

What is Betrayal Trauma? Learn How to Heal



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Betrayal trauma is not often discussed, but anyone who has experienced betrayal can attest to its abject devastation. Trauma is often discussed in the context of significant disturbing events such as sexual assault, near death experiences, combat, natural disasters, and more. However, the betrayal of trust can leave a wake of physical and emotional posttraumatic stress.

Experiencing betrayal trauma often shakes up the world, reality, and beliefs one had for their partner before the betrayal. The symptoms experienced can vary, but often times are debilitatingly painful, confusing, and often lonely. The betrayed partner often experiences myriad emotions ranging from sadness to anger to wanting revenge to wanting to go back to when things were normal, and even guilt.

To best understand the way betrayal trauma impacts a betrayed partner's life, it may be helpful to further unpack the definition and presentation of betrayal trauma.

Understanding Betrayal Trauma

Similar to other forms of trauma, betrayal trauma can occur after one has experienced an event or betrayal of one's primary relationship that one considers extremely disturbing or damaging. According to Bessel van der Kolk, expert on trauma and author of renowned book, *The Body Keeps the Score*, trauma is defined as, "an event that overwhelms the central nervous system, altering the way we process and recall memories."

Research suggests betrayal trauma symptoms are deeply impactful and can have long term affects to one's mental health. Experiencing betrayal, a form of emotional abuse, can cause various post-traumatic stress disorder. Symptoms such as flashbacks, nightmares and impaired sleeping, depression, anxiety, brain fog, distrust, dissociation, are common. Betrayed partners often feel as if their reality has been shaken to its core.

The forms of betrayal in relationships they have discovered has exposed their partner as someone they do not recognize, which can be disorienting and heartbreaking. The betrayed partner now is left with a decision. Should they stay or should they go?

What is the Definition of Betrayal?

Many instances can be considered relationship betrayal. There are the more obvious betrayals such as infidelity, secrets, and lies. Other less commonly discussed forms of betrayal can be discovering one's partner is a sex addict or demonstrates sexually addictive behaviors.

When someone discovers their partner has compulsive sexual behavior, it can shatter the view they once had of their partner. This can be painful and traumatic. Additionally, experiencing types of abuse such as domestic violence, emotional, spiritual, sexual, or financial abuse can be a form of betrayal trauma.

Overall, betrayal trauma manifests when one's reality of their relationship has been upended. The survivor believed their partner was a certain person with certain values and they have learned that not only can they not trust their partner. They often question if they can even trust themselves.

The betrayed partner will likely grapple with guilt and blame themselves for what they did or didn't do, as they begin healing betrayal trauma.

What are the Common Impacts of Betrayal Trauma?

Emotional Dysregulation

The impact of betrayal trauma can onset a wave of questions and emotions regarding their partner and relationship. A betrayed partner may question the authenticity of the relationship. They may speculate how their partner was able to commit such a considerable act of betrayal. Betrayed partners often wonder if the relationship as well as their own health will ever feel normal again.

Whether the victim has discovered their partner's betrayal was on-going or a singular incident, the impact of the trauma can cause severe panic, terror, and helplessness.

Physical Symptoms

Betrayal trauma theory notes that infidelity not only affects the betrayed partner on an emotional level, but physically as well. Physical symptoms the betrayed can experience

include their view on their body image, weight loss/gain, sleep disturbances, expressions of rage, stomach sickness, aversion to intimate touch, crying episodes, vomiting, hair loss, and more.

Cognitive Symptoms

Common amongst betrayal trauma symptoms are intrusive thoughts about the betrayal. A heightened state of paranoia and hypervigilance is common with betrayal. It can result in the betrayed partner obsessively searching for evidence of continuing betrayal. They may search their partner's phone records, internet browser history, and bank statements.

Due to the immense amount of thought and cognitive energy going into processing the betrayal, the betrayed partner may struggle to muster up additional concentration ability for other aspect of their life.

Shame

Despite the betrayed partner not being at fault for their partner's betrayal, the betrayed will often experience feelings of shame, guilt, and/or embarrassment around their partner's betrayal.

The betrayed may experience a sense of inadequacy, It's often common for a betrayed partner to think they could have either provoked their partner or that there was more they could have done to satisfy them.

Daily Living Stressors

Betrayal trauma impacts a partner's day-to-day existence as much as it impacts their short and long term emotional, physical, and mental health. The betrayed may go into survival mode, especially when dealing with aspects of the relationship in which they depend on their partner.

This can look like financial anxieties if the betrayed partner is considering ending the relationship with their partner who they are financially dependent on. Betrayal trauma symptoms can impact the way the betrayed partner shows up for his or her children, at work, with friends and family, and other domains of their life.

Lack of Support

Betrayal can be an isolating experience for a partner. Due to the stress, shame, and embarrassment, a betrayed partner could feel conflicted about reaching out for support.

They may not want their family and friends to know what they are going through for several reasons. They may feel as if the betrayal reflects on them in some way or even feel a desire to protect the reputation of their partner.

Partner betrayal trauma symptoms can be incredibly painful and earth shattering, especially if the person betrayed has any childhood trauma that is activated. It can be hard to know what to do when faced with a traumatic experience within a relationship that is so significant.

If you are experiencing the debilitating betrayal trauma symptoms, it's okay to ask for help, lean on your support network, and ultimately validate your experience as one that matters and is deserving of empathy. Couples who practice mindful attunement have a stronger chance of healing.

Modern Intimacy is a group therapy practice, founded by renowned Psychologist and Sex Therapist, Dr. Kate Balestrieri. This inclusive blog is designed to provide a wealth of information and resources for mental health, relationships, and sexuality. Subscribe today to get the latest information from our expert contributors from all around the world.

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Kayla Tricaso is the Office Manager and Patient Intake Specialist at Modern Intimacy. Passionate about mental health and social justice, Kayla spends her free time listening to true crime podcasts, reading and working on her personal memoir.