Introduction

Infidelity was ranked as one of the most difficult therapeutic problems to treat in couples counseling (Whisman, Dixon, & Johnson, 1997). An extra-marital affair is a betrayal of one of the most intimate interpersonal relationships that exists among humans, and research is consistent in its findings on how the discovery of an infidelity can have a traumatic impact on couples (De Stefano & Oala, 2008; Fife, Weeks, & Gambescia, 2008; Snyder, Baucom, & Gordon, 2008; Whisman et al., 1997). Infidelity has been conceptualized as an interpersonal trauma in which a couple must seek treatment to recover from interpersonal injury. For the injured partner learning of the infidelity, there is a broad range of negative emotions and behavioral consequences that include: partner violence, depression, suicidal ideation, acute anxiety, and symptoms resembling those of post-traumatic stress disorder (Snyder et al., 2008). Injured partners also described fluctuating feelings of rage, overwhelming powerlessness, victimization, and abandonment. The authors also reported symptoms such as depression, suicidality, and acute anxiety in partners who have engaged in an affair, especially if the discovery of infidelity results in marital separation or threats of divorce (Snyder et al., 2008).

According to Fife et al. (2008), spouses may also experience grief, pessimism, and self-doubt. The authors reported the discovery of infidelity resulted in problems including posttraumatic stress-like symptoms of shock, confusion, and anger, as well as depression, damaged self-esteem, and decreased personal and sexual confidence. Furthermore, infidelity comprises a marital crisis that has been associated with the “subjective experiences of poorer health and well-being, and functional impairment in occupational, professional, and parenting roles” (De Stefano & Oala, 2008, p. 14).
Counselors working with couples who have experienced infidelity report the difficulties in current treatments. Infidelity is said to be one of the top three reasons couples report for counseling. In a study by Whisman et al. (1997), infidelity was ranked as the third most difficult therapeutic problem to treat. According to the authors, counselors often approach infidelity cases with apprehension because of the intense emotional reactions infidelity elicits from couples (Whisman et al., 1997). Furthermore, in the treatment of infidelity, forgiveness is a crucial component that aims to help couples move forward from the painful emotions towards a healthier adjustment (Fife et al., 2008). However, introducing this concept to couples proves challenging for counselors, as clients have their own experiences, beliefs, and definitions of forgiveness. In fact, research suggests counselors must be meticulous even in the words they choose to portray the concept of forgiveness to couples, especially where the feelings of betrayal may still linger (Olmstead, Blick, & Mills, 2009).

Since forgiveness presents an obstacle for counselors, it could prove useful to implement a technique to assist clients in becoming more aware of the feelings they have in conjunction with thoughts of forgiveness. Furthermore, it would be helpful for clients to have a safe way to deal with their most distressing emotions surrounding the infidelity. Loving-Kindness Meditation (LKM) is a style of meditation from the Tibetan Buddhist traditions that provides specific instructions on how to increase compassion for self and others. LKM is proposed in this article to facilitate forgiveness in conjunction with Stage 3 of the Integrated Treatment Model, which can be the essential element in moving forward from an infidelity (McCullough, 2000; Worthington, 1998). This article reviews how to add LKM into the established Integrative Treatment Model (ITM) for couples recovering from infidelity that was created by Gordon, Baucom, and Snyder (2004). LKM used in conjunction with the ITM could increase feelings of forgiveness in couples recovering from an infidelity.

Integrative Treatment Model

Gordon, Baucom, and Snyder (2004) devised a treatment model for infidelity that is divided into three stages including: cognitive, behavioral, and affective elements. It is similar to trauma-based approaches in that one of the crucial components of the model is the understanding of why the injury occurred, coupled with reconstructing a new meaning for the occurred event (Snyder et al., 2008). In Stage 1 of the model, the focus is primarily on dealing with the impact of infidelity. In Stage 2, the focus continues forward with the exploration of the context and finding meaning behind the infidelity. Finally, Stage 3 focuses on forgiveness and “moving on.”

