

Is Cheating Just a Symptom (and Not the Cause) of Declining Relationships?

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Does infidelity predict an unhappy relationship? Or is it the other way around? Can a relationship recover after infidelity?

In a recent study published in [Psychological Science](#), researchers found that relationship functioning starts to decline before infidelity happens and that, in most cases, well-being did not recover in the years following the infidelity. The lead author, Olga Stavrova, a researcher and professor at Tilburg University, explains these findings and elaborates on how they can expand our knowledge about the dynamics of romantic relationships.

Unedited transcript:

[00:00:13.090] – Ludmila Nunes

Does infidelity predict an unhappy relationship or is it the other way around?

[00:00:18.690] – Ludmila Nunes

Can a relationship recover after infidelity? This is under the cortex. I am Ludmila Nunes with the Association for Psychological Science. To speak about a study that analyzed couples' wellbeing before and after one of them cheated on the other. I have with me Olga Stavrova from Tilburg University, co author of an article published in Psychological Science. This was one of the ten articles published in the APS journals that attracted the most attention online in 2022. Olga, thank you for joining me today. Welcome to under the cortex.

[00:00:55.730] – Olga Stavrova

Hi, and thanks for having me.

[00:00:58.370] – Ludmila Nunes

So I would like to start just with the main takeaway from your work, if you could summarize it for our listeners.

[00:01:06.070] – Olga Stavrova

Yeah, sure. So basically infidelity is frowned upon a lot and it's often considered like one of the major transgressions in a relationship, a reason for divorce. Also, when you ask people about why you're getting a divorce, so many of them think about half, according to some statistics, will mention some infidelity. And so it's easy to conclude that infidelity is something that destroys a relationship that's very bad for a relationship. However, it could also be that couples who already have some problems are unhappy in the first place, that they are more likely to have a fears. And so infidelity could be rather a consequence or maybe a symptom of an unhappy relationship. So of course, to find out what is the case here, ideally we would have like some kind of an experiment with a random assignment. So we would assign some couples randomly to commit infidelity and other people, other couples to stay faithful. But while that's not possible for the obvious reasons and so what we however can do is that we can track couples well being over time so we can look at how they felt before infidelity event, so how happy they were with each other, how satisfied they were with their relationship, but also with life in general.

[00:02:23.250] – Olga Stavrova

And then we can see what happens after the event and then we can also compare the trajectories to the wellbeing development of couples who did not experience the event at all. So in, basically that's what we did in the paper. So we took this very large data set of German couples that was national representative of the German population. So we had overall about I think 14,000 people in the data set. Of course not all of them committed infidelity. I think about 600 of them reported having an affair at least once during the time that they were part of the study and about 300 people reported being cheated on by their partner. And so every year the couples completed some questionnaires about their wellbeing and also infidelity. And also a lot of other questions were included that we are not looking into right now in this paper. So basically we looked at their well being such as life satisfaction, self esteem, relationship satisfaction, the feeling of intimacy, admiration for the partner, the conflicts in the couple. So we looked at individuals responses to the questionnaires every year before the event and every year after the event.

[00:03:38.500] – Olga Stavrova

So the maximum number of years that we observed the couples was twelve years, but on average it was less. On average it was I think five years. So basically what we found is that for both perpetrators and for the victims of infidelity that relationship and life satisfaction starts decreasing way before the event actually happens. So the infidelity is actually preceded by decreasing relationship satisfaction and life satisfaction but after the event happens. So after that we don't see much things happening, especially when it comes to relationship satisfaction. So on average it does not really recover, but it's also not really getting much worse. And so basically that kind of tells us that okay, most probably infidelity is just a symptom of a relationship which is kind of bad in the first place.

[00:04:32.790] – Ludmila Nunes

So couples would go back to the well being levels that they had before the infidelity basically.

[00:04:42.410] – Olga Stavrova

So when it comes to their personal wellbeing such as life satisfaction and self esteem. So on average we found that they do show some recovery after the event, but when it comes to the relationship satisfaction then it does not really go back. On average they don't bounce back to the satisfaction that they had before the event.

[00:05:02.850] – Ludmila Nunes

So were these findings unexpected? Did you find something that truly surprised you? It's novel.

[00:05:10.210] – Olga Stavrova

So this decrease in well being which precedes infidelity, that was not very surprising. So what I was surprised about is that there was not much change after that. So on the one hand one could have predicted that people would bounce back as they usually do when it comes to well being. For example, there are studies on divorce also using similar methodology and they usually show that there is like this deep decrease in satisfaction before the divorce, before separation, but then usually people kind of recover so they're usually better off after than they were before, but we don't see that within fidelity. So that was a little surprising. So I was expecting maybe more recovery after the event.

[00:06:00.850] – Ludmila Nunes

And did you find any exceptions to this pattern?

