



Psychological Reactions and the Process of Coping with Marital Infidelity in Couples: A Grounded Theory Research

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Received: 31.10.2020

Accepted: 13.06.2021

Published online: 20.06.2022

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Citation:

Yaghoobi Tourki M, Khodabakhshi-Koolae A, Falsafinejad MR. Psychological reactions and the process of coping with marital infidelity in couples: A grounded theory research. J Qual Res Health Sci. 2022; 11(2):99-107.

Abstract

Introduction: Marital infidelity as a traumatic event can endanger the married life of couples and lead them to divorce. This study aimed to identify the psychological reactions and the process of dealing with the disclosure of marital infidelity in the betrayed person.

Methods: The present study was conducted using a qualitative method based on grounded theory. The research population included all married people living in Tehran, who had experienced marital infidelity in their marital life. The participants were 20 individuals who experienced marital infidelity and were selected through purposive sampling in 2019. The data were collected via semi-structured interviews with the participants and analyzed simultaneously using open, axial, and selective coding.

Results: The reactions to the disclosure of marital infidelity were classified into two main themes (psychological reactions and physical reactions) and eight subthemes. The psychological reactions were shock and denial, anger and hatred, anxiety and rumination, feeling depressed and frustrated, cognitive errors, negative emotions, sleep disorders, and physical symptoms. The couples reacted to their spouse's infidelity under the influence of contextual and situational factors and decided whether to continue living together. These decisions ranged from forgiving or not forgiving the spouse, forgetting the infidelity, coercion to continue living together, and separation and divorce.

Conclusion: The results of the study showed that with an awareness of the psychological reactions to the exposure of spousal infidelity and its contextual and situational factors, it is possible to understand the nature of problems and develop psychological interventions fitting couples' social and cultural conditions.

Keywords: Extramarital relations, Psychological reactions, Grounded theory research

Introduction

Despite the numerous benefits of monogamy and committed relationships in married life, psychological research has shown that maintaining a marital relationship, even among those who have an intimate relationship with their spouse, is not easy for long periods (1). A successful marriage can

meet the couple's psychological and physical needs and marriage is a contract between two persons for loyalty to each other and a monopoly of romantic and sexual relationships (2). Marriage is a very common human convention that occasionally grapples with an issue called infidelity (3). Infidelity



is defined as having sexual affairs or spending emotional resources, such as love, time, and attention to someone other than one's spouse. Infidelity is generally divided into three categories: emotional infidelity, sexual infidelity, and emotional-sexual infidelity (4). Schonian divided marital infidelity into three types of sexual infidelity, emotional infidelity, and internet infidelity (5).

Infidelity is an issue that couple therapists regularly encounter in counseling clinics, and can be a confusing and daunting experience for all those involved in infidelity, including the therapists (6-7).

Although the majority of Americans condemn infidelity, it is estimated that 2-4% of spouses engage in infidelity each year (8). Statistics show that secret extramarital relationships have greatly increased over time. Opinions vary about the incidence of infidelity in societies and social groups. According to some statistics, 20% to 40% of men and 20% to 25% of married women betray their spouses at least once in their lives. Sometimes, this rate amounts to about 60% of men and 40% of women. Of course, these figures have their complexities, because some people betray their spouse only once, while others commit infidelity many times during their marriage. Gordon et al. reported About 2% to 4% of American men and women have cheated on their spouse in the past year (2005), yet 77% of the participants in a large-scale survey believed that extramarital sex is wrong (9). Besides, Kubrebwa and Dzimiri found that women estimated 80-98% of men's involvement in marital infidelity, and men stated that 70% to 90% of women cheat on their husbands (10).

Researchers have reported many causes for infidelity, including attracting attention, gaining power, proving masculinity or femininity, and proving attractiveness (11), dissatisfaction with the current relationship, desire for sexual diversity or excitement, feeling insecure in a relationship, immaturity, lack of commitment, extreme desire to have a romantic extramarital relationship with a person, sexual dissatisfaction, inability to control whims and desires, and spouse unavailability (12), dissatisfaction with the marital relationship, fighting with problems, genetic and personality patterns (13), social, psychological, or biological motivations, lack of love, low commitment, improving self-esteem, seeking sexual diversity, and situational factors (14). After physical violence, infidelity is the most harmful and destructive event in marriage (15) and is one of the most important factors threatening the functioning, continuity, and stability of marital relationships. Marital infidelity can have severe emotional consequences for couples (16).