Snyder et al. (2008) concluded that, for treatment to be effective and recovery optimal, an integrative treatment approach must adhere to the following guidelines: (a) recognize the traumatic impact of an affair, (b) build relationship skills that influence the initial containment of trauma and promote effective decision making skills, (c) promote a greater understanding in each partner of how factors within and outside themselves increased their vulnerability to an affair and influence their recovery, and (d) address emotional, behavioral, and cognitive processes essential to forgiveness and moving on—either together or separately (Snyder et al., 2008). Included as a therapeutic component of
Stage 3, the counselors discuss forgiveness with the couples focusing primarily on four of the basic aspects of forgiveness.

The four stages of forgiveness include a description of the forgiveness model as a process, common beliefs about forgiveness, consequences of forgiving and not forgiving, and addressing blocks to forgiving or “moving on” (Snyder et al., 2008). Some of the examples as to why partners report difficulty with forgiveness include belief that forgiving one’s partner is “weak,” forgiving means the affair is condoned and excused, and the belief that one renders him/herself vulnerable to experiencing a similar betrayal in the future (Snyder et al., 2008). Additionally, the article also states that although a partner may hold a reasonable view of forgiveness, they may still be resistant to forgive. In this model, the distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation are emphasized, “that is, couples whom have successfully negotiated the forgiveness process may still decide to dissolve their relationship based on their new understandings of themselves” (Snyder et al., 2008, p. 305).

In stage one of the forgiveness model, the counselors are promoted to use the client’s terms when discussing the topic of forgiveness. In stage two of the forgiveness component, participants suggested that psychoeducation on forgiveness focus on two aspects, these are: (1) help clients understand that forgiveness is a process and (2) facilitate the client’s misunderstandings about forgiveness (Olmstead et al., 2009). The authors further suggest making the distinction between reconciliation, which is defined as an interpersonal process, and forgiveness, which is defined as an intrapersonal process. Consequently, establishing a clear concept of forgiveness will also offer a clear perspective on the goal or aim to work towards. Stage three of the forgiveness component is aimed at gaining a clear understanding of two important areas: (1) the needs and wants of the couple and (2) the forgiveness language that will be used (Olmstead et al., 2009).

It is important to assess the couples’ needs and desires because as the authors report, some couples come into therapy willing to work towards forgiveness and reconciliation, while other couples may want to forgive but have no desire to be a part of the marriage (Olmstead et al., 2009). Equally important in this theme is the subtheme of forgiveness language, that is, clarification on the language that will be used for the forgiveness process. The authors give the example in which one or both partners may have a different word for forgiveness that also differs from the language of the counselor. In the fourth stage, two aspects of time were discussed which included: (1) the process of forgiveness requires time and (2) wait until the couple is ready to discuss the topic of forgiveness. One counselor was quoted emphasizing the following point:

They want to hold onto the fact that it was offensive and it was wrong and so they don’t want to forgive in the sense that it didn’t happen. They want to forgive with a sense of ‘reconciling’ or ‘learning from it’ or ‘letting it go’ and figuring out a different way to make things better. (Olmstead et al. 2009, p. 61)

Timing is key, as forgiveness is a process, and a counselor that pushes a couple too soon may damage the relationship and hinder healing. In this model of forgiveness there is a substantial amount of discussion and psychoeducation. However, what is missing is how to transform the tough emotions of resentment, rage, and hurt into compassion, forgiveness and how to then ‘let go’ of pain. In the next section, Loving Kindness Mediation is explained and offered up as a method of digging into the affective piece of
forgiveness, and allowing each person in the couple to do it in their own way and in their own time.

**Loving-Kindness Meditation**

Loving-Kindness Meditation is a meditative practice used to cultivate feelings of compassion and loving-kindness; it is a practice used primarily in the Theravada Buddhist tradition (Kristeller & Johnson, 2005). Research on LKM has increased since 2000 to include treatment for depression, increase empathy, and enhance relationships (Leppma, 2011). LKM’s positive effects on research subjects have included reductions in anger, anxiety, fear, helplessness, emotional pain, and judgments; and increases in happiness, well-being, compassion, openness, and self-efficacy (Corcoran, 2007). Meditation in general has proven to be effective in helping people self-regulate stress, anxiety, chronic pain, and various illnesses (Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008), but Loving-Kindness Meditation is specific to directing feelings of compassion towards themselves and another in an open-hearted and focused manner. This practice, explained below, could prove significantly beneficial in the treatment of infidelity during the last stage, Stage 3 of the Integrated Treatment Model.

