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Grounded Theory on the Process of Individual Healing from Infidelity

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Abstract

The purpose of this grounded theory qualitative study is to develop a theory describing the process of individual healing from infidelity. Infidelity is a traumatic experience that affects individual and relationship health and well-being. Despite being a common phenomenon (O'Connor & Canavello, 2019), there is little empirical research on individual healing. Research team members analyzed transcripts of interviews with six participants. Preliminary findings include seven themes: making space for healing, caring for one's self, making meaning, gaining new perspective, nurturing relationships, receiving support, and time. The themes are tied together by a core category of (re)building self and provide a preliminary pathway for individual healing from infidelity.

Introduction

Infidelity is a relational betrayal that can lead non-straying partners to develop symptoms akin to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as well as depressive and anxious symptoms (Roos et al., 2019; Warach & Josephs, 2019).

Several models have been developed to guide couple healing, but the extent to which these models describe the process of healing for an individual is unknown (Negash et al., 2014). Suggested common-factors in healing include making shared meaning about the infidelity (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Gordon et al., 2005), the straying partner accepting responsibility and expressing remorse (Meneses & Greenberg, 2011), and the non-straying partner forgiving the straying partner (Fife et al., 2011; Meneses & Greenberg, 2011). Some researchers have suggested that individual healing may center on reconstructing and reintegrating identity (Afifi et al., 2001).

The purpose of the present study is to use grounded theory methodology to construct the process of individual healing following infidelity-induced relationship termination.

Methods

Constructivist grounded theory studies are designed to develop a theory grounded in data. They consist of multiple stages including data collection, preparing data for coding, coding data, and theory construction.

Data collection: We collected data through interviewing adult individuals who self-reported healing from infidelity. The interviews consisted of a semi-structured set of open-ended questions regarding healing, setbacks, anger, trust, and forgiveness. The interviews were recorded via an audio recorder.

Preparing data: The interviews were transcribed into word processors. Transcriptions were checked by fellow team members.

Coding data: These transcripts were coded by identifying actions, processes, or experiences of healing. The research team collaborated on how to code these items and moved the analysis from in vivo coding to higher levels of abstraction. The final stage of coding consisted of identifying data that provided grounds for theoretical constructs.

Theory construction: With these theoretical constructs in place, each presenter analyzed how the different constructs interacted with each other. These interactions were the framework used to construct the theory.

Results

Caring for Oneself

Including self-improvement efforts (i.e. academically, physically, hobbies), going to therapy, investing in one's future; self-awareness of one's emotions/accepting one's self as they are in this experience

"I've been like pouring myself more into like stuff for me and for my future, which I typically don't do especially if I'm with somebody else."

Nurturing Relationships

Includes effectively drawing closer to friends, family, relationship with God (attending church more, praying more), community, or any other significant relationships (does not include rebound relationships)

"- but I wanted to be more spiritual because I needed something to hold on to to give me hope"

Gaining New Perspective

Taking care of family who may have experienced a life-threatening incident; social support that re-centers one in the present/contextualizes the situation

"And, yeah. I had a relationship, it didn't work out, but that wasn't the end of the world. Like, I didn't... I'm not paralyzed, you know?"

Receiving Support

Directionality of social support is receiving; includes getting advice from mentors, friends, and family; can also include child-care

" Yeah and even my mom telling me, you know, like we'll help you when you go back to school. Because I didn't think I was going to go back to go finish like we'll help you. We'll pick him up from daycare."

Making Space for Healing

Distancing one's self from the past partner, deleting or taking a break from social media, and traveling; distancing oneself from the context (or reminders) of the affair

"From, I remember feeling that I had to physically distance myself, but also emotionally and digitally, especially? I remember blocking him on everything and like deleting pictures of us, and just so I wouldn't see any reminders"

Making Meaning

Any efforts to find meaning and purpose beyond their past relationship. For example, these efforts can range from humanizing the betrayal/betrayer to finding purpose in raising a child after separation

"I've also had to understand how he was raised in the fact that he had a horrible childhood. I think - he didn't really disclose but there was suspicion of sexual abuse when he was young and stuff. I know that he went through rough times himself and I think it has helped me humanize him?"

Time

Overarching and broad idea that many individuals experience needing a passage of time in their healing process

" And just looking at how these moments of communication, at various levels and different contexts, actually helped promote that. All under the context of I need distance first, and slowly becoming kind of reintegrated as friends"

Conclusion

The findings of this research suggest that the process of healing from infidelity is not straightforward, but rather intricate, and requires awareness of several aspects while approaching healing.

This grounded theory offers a framework for individual healing from infidelity that emphasizes the key themes of making space for healing, caring for oneself, making meaning, gaining new perspective, and nurturing relationships. These key themes are tied together by a core category of re(building) self.

Understanding of each of these themes and their unique role in the healing process can guide clinicians' focus towards more timely and effective interventions and healing experiences. It can also provide a preliminary pathway for individuals to use as a basis for their healing journey after experiencing infidelity.

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