression and loneliness amongst couples’ relationships broken by infidelity.

During a five-year follow-up study, Tiikainen and Heikkinen [81] confirmed the link and interplay between loneliness, depression, and a person’s perception of closeness. There actually exists a two-way relationship between the three states. First, this team found that the increasing symptoms of depression, which most often hits women, eventually lead to feelings of loneliness. On the other hand, feeling lonely at first can unravel into depression. Both instances resulted in a loss of togetherness. In this study, loneliness appeared to be connected to reliable

alliance, social integration, and attachment. Depression, however, was affected by feelings of guidance, reassurance of worth, reliable alliance, and attachment. Interestingly, we can see that loneliness and depression share common factors, attachment and reliable alliance, and that both loneliness and depression stem from, in part, a lack of emotional closeness. It is, then, suggested that infidelity often destroys a person's self-worth, reassurance, attachment, guidance and social integration.

Another way to look at this relationship is to account for the belongingness hypothesis. As Baumeister and Leary [82] claimed, human experience is mediated by a need to belong and therefore, human behaviors in general are motivated to fulfill this need. Individuals strive for meaningful interactions that are based on care and affection. These interactions promote social connectedness which in turn prevents loneliness. This feeling of belongingness is known to be a protective buffer against loneliness and depression in adolescents [83]. As a continuity of this idea, Aanes, Mittelmark, and Hetland [84] studied this hypothesis in relation to interpersonal stress and trauma, such as infidelity. The researchers found that interpersonal stress created psychological distress which was in most cases caused by, or related to loneliness. When looking at loneliness and depression specifically, they reported that 75% of the cases where people felt lonely following these interpersonal traumas predicted the outcome of depressive symptoms. Along the same line of work, Palgi, Shrira, Ben-Ezra, Shiovitz-Ezra, and Ayalon [85] established that potential traumatic life event (PTLE) highly contributed to loneliness in later stages of life. A PTLE can include the loss of a loved one or being hurt by a loved one, as is the case with infidelity. Such events make it very hard to rebuild trust or even build new relationships. Individuals who struggled with the infidelity of a partner usually decide to live alone following their relationship dissolution – which leads to loneliness [86]- and have a hard time making meaningful connections that lead to healthy and fulfilling intimacy [87].

### **INFIDELITY: SOCIAL SUPPORT AND LONELINESS**

A person's quality of life will often be mediated by the quality of social domain, such as interaction with their community, the presence of social networks, and participation and engagement in the social world [20]. Cohen [88] provided a thorough picture of the importance of social support. This kind of support gives us "psychological and material resources intended to benefit [our] ability to cope with stress". (p676) We feel socially integrated when we actively engage with our entourage and when we experience a sense of belongingness that is characterized by a sense of self and emotional well-being. Social networks also provide us with validation of our social identity [89] and help us validate our social role expectations, for instance that of a wife or husband [88]. When an event like infidelity occurs, psychological distress ensues. Being rejected and excluded from your social role of partner, as is the case in infidelity, creates feelings of distress and hurt [90].

The role of perceived social support as a buffer and protective barrier to loneliness has been well documented [91-93]. Infidelity is known to destroy a person's social

support system as a result of no longer having access to resources that would help them cope with the stressors associated with the devastating situation [86]. It is common after a rupture, that one feels isolated and deprived of their existing social support, such as friends and family whom will often turn their back to the person, whether it be the adulterer or the victim [94]. As Rokach and Sha'ked [95] stated, "the interpersonal isolation dimension of loneliness addresses the feelings of alienation, abandonment, and rejection that are commonly related to a general lack of close relationships".

### **INFIDELITY: BETRAYAL AND LONELINESS**

Although the victims of infidelity usually show greater symptoms of distress [68], we must not overlook the role of the adulterer and the psychological picture engendered by committing infidelity and living with its revelation. Following the discovery and disclosure of infidelity, individuals who were responsible often show symptoms of distress, including depression, anxiety, guilt and loneliness [75, 96]. The fact that infidelity "tends to be regarded more negatively than other forms of betrayal, such as the breaking of confidences and agreements" [97] also impacts on others' view of the adulterer. It is common for the adulterer, not only the victim, to be ostracized and deprived of their social set of resources due to the nature of their transgression.

It has been established, time and again, that there are important factors that lead a person to commit adultery. Feelings of loneliness stemming from unsatisfying intimacy, closeness, and low quality of sexual relationships, all cause a person to seek satisfaction and pleasure outside of their monogamous relationship [45, 66].

### **CONCLUSION**

It is common to feel lonely and alienated when a person is ridden of their social support and feel isolated [98]. These emotional states then hinder our concept of self-esteem [88]. While people experience greater self-esteem when they feel attached, cared for, and experience mutual support and stability with a partner [99-101], finding out about the infidelity of a loved one disrupts a person's identity and self-worth, as they begin to perceive themselves as unattractive and uninteresting [75]. Furthermore, a sense of personal rejection, shame, and humiliation usually ensues following the deception and betrayal associated with the affair. The victim will often find themselves questioning "what's wrong with me", "why am I such a fool", or even "why was I so blind" [25]. All those emotional states refer back to the idea of worth and acceptance that are premised in the concept of self-esteem.

This article examined the relationship between intimacy, loneliness, and infidelity. More specifically, we explored the link between loneliness and infidelity, after the discovery of infidelity or the feelings of loneliness leading to it. The link between depression and infidelity was studied and connected with loneliness. Social support was also examined in relation to infidelity and loneliness. It is suggested that infidelity results in loneliness and many times anxiety and depression, especially of the betrayed partner, but at times by the adulterer as well. It appears that having a restricted or

diminished social connectedness, which usually is the case in relationship dissolution, produce loneliness, even more so when our social expectations are no longer met. Infidelity harms one's self-esteem. This decrease in self-worth and self-respect is often mediated by feelings of loneliness, as is the case with depression. This review highlights the importance to assess these constructs separately, although inextricably intertwined, in couple therapy. Meeting, in therapy, of one or more of those constructs could light a warning signal that infidelity may be involved.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author confirms that this article content has no conflicts of interest.

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