In research by Pruitt and McCollum (2010), participants reported that traits of acceptance and compassion developed through the practice of loving kindness related to “an understanding of the shared humanity of people” (p. 142). Consequently, clients may be able to connect with their partners in a more genuine way and empathize with their partners’ struggles. Hill (2010) stated, “human forgiveness is not doing something but discovering something— that I am more like those who have hurt me than different from them” (p. 173). Moreover, in the practice of LKM, the seed of compassion that is planted allows one to be less critical of themselves; this is important because the practice emphasizes that, before we can extend feelings of loving-kindness and compassion towards others, we must also extend that feeling toward ourselves. According to participants who were asked to practice LKM in a study examining meditation practices on intimate relationships, it was easier for them to extend acceptance or compassion to others when they first offered it to themselves (Pruit & McCollum, 2010).

Additionally, participants reported four primary meditation traits that developed as a result of the practice; these included awareness, disidentification from emotions and thoughts, acceptance, and compassion and loving-kindness. With the development of these traits, participants found they were more willing to be present in a moment of difficult emotions; consequently, this change in their relationship with their emotions enabled them to approach external situations differently (Pruitt & McCollum., 2010). LKM also provided participants with an understanding that people have reasons for their behavior. Likewise, they also reported being less reactive and more aware of their emotional vulnerabilities (Pruitt & McCollum, 2010). In practicing LKM, the counselor is asking each client to intentionally direct feelings of warmth and caring toward themselves so that they may experience compassion for themselves and, as a result, extend that compassion towards each other. Encouraging positive feelings by practicing LKM, in and out of session, may help reduce critical thoughts or self-judgments. When one is compassionate and loving towards the self, one can become more forgiving of
others’ faults and ultimately, in the case of infidelity, forgive the transgression against their marriage.

**Case Illustration: Integrating LKM Into ITM Approach to Infidelity**

Joe and Mary came to couples counseling and were referred by Mary’s individual counselor. They stated they were struggling after an infidelity by Mary. Mary is a 36 year-old African-American female and Joe is a 35 year-old Caucasian male. They have been together for 10 years, married for 6. The couple reports that Mary had a one-night stand with a man she met while drinking with her girlfriends. She reported she wasn’t attacked or drugged, but that she doesn’t really remember the details either, as she was binge drinking. Joe reported that their intimacy has been very low for the past 9 years and that he let her go out and spend the night away from home with her girlfriends, as it seemed “to make her happy.” The one-night stand resulted in a pregnancy and she and Joe are struggling with how to move forward. Mary wants to keep the child and have Joe raise it as his own, and Joe has reservations about doing so.

In using the Integrative Treatment Model (ITM), the counselor spends time joining with the couple and assessing the initial trauma, including: how the infidelity was revealed, how their relationship has changed since, and what their most distressing issues are at hand. The couple reported the impending pregnancy as the reason for revealing the infidelity and as the most distressing daily reminder of their marital problems. Mary performed an abortion with Joe’s baby when they first starting dating, upon his request, and felt that she needed to keep this one “no matter what.” The current pregnancy has pressured their timeline for decision-making about staying together, and both of their concerns over money and occupational decisions have intensified. Mary is concerned that if Joe leaves she will be financially stranded and Joe wonders if she even loves him or ever did. Joe found a lucrative job that would prompt him to move before the arrival of the child. The couple is considering if they should break up or stay together. They report they do not fight, that there is no drug use and no history of violence. The biological father was contacted and expressed a lack of interest in the child or Mary and hired a lawyer in preparation for any litigation.

The counselor explored issues surrounding what led to the infidelity and the texture of their relationship in the here and now. Mary reported she is becoming aware of the fact that she has struggled with chronic depression her whole life and has begun individual therapy and SSRI treatment. She has ceased drinking since discovering she was pregnant and is working on exploring her family of origin issues in individual therapy, which included themes of abuse and trauma. Joe’s family of origin included two professional parents who led separate lives, were overly involved in their careers, and shared little expressed affection towards each other or Joe. The parent divorced upon Joe’s exit to college. Joe reports that his childhood was “fine.”