Marital infidelity can harm the quality of life of the couple and cause deep damage to the soul and psyche of the couple (17). After exposing infidelity, the victimized spouse experiences emotions such as anger, shame, depression, helplessness, and abandonment (18). Fincham and May studied the consequences of infidelity and concluded that infidelity causes mental disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD), depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive behavior, nightmares, and psychosomatic disorders including gastrointestinal, cardiovascular, and respiratory problems (8). Infidelity is followed by problems such as loss of affection, emotional divorce, distrust, impaired parenting functions, job problems, dissatisfaction, communication conflicts, decreased intimacy, and eventually divorce (19).

In Iran, as a religious country with a family-oriented culture, sometimes the betrayed couple prefers to continue the marital life due to cultural, family, legal, and economic issues (2). There are a few studies on this issue which are often quantitative, while the nature of couples' relationships and how they adapt to threatening situations requires qualitative research. This study intends to use a qualitative method using semi-structured interviews to explore the challenges facing couples experiencing marital infidelity and the process of coping with it and the couples' decision to continue their marital life.

Methods

The grounded theory method as a qualitative research method was used in this study (20). The participants were selected from Khatam University Counseling Center in Tehran in 2019. The sampling method was voluntary and based on theoretical sampling (21). The participants were individuals who experienced spouse infidelity. To ensure the correct selection of the participants and whether they were exposed to infidelity, marital infidelity was operationalized as an emotional or sexual relationship or a combination of both with someone other than the spouse. However, to ensure that infidelity occurred, participants reported that the betrayed spouse should seek medical or legal assistance after disclosure. The interviews were conducted face-to-face (16 participants) and by telephone (4 participants). The data were collected in the research setting (Khatam University Counseling Center) and analyzed outside of it. To collect more data, the researcher returned to the setting and continued interviewing more participants, and this process repeated until the data were saturated. The participants were 20 persons including 14 women and 6 men. The interviews began with a general question: "As far as you feel

comfortable, please explain your spouse's infidelity, and what happened when you realized it".

Since the focus of the study was to come up with a deep understanding of the participants' experiences, the duration of each interview lasted about 45 to 90 minutes according to the stories told by the participants and their cooperation and patience during the interviews. Before starting the interviews, informed consent was obtained from the participants for participation in the study and recording their voices during the interviews and they were assured that their information would be kept anonymous and strictly confidential. They were also told that their recorded voices would be omitted after analyzing the data.

In the next step, the recorded interviews were transcribed and analyzed through theoretical coding and continuous comparison. The data were then analyzed using open coding to extract relevant themes and categories based on the research variables and the statements made by the participants. The extracted themes were further refined using axial coding. Finally, the identified themes along with relevant categories were merged into a single model based on the psychological

reactions to infidelity through selective coding using a paradigmatic approach focusing on contextual conditions, causal conditions, mediating conditions, strategies, and outcomes (20). The robustness of the data was checked using Lincoln and Guba's four validation criteria (22). The credibility of the data was checked by having the interview transcripts reviewed by the participants to confirm the data after making necessary modifications. To ensure the confirmability of the data, the researcher tried not to involve her presumptions in the data collection process to the extent possible. Moreover, the dependability of the data was peer checked and the extracted codes were reviewed and confirmed by some professors in the field and a qualitative research expert. Finally, to enhance the transferability of the findings, the data were collected from people who experienced marital infidelity at different ages, with different education levels, and marriage durations.

Results

The participants were 20 persons (14 women and 6 men) who were victims of spousal infidelity. The participant's demographic characteristics are shown in [Table 1](#).