[00:06:05.010] – Olga Stavrova

Yes, so we did find some differences between individuals. So one of those findings was really unexpected. So that's gender effects. So what we found is that women who were perpetrators, so who committed infidelity, that they were actually more likely to gain in self esteem and blessed affection and religion to satisfaction after the event. So for some reason they actually improved after the event. For

men that was not the case and we can only speculate about what was happening there. So it is possible that maybe especially for women, the infidelity was a result of dissatisfaction with the relationship and then maybe for their partner. That was kind of a wake up call that something needs to be changed. And then maybe that was like a reason to, I don't know, work in the relationship or improve it. So that's just speculation. We don't know what is happening. But yeah, that's what we found when triggered in gender and then another characteristic or another dimension of individual differences that mattered here was also the initial relationship commitment. So the commitment to the relationship that people had before the event. So at the very beginning of the relationship, actually, and here what we found, is that people who were very committed at the beginning, they were hurt most.

[00:07:39.400] – Olga Stavrova

So for those people, there was a stronger gradual decrease in wellbeing following the event compared to individuals who were less committed to the relationship at the very beginning. And that makes sense because I think for them it was a much bigger trauma, probably a bigger violation of the expectations of what the relationship should be and maybe a bigger disappointment on their partner.

[00:08:05.450] – Ludmila Nunes

Interesting. Did you find any protective effects for the victims?

[00:08:11.070] – Olga Stavrova

Yeah, so good question. For example, when we talk about commitment, actually, individuals, both victims and perpetrators who were not very committed to the relationship, they recovered pretty quickly and quite nicely. So I don't know if we should call it protective factor, but I guess to some extent expectation management, forgetting the relationship could be a protective factor.

[00:08:39.270] – Ludmila Nunes

So the ones who are less committed had fewer expectations about the relationship. They seem to have suffered a little less than the others. Interesting. I want to hear about how we might apply these findings to people's lives. But first we need to take a short break.

[00:08:59.370] – Speaker 4

2023 is going to be an exciting year at APS. Mark your calendars for ICPS in Brussels from the 9th to the 11 March and our annual convention in Washington DC. May 23 through 25. This is your chance to join your colleagues and the psychological science community in the coming year. For more information, visit [psychologicalscience.org slash conventions](https://psychologicalscience.org/conventions).

[00:09:30.070] – Ludmila Nunes

This is related to what surprised you, but do you have any aspect of your findings that really intrigue you, that you would like to follow up, to develop more, to know more about?

[00:09:42.880] – Olga Stavrova

Yeah, so I would be curious to find out what is happening with the gender effects, if they are stable or if it's some kind of an artifact of this particular data set. And then, okay, why is it the case that then women recover so quickly, especially while it's women who committed infidelity themselves? Also, there are some limitations in this data set and so ideally I would have conducted or replicated the study without this limitation, such as we don't know or we cannot differentiate the couples where the infidelity was in the open, so where both partners knew about that from the couples where the infidelity was secret. And I think that's quite important to know.

[00:10:27.590] – Ludmila Nunes

I agree so you had to treat all of it as if it were secret because you don't know which ones. Everybody knew about it.

[00:10:34.990] – Olga Stavrova

Yeah. So for the victims we kind of know that if I'm the victim and then I'm telling the researcher that has been cheated on, then you have cocaine. Maybe the partners did not discuss it among themselves, but it was the victim who knows what was happening. But for the perpetrators we don't know if it's secret or open. So that creates difficulties in interpreting the results.

[00:10:59.010] – Ludmila Nunes

Regarding the gender effects, the big question is do women cheat for different purposes and then that's why they have different outcomes or does the effect of cheating has a different effect in men and women, so the way they deal with it might change the relationship well being and that's what we are seeing. Right, so that's the big question. Try to differentiate where the effect is.

[00:11:25.630] – Olga Stavrova

Yes, indeed. It's also possible that there are some selection effects for women. So maybe that's a very specific type of women that differ from other women in terms of their personality, for example of values or something else that are more likely to tip. These are also maybe the trends that make them more likely to recover. So we don't know that and yeah, that would be interesting to find out.

[00:11:49.140] – Ludmila Nunes

Do you have plans for new studies in this line of research?

[00:11:53.110] – Olga Stavrova

We do have some plans but we haven't gotten any funding yet for those plans. So yeah, we want to find out. So how well aware of people about the other partners infidelity so other specific cues that people know indicate that the partner is not being faithful and how accurately can people guess their partner's behavior? And then we want to go one step further and also look at whether there could be machine

learning based algorithms developed to actually help people identify the dissatisfaction of their partner with the relationship, including potential infidelity. But this is at the very, very beginning right now and sounds like a huge project. Yes, that's true.

[00:12:42.370] – Ludmila Nunes

This is Ludmila Nunes with APS. And I've been speaking to Olga Stavrova from Tilburg University. She is the first author in an article published in Psychological Science, Estranged and Unhappy, Examining the dynamics of personal and relationship wellbeing surrounding infidelity.

[00:13:00.900] – Olga Stavrova

Oh yeah, thanks for having me.