Joe has always felt guilty towards Mary because of the previous abortion and having her move away from her family when they first met. He states that he won’t leave her now while she is going through this pregnancy. The counselor explored the 9 years of low intimacy and what strengths they held as a couple, to build relationship skills and increase awareness of the couple’s strengths. Joe reports he felt the low intimacy on Mary’s part was his fault for asking her to move away from her family, and is also why he let her go out without him when they moved back. When Mary was asked about her
feelings about low intimacy, she stated she just “isn’t interested” but wanted to be. The couple reports that their strengths are that they are quite compatible on a day to day basis, are best friends, and that is why they are still together. They sit close together in session and laugh and smile easily at each other’s jokes and shared memories.

The couple’s focus was on remitting symptoms of her depression, the logistics of money, their future as a couple, and location of their new possible family. They resisted discussing intimate emotions towards each other. Mary mostly commented on her state of depression. On the other hand, Joe was often stoic and rationalized most of his responses to the situation. Joe struggled with revealing emotions surrounding the here and now. Both seemed overwhelmed and unable to dig deeper into the fabric of their relationship prior to the pregnancy or in the present.

**Introduction of LKM**

The next stage of ITM is the stage of dealing with cognition, emotions, behavior, and forgiveness. As this couple is overwhelmed with Mary’s due date and Joe’s occupational decision, it is a good time to introduce the Loving Kindness Meditation practice. The couple is instructed to read over some literature about Loving Kindness Meditation, which includes information on where it originated, the purpose of increasing compassion for self and others, and instructions for the daily meditations. The couple is asked if this is something they would be interested in trying in the following sessions. (This step is important because the couple is in a state of crisis and if this type of meditation is opposed to their religious beliefs, world view, or interest level, then it could be harmful to the couple as it could damage the relationship with the counselor if he/she proceeds without the couple’s consent.)

The couple agrees saying “it couldn’t hurt.” Mary mentioned one family member did not like meditation but that this family was very religious and that she was okay with trying it. Joe stated that he felt it might help. So the counselor states she will spend 10 minutes catching up with the couple to find out about any pressing concerns over the week that they need to process, and then that she will begin a meditation during the session. The week was uneventful and the counselor asks the couple to get comfortable on the couch and to close their eyes to begin the meditation.

The counselor reads this script below for the couple (this script was taken from a website http://www.newbieyoga.com/guided-meditation-script.html)

Now relax your eyes and close them if you wish. Feel the tension draining away from you, starting with around your eyes and face, through your neck, shoulders and down your arms. Feel the tension drain like a liquid down your body and out through your legs. Feel your body fill up with love. Imagine a loving green light entering your feet and legs, up through your body, up your stomach, chest and arms.

Feel it almost bursting through your heart, your fingers and through the crown of your head. Feel your body being filled with green, loving light. Feel it buzzing through your body and radiating from your skin. When you feel enveloped in that love repeat these words: May I be free from all harm. May I be safe and protected. May I be free from all suffering. May I be happy. May I be free from all
disease and physical pain. May I be healthy and strong. May I be able to live in this world happily, peacefully, joyfully and with ease.

Now think of someone that you regard highly, it may be a mentor or a teacher. It can be someone you haven’t met but have influenced your life in a positive way. Keeping this person in mind repeat the statements: May you be free from all harm. May you be safe and protected. May you be free from all suffering. May you be happy. May you be free from all disease and physical pain. May you be healthy and strong. May you be able to live in this world happily, peacefully, joyfully and with ease.

Now think of someone that you love dearly. Your mother, sibling, lover or friend. Keeping this person in mind. Send loving thoughts to him or her repeat the following statements: May you be free from all harm. May you be safe and protected. May you be free from all suffering. May you be happy. May you be free from all disease and physical pain. May you be healthy and strong. May you be able to live in this world happily, peacefully, joyfully and with ease.

Now think of someone who is an acquaintance, a practical stranger. You do not know this person well. Send loving thoughts to him or her and repeat the following statements: May you be free from all harm. May you be safe and protected. May you be free from all suffering. May you be happy. May you be free from all disease and physical pain. May you be healthy and strong. May you be able to live in this world happily, peacefully, joyfully and with ease.