Table 1. The participants' demographic characteristics

Participant	Gender	Age	Education	Marriage duration	Occupation	Number of children	Spouse's education	Spouse's age	Spouse's occupation	Mode of interview
1	Female	26	High school diploma	8	Housewife	2	High school diploma	31	Self-employed	Face-to-face
2	Female	38	High school diploma	16	Housewife	2	Elementary school	44	Carpenter	Face-to-face
3	Female	45	Master's degree	10	Employee	0	Bachelor's degree	42	Engineer	Face-to-face
4	Female	32	Associate degree	9	Housewife	1	Associate degree	35	Insurance agent	Face-to-face
5	Male	36	Bachelor's degree	1	Self-employed	0	Bachelor's degree	33	Trade union manager	By phone
6	Female	37	Bachelor's degree	14	Sports trainer	2	Middle school	39	Self-employed	Face-to-face
7	Female	34	PhD Degree	8	Physician	0	High school diploma	36	Restaurant owner	Face-to-face
8	Female	40	Bachelor's degree	6	Housewife	1	Associate degree	42	Employee	Face-to-face
9	Female	33	Master's degree	8	Judicial officer	2	Associate degree	36	Oil change technician	By phone
10	Female	31	Master's degree	4	Employee	0	Master's degree	31	Employee	Face-to-face
11	Female	41	Bachelor's degree	14	Housewife	0	Bachelor's degree	43	Engineer	Face-to-face
12	Female	22	Bachelor's degree	3	Housewife	1	Bachelor's degree	31	Bankrupt (Self-employed)	Face-to-face
13	Male	34	Bachelor's degree	2.5	Fish breeder	0	High school diploma	33	Hairdresser	Face-to-face
14	Male	26	Bachelor's degree	1	Carpenter	0	High school diploma	26	Housewife	Face-to-face
15	Female	25	Bachelor's degree	6	Employee	0	Associate degree	27	Repairer	Face-to-face
16	Male	51	Bachelor's degree	18	Expert	2	Associate degree	45	Operating room technician	Face-to-face
17	Female	36	High school diploma	15	Housewife	3	High school diploma	41	Barber	Face-to-face
18	Female	38	Bachelor's degree	8	Housewife	1	High school diploma	34	Construction facilities	Face-to-face
19	Male	29	High school diploma	5	Oil company employee	0	High school diploma	24	Hairdresser	By phone
20	Male	30	Bachelor's degree	6	Constructor	0	High school diploma	27	Housewife	By phone

Based on the analysis of the data from the interviews, the psychological reactions to infidelity were categorized into 49 primary codes in open coding. The identified codes were then reduced to eight subthemes via axial coding. Finally, two main themes including psychological reactions and physical reactions were extracted using selective coding as shown in Table 2. Furthermore, table 3 depicts the process of dealing with marital infidelity

in couples. The main themes were psychological reactions to the disclosure of infidelity, issues related to the betrayed person, family issues, and issues related to infidelity. Moreover, table 3 shows the strategies taken to deal with infidelity. These strategies were categorized into three main themes including forgiving the spouse, intolerance and leaving the spouse, and living together without forgiving the spouse.

Table 2. Themes extracted from the participants interviews on psychological and physical reactions

Open codes	Axial codes (subthemes)	Selective codes (themes)
Rejection of reality	Shock and denial	Psychological reactions
Denial		
Disbelief		
Shock		
Aggression	Anger and hatred	
Retaliation		
Anger		
Competition		
The desire for revenge		
Hatred		
Self-blame		
Fear of the future	Anxiety and rumination	
Restlessness		
Distraction and indecision		
Severe stress		
Anxiety		
Insecurity		
Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)		
Fixation	Feeling depressed and frustrated	
Low self-confidence		
Low self-esteem		
Lack of motivation		
Feeling worthless		
Sense of death		
Constant crying		
The feeling of being a victim		
Feeling oppressed		
Sense of being crushed		
Silence		
Distrust		
Suicidal thoughts		
Lack of energy	Cognitive errors	
Disappointment		
Not enjoying pleasant activities		
Catastrophizing	Negative emotions	
Self-blame		
Negative anticipation of the future		
Fear	Sleep disorders	
Anger		
Feeling sad		
Shame and humiliation		
Jealousy		
Oversleeping	Physical symptoms	
Sleep deprivation		
Insomnia		
Body tremors		
Weight loss/gain		
Decreased/increased blood pressure	Physical symptoms	
Increased heart rate		

Table 3. Open codes and categories related to causal conditions

Categories	Open codes
Psychological reactions to the disclosure of infidelity	Being shocked
	Anger, its expression, or the ability to manage it
	Trying or wanting to take revenge
	Anger and hostile
Issues related to the betrayed person	The dominance of negative emotions
	Religious believes
	Financial and economic conditions
	Personality traits and types of attachments
	Support received from the family, friends, and community
Family issues	The degree of acceptance and tolerance of infidelity
	Children and their number
	The level of acceptance and support of the main family
Issues related to infidelity	The degree of commitment and responsibility towards the family
	Type of infidelity, whether sexual, emotional or both
	Duration of infidelity
	The extent to which family or children know about the infidelity

The psychological and physical reactions to infidelity in couples

1. Shock and denial: this feeling was reported on the participants' reactions (shock and denial) to marital fidelity: *"I was shocked, but I pretended to be strong. I just walked and tapped my feet with my hands. I was saying that I'm dreaming. It would be ok. I will wake up. My husband cannot have done this to me"* (Participant 11).

