

A photograph of a man, a woman, and a young child. The man is on the left, wearing a maroon sweater, and is kissing the child on the cheek. The woman is on the right, wearing a peach-colored sweater, and is also kissing the child on the cheek. The child is in the center, wearing a yellow sweater and blue jeans, and is smiling. The background is a plain, light blue-grey color.

TIPS of the Month

FEBRUARY 2023

DECIDING
whether to stay in a relationship



Military Family
Resource Centre
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Martin, a member, a father of two sons, age 5 and 11, just found out that his wife cheated on him after drinking at a party. She confessed everything yesterday. Martin is experiencing a range of emotions simultaneously. He is angry, sad and very disappointed. He does not know how he should react. He doesn't want to break up his "little family," or drag his sons into it. Martin's spouse went to stay at her sister's for a few days to give him a chance to "digest" everything. The children currently think their mother is on vacation at their aunt's house.

What to decide?

- An important variable in the decision is how the infidelity comes to light. For example, if the cheating spouse lets the information slip by accident, he or she likely didn't feel that bad about cheating and this masquerade might have dragged on for years. However, when the partner confesses everything, it is easier to think that he or she felt badly about the situation.
- If the decision is to forgive, it is important not to continue to play the role of the victim, and to make the other "pay" or hold them accountable until the end of time. This means not checking the telephone, mail, avoiding sexual relations, keeping track of outings... When the decision is to forgive, the discussion must be opened in order to try to understand what led to the cheating and to find ways to move forward in the relationship.
- To make the best decision, take time to reflect and list your most important values. For example, are family values, the social circle, financial security, religion and the sanctity of marriage of paramount importance to you or freedom, justice, loyalty, etc. This exercise will help you make your decision. The goal is to live according to your values.

And the children?

It is important to ensure that the children are not "caught between the two parents." Unfortunately, during arguments and/or separations, children all too often hear conversations and one spouse insulting the other. Sometimes, they must play the role of judge or mediator. Bear in mind that is not their role.

Depending on the age of the children, here are a few suggestions if there is a separation or a divorce:

- Use practical terms to explain to the children what is happening or what is going to happen after their parents separate. Do not mention a spouse's infidelity. The explanation must not include blaming one of the parents.
- Reassure the children they are not responsible for this situation. Children between 2 and 8 years are the more likely to think they did something which led to their parents' separation.
- Monitor behavioural changes at home and at school (aggressiveness, temper tantrums, anxiety, crying, delayed learning). The latter may be a sign of their suffering and the need to communicate with the parents about the separation.
- Monitor this behaviour and revisit roles. Children between 9 and 12 years can understand the parents' different viewpoints and be angry with one of them. They can sadly play the role of parent with their mother, father or siblings.
- Watch for "rebellious" behaviour, isolation and open as sincere a dialogue as possible. Adolescents can experience a decrease in self-esteem, be extremely angry with parents and question their own ability to have a long-term relationship with a partner.



DID YOU KNOW...

- Healing and adaptation can take many months or years. Children will adapt faster if the parents work well together, adapt quickly and ensure they create space for discussion with them.
- During the first year of the separation, parents are often unaware and/or underestimate the harmful impact of their own behaviour on their children. They contribute to the latter's stress and distress.
- To help children during this period, the parents must ask for help with their feelings of distress as quickly as possible. Decreasing the stress factors they face will therefore be a discussion topic.



Bibliography:

- Government of Canada. (November 7, 2017). Voice and Support: Programs for Children Experiencing Parental Separation and Divorce. Department of Justice/Reports and Publications/Family Law. Source December 13, 2022, from https://www.justice.gc.ca/fra/pr-rp/lf-fl/divorce/2004_2/p2.html
- Karpel, M. (1994). *Evaluating couples*. New York. Brunner/Mazel, p. 333-347.

Need help?

Contact Psychosocial Intake at the Military Family Resource Centre, Montreal Region.
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