I would like you to think of someone who makes you upset or angry. Still feel the love in your body. Do not let go of this love. Think about this person and send loving thoughts to him or her. Say to them: May you be free from all harm. May you be safe and protected. May you be free from all suffering. May you be happy. May you be free from all disease and physical pain. May you be healthy and strong. May you be able to live in this world happily, peacefully, joyfully and with ease.

Now turn your thoughts to this vast world. The Earth with all its living creatures. Feel the love bursting through your body as you say: May all beings be free from all harm. May they be safe and protected. May all beings be free from all suffering. May they be happy. May all beings be free from all disease and physical pain. May they be healthy and strong. May all beings be able to live in this world happily, peacefully, joyfully and with ease.

Send your love as far out around the world as possible imagine that energy travelling through the Earth. When you are ready, feel that love centered around your heart. Notice the weight of your feet on the floor. Feel yourself in the now, in the present moment and when you are ready open your eyes.
After the couple opens their eyes, the counselor processes their reactions to the each level of the meditation and their overall reactions. Mary expressed she liked it a lot and that she felt like crying at certain points in thinking of her new baby insider her. Joe stated he did not feel anything and that he was concerned he must be doing it wrong. They are both informed by the counselor that all reactions are okay and that they are to try this meditation twice a day and discuss in the following sessions.

The counselors asked which person they chose for the prompt “ think of someone who you are upset or angry with,” they looked reluctant to share. The counselor let them know they can keep the images of persons to themselves, yet if the person that they conjured up in the meditation as the difficult person was each other, it is to be expected as they are working through an infidelity. They both nodded and looked at each other. This prompted Mary to ask if they should do this practice together or alone. The counselor asked them to discuss it and decide for themselves. They decided to do it alone for the time being as Mary stated it was “too much” to be near him while thinking about her conflicted feelings. The session ended with the counselor handing over two copies of the recorded LKM guided meditation for their home sessions.

The couple returned the next session and reported they did the meditation on most days. A portion of the session was spent discussing obstacles to meditation and answering questions related to understanding aspects and bolstering their efforts to get the meditation into their daily schedule. After a few weeks of doing the meditations and processing their weekly reactions, Mary reported she cried a lot during her meditations and stated she oscillated from feeling bad about the infidelity, bad about what she was bringing the baby into, and a sense of hope. When asked about the sense of hope, she said that she was beginning to feel that she would be able to forgive herself a little and that she knew that forgiving herself was the first step in being a better mother and maybe a better wife. Joe had a different reaction. He said that he still did not feel as much emotion as Mary, but that he began to feel better. He felt less mad at Mary and decided over the week to go to an appointment Mary had with her ob-gyn to see an ultrasound of the baby. He stated that he was able to feel that “none of this was the baby’s fault.” The couple reported that they may still separate after the baby is born. Joe would be taking the job in the different state and that Mary would join him for the time being to see if they could work it out. Joe stated he wanted to be a part of the baby’s life “no matter what” and that he wanted to be called “Uncle Joe.”

Concluding Comments

The couple was able to use the Loving-Kindness Meditation to begin to process some of the most difficult aspects involved in forgiveness and surrounding complicated emotions. The use of meditation allowed the couple to slow down and become mindful of their very personal, distressing, and confusing feelings towards themselves and their partner during a high pressure situation of an upcoming birth. They were able to begin to create space for their own feelings, without fighting or denying them, and to begin to apply loving kindness and forgiveness to themselves and their partner and the new child. Finally, LKM allowed the couple to work without the pressure of moving forward for the sake of moving forward and/or pressure to forget everything that happened without acknowledging their feelings.
Conclusion

The research on infidelity shows that, forgiveness can play a significant role in successfully treating couples (Olmstead et al., 2009, Snyder et al., 2008). However, when presented with the concept of forgiving, couples are less than open to the idea, act, or process, and can get stuck. The authors hypothesize that adding in LKM to the established ITM infidelity treatment may prove beneficial in helping clients overcome the roadblocks on their path to forgiveness, as well as help create an environment where clients are less reactive and more able to access more vulnerable emotions and begin to move toward forgiveness and beyond the infidelity. More research is needed on the use of LKM and specifically in the treatment of infidelity.

References


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