2. Anger and hatred: The second theme (anger and hatred) identified in this study was anger and hatred. The participants stated that they had a desire for revenge as a reaction to their husband's infidelity. However, the male participants believed that the revenge was to compensate for the betrayal behavior. *"Although I did not like it, after the betrayal of my wife, I once had sex with a woman, as if I wanted to retaliate"* (Participant 16).

3. Anxiety and rumination: The third theme identified in this study was anxiety and rumination. The couples who experienced spousal infidelity showed different anxiety reactions: *"I was constantly thinking about where he was, what he was doing, and if he was with that woman or not. I was constantly wondering what she had I did not have. I was very anxious as I no longer had any sense of security"* (Participant 3).

4. Feeling depressed and frustrated: The fourth theme revealed by some participants was feeling depressed and frustrated. *"I was crying all the time, I felt depressed, I felt empty, I felt no one understood me, and of course I still have the same feelings"* (Participant 1).

5. Cognitive errors: Cognitive errors accounted for another theme that emerged in this study. Some of participants said that they had self-defeating thinking. *"I was worried about my child's future, I do not know what would happen to him in the future. We will not be expecting a good future"* (Participant 4).

6. Negative emotions: Negative emotions was another theme extracted in this study. *"I felt to be inferior and humiliated. I was feeling that the woman must have been much superior to me so that she was able to make my husband interested in herself. I envied her"* (Participant 10).

7. Sleep disorders: The seventh theme identified in this study was related to sleep disorders including oversleeping, sleep deprivation, and insomnia: *"I stayed up until the morning. I could not sleep"* (Participant 15).

8. Physical symptoms: The last theme extracted from the data was related to physical symptoms including body tremors, anorexia, decreased or increased blood pressure, and increased heart rate: *"My hands and feet trembled when I was angry. I couldn't eat anything for a while"* (Participant 19).

The process of dealing with marital infidelity in couples

Causal conditions: Causal conditions are a set of events and conditions that affect the psychological reactions to infidelity as the core category. The core category in this study was influenced by four categories as causal conditions including psychological reactions due to disclosure of infidelity, issues related

to the betrayed person, issues related to family, and issues related to infidelity crisis as shown in Table 3.

The strategies of coping with marital infidelity in couples

Strategies: Following the grounded theory, strategies refer to providing solutions to deal with the phenomenon in question. Strategies are used to manage, deal with, and accomplish and show sensitivity to the phenomenon under study (20). In the present study, spouse forgiveness, intolerance and abandonment, un-forgiveness and forgetfulness, and continuing living together without forgiving the spouse were considered as strategies to deal with the phenomenon of marital infidelity. The open codes and related categories are listed in Table 4.

As can be seen in Figure 1, various circumstances and factors underlie marital infidelity, and the betrayed person can take different decisions after the disclosure of infidelity including forgiving the spouse and continuing the marital life, leaving the spouse and separation, and not forgiving the spouse but continuing the marital life unwillingly (marital apathy).

Discussion

This study explored the psychological and physical reactions to marital infidelity and the process of coping with it. Similarly, Amato and Rogers stated that young couples are more likely to be unfaithful (23). In contrast, Atkins et al. reported that older couples were more likely to experience infidelity (24). According to the findings of the present study, the highest rate of infidelity (45%) occurred in the first 6 to 10 years of marriage. In the same vein, Liu reported that extramarital relationships reach their climax among men in their seventh year of marriage (25). These findings are not in line with the midlife crisis and Frank Pittman's theory that three crises (empty nest, climax, and the crisis of life facts) often lead to unfaithfulness. The present study showed that more than 57% of unfaithful spouses were housewives. Accordingly, Kleine found that infidelity in couples where one of them is employed is more likely than in couples who are both employed and people with jobs that have a higher chance of infidelity are more likely to engage in extramarital affairs (26).

Liu and Lusterman believed that having a child is a form of committing human investment, and parents avoid extramarital affairs to avoid the frustration of their children (25, 27).

Table 4. Open codes and categories related to strategies to coping with infidelity

Categories	Open codes
Forgiving the spouse	Sacrifice and selflessness for marital life
	Attachment and love for the spouse
	Infidel person's acceptance and attempt to compensate for their infidelity
	Preventing harm to children
	Ability to accept the reality
	Receiving advice
	Maintaining the marital life
	Building trust by the unfaithful spouse
Intolerance and leaving the spouse	Gaining peace
	Conflict and quarrel with the spouse and his/her family
	Existence of marital disputes before infidelity
	Intolerance and acceptance of spousal infidelity
	Occupational status of the couple
	Distrust and a feeling of infidelity after its disclosure
	Financial ability to live after separation
Continuing living together without forgiving the spouse	Separation proposed by the unfaithful person
	Pregnancy and its consequences
	Family issues
	Educational issues of children
	Lack of parental support
	Supporting children
	Lack of support from the unfaithful spouse for children
	Economic situation and financial inability
	Fear of divorce and its consequences
	Fear of reaction from family and others

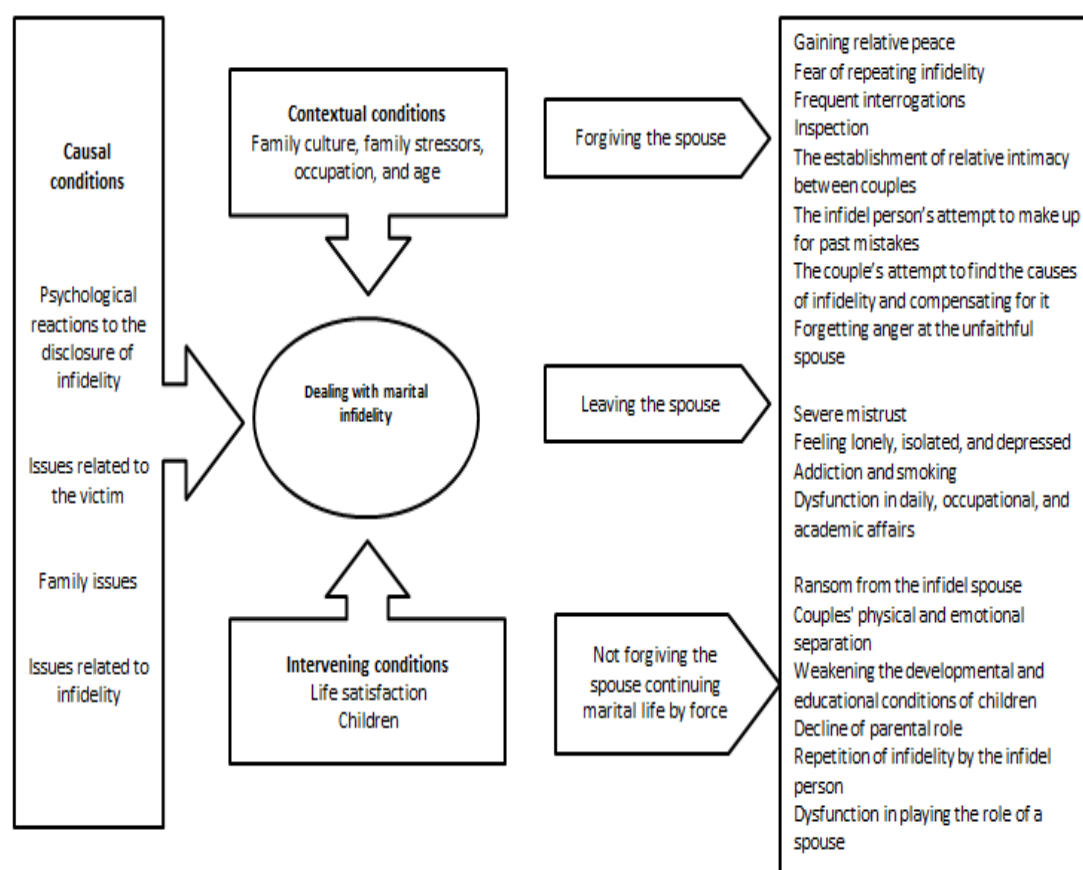


Figure 1. The process of dealing with marital infidelity

The findings of the present study showed that people affected by infidelity show different psychological reactions including shock and denial, anger and hatred, anxiety and rumination, feelings of depression and frustration, cognitive errors, and negative emotions as well as physical reactions such as sleep disorders, and physical symptoms. In a similar vein, Roos et al. showed that marital infidelity is associated with a set of psychological symptoms and traumas such as anger, revenge, and hatred on the part of spouses who were betrayed (28). Fincham and May also concluded that infidelity leads to depression and nightmares (8). Furthermore, Koolae et al. showed that psychological projection, labeling, personalization, magnification, negative prediction as well as mind-reading were some common defenses and cognitive errors in infidel couples (29). Besides, Dupree concluded that infidelity leads to negative emotions (30). Fincham and May also suggested sleep and dream disorders, eating disorders, brain dysfunction, physical symptoms of anxiety and stress, blood pressure problems, hormonal disorders, premature aging symptoms, stomach problems, respiratory and pulmonary problems, eye problems, cardiovascular problems, and direct physical injuries

are some psychosomatic reactions of spousal infidelity (8).

The present study showed that betrayed persons decided to continue their life together based on the existing causal and contextual conditions. It was shown that the betrayed people had decided to continue their marital life and forgive their spouse for various reasons such as self-sacrifice and devotion to living together, attachment and love for their spouse, acceptance and compensation by the unfaithful person, children and their number, acceptance of reality, maintaining marital life, building trust by the unfaithful spouse, gaining peace, and receiving advice. In the same line, Vaughan showed discussion between couples about infidelity and the accountability of the unfaithful spouse have a significant relationship with the recovery of the betrayed spouse (31). Moreover, Staples suggested building trust between spouses requires establishing secure interactive strategies between them and changing attitudes toward oneself and the other (32). Furthermore, Davis and Gold believed that there is a connection between the remorse of the unfaithful spouse and the forgiveness of the betrayed spouse (33). Similarly, Fife, Weeks, and Filbert suggested that

following forgiveness, the couples can restore their trust and unity (34). A study by Khodabakhshi Koolae et al. showed that in Iranian society, due to cultural issues, male infidelity does not cause women to seek a divorce, and women sought relief from the pain and suffering caused by marital infidelity (17).

This study also indicated that couples decided to separate from their spouses upon the proposal of divorce by the unfaithful spouse after the disclosure of infidelity for reasons such as conflict with the spouse, disagreement, dissatisfaction before the infidelity, intolerance, acceptance of infidelity, employment status and financial ability, and mistrust and the feeling of infidelity after disclosure. Similarly, Johnson et al. showed that secret relationships and infidelity are associated with increased marital turmoil, conflict, and divorce (35). Furthermore, Williams concluded that the power of infidelity in dissolution and the transformation of the relationship depends on factors such as gender, power, and latent culture, and believed that the insistence of one of the partners to continue living with a third person, leads to separation and divorce; otherwise, the continuation of the marital life would be full of tension. They also stated that dissatisfaction with life would be a reason for betrayal and separation (36-37). In this study, it was found that in the process of adapting to marital infidelity, the injured person and the couple go through stages such as experiencing psychological and physical reactions and deciding whether to continue living together and facing the consequences of the decision. Thus, it is suggested that in providing counseling services to individuals, the stage they are in should be considered and services

should be provided according to the circumstances. The present study was conducted with two limitations. First, the participants were from Tehran, the capital of the country, hence, not representing the people of other cities, little towns, and rural communities in Iran. Therefore, caution must be exercised in generalizing the findings. Second, the researchers interviewed people who experienced unfaithfulness by their partner, so, the results didn't cover the opinions of their spouse or other family members such as children.

Conclusion

The present study showed that in the process of coping with marital infidelity, the betrayed person and the couple go through stages such as experiencing psychological and physical reactions, deciding to continue living together, and facing the consequences of the decision. Therefore, it is recommended that when providing counseling services to individuals, the stage they are in, be considered and services be provided according to their circumstances.

Acknowledgments

This article was extracted from a master's thesis in family counseling conducted at Khatam University. In addition, this research was approved by the Research Committee under the code: 98/S/100/62. The authors would like to express their gratitude to participants in this study.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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