

Infidelity in the Time of COVID-19

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Infidelity occurs in approximately 25% of marriages and is associated with various negative consequences for individuals (e.g., depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress), the couple relationship (e.g., financial loss, increased conflict, and aggression), and the couple's children (e.g., internalizing and externalizing behaviors). Infidelity is also one of the most frequently cited reasons for divorce. The increased stress brought on by the pandemic may be putting couples at an increased risk for experiencing infidelity, and data collected during the pandemic have shown that people across the United States are engaging in behaviors that are associated with a high likelihood of experiencing infidelity. The negative consequences of infidelity are also likely to be exacerbated for couples during the pandemic due to the intersection with the social, emotional, and financial consequences of COVID-19. Furthermore, couples are likely to experience disruptions and delays to the affair recovery process during the pandemic, which can negatively impact their ability to heal. Therefore, recommendations for navigating affair recovery during the pandemic, including adaptations for therapy, are also discussed.

Keywords: Infidelity; Affair Recovery; Pandemic; Clinical Recommendations; Couples

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Infidelity occurs in approximately 25% of all marriages (Allen et al., 2005; Laumann et al., 1994). Infidelity is described in the literature as an emotional or sexual act that is outside of the primary relationship and constitutes a breach of trust or agreed upon boundaries of that relationship (Blow & Hartnett, 2005). Experiencing infidelity is associated with various devastating consequences for both partners and for the relationship. Individuals may experience symptoms of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Cano & O'Leary, 2000; Couch et al., 2017; Gordon et al., 2004). Couples will often experience significant financial loss when infidelity occurs, which is exacerbated even further for those who get divorced (Crouch & Dickies, 2016). It also negatively impacts the couple relationship through decreases in sexual desire, frequency, and satisfaction, along with overall happiness (Groves et al., 2011; Manning, 2006; Previti & Amato, 2004). In addition, infidelity is associated with increased conflict and a tendency toward aggressive behaviors, which can escalate into intimate partner violence (Nemeth et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2012). It is also one of the most frequently cited reasons for divorce with one in five couples that experience infidelity identifying it as the primary cause of the dissolution of their relationship (Amato & Previti, 2003).

Furthermore, the impact on the couple can have far-reaching effects on their children. Increased exposure to parental conflict can trigger internalizing behaviors, such as anxiety and depression, and externalizing behaviors in children (Ablow et al., 2009). In

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addition, research supports an intergenerational pattern of infidelity within families, such that individuals that experience parental infidelity during childhood are more likely to be in romantic relationships in adulthood that are plagued by infidelity (Hunyady et al., 2008; Lusterman, 2005; Platt et al., 2008), further perpetuating the cycle and its associated consequences for future generations.

This significant dyadic problem is likely to be exacerbated by the effects of COVID-19, and couples' recovery processes are similarly likely to be delayed or negatively impacted by the pandemic and its attendant social, emotional, and economic fallout. This paper lays out the various ways in which COVID-19 intersects with normal risks of affairs and the recovery process and provides recommendations for how to address these complications.

COVID-19 AND THE INCREASED LIKELIHOOD OF AFFAIRS

The current pandemic may be putting couples at increased risk for experiencing infidelity. While we do not yet have definitive statistics on the rates of infidelity in this era, studies show that individuals across the United States are experiencing significantly high levels of stress in response to the pandemic, which is common during an infectious disease outbreak like this one (CDC, 2020). One survey found that 69% of employees have identified the current pandemic as the most stressful time in their career (Mayer, 2020). According to Bodenmann (2005), dyadic stress is defined as a stressful event that impacts both partners, either directly through encountering the same stressful event or indirectly when the stress of one partner spills over into the relationship, both of which are likely happening with the current pandemic. Research has consistently found increases in stress to be associated with decreases in both sexual and relationship satisfaction (Bodenmann et al., 2007; Harper et al., 2000; Neff & Karney, 2004). Relationship satisfaction is a powerful predictor of infidelity such that individuals in highly satisfied relationships are less likely to have an affair (Atkins et al., 2001; McAlister et al., 2005; Previti & Amato, 2004; Shaw et al., 2013), and a lack of relationship satisfaction is a common justification for individuals who have affairs (Emmers-Sommer et al., 2010). Furthermore, individuals who report feeling sexually satisfied in their relationships are less likely to have an affair (Allen et al., 2005; Waite & Joyner, 2001). Individuals who are dissatisfied in their current relationship are more likely to explore alternative options and the increased stress from the pandemic may be contributing to more negative perceptions for individuals of both their partner and their relationship.

While prior research supports the theory that couples are at a higher risk of infidelity due to the pandemic, it is also important to acknowledge that the methods of contact for affairs may be different than they were before. The recommendations around social distancing have decreased the opportunities for physical contact with affair partners, such as not going to the gym, not going to work. However, the use of virtual apps to stay connected (e.g., Face Time, Zoom, and Skype) has drastically increased during this time (Warren, 2020) and may be more likely to be used for contact with affair partners than prior to the pandemic. Current research also provides supporting data for the increased risk of infidelity occurring through virtual means during this time. For example, a dating site for married individuals has been adding 17,000 new members per day during the pandemic, which is an increase of 1,500 new members per day from 2019. Data show that individuals are accessing this dating site for a variety of reasons including the desire to chat with someone besides their spouse, the need for emotional validation, or the fantasy of pursuing a secret sexual relationship (Takahashi, 2020). The current regulations around social distancing may make a dating site such as this one an optimal outlet for individuals to pursue extradyadic connections. Researchers at The Kinsey Institute are also studying how the pandemic is affecting intimate relationships. Findings show that about 20% of people

have contacted an ex-partner at some point during the pandemic with about half reporting that they have reached out to multiple ex-partners. About 25% of participants reported being contacted by an ex-partner and of that group most reported that they replied to their ex-partner. Of those in committed relationships, about 13% said that they have reached out to an ex-partner during the pandemic. Follow-up data demonstrated various reasons for connecting with an ex-partner including checking to see how their ex-partner was coping with the pandemic, feeling lonely or bored, looking to have sex or hook-up, checking on their ex-partner's relationship status, or out of a desire to rekindle a relationship with their ex-partner. Participants in committed relationships identified looking for a hook-up or wanting to rekindle the relationship as the primary reasons for the contact, both of which indicate an increased likelihood of engaging in infidelity (Lehmiller, 2020).

INCREASED CONSEQUENCES OF AFFAIRS DUE TO COVID-19

Given that the data are trending toward an increased risk of infidelity for couples, and couples are spending more time together than ever before, it is also reasonable that affairs will be discovered at higher rates during this time. Whether discovered during or right before the pandemic occurred, it is important to consider how the consequences of affairs have changed as a result of the pandemic. The discovery of an affair is a devastating event and couples experiencing the aftermath of an affair during the pandemic may be at greater risk for negative consequences. The pandemic is taking a significant toll on the psychological health of individuals around the country. In a recent poll by the Kaiser Family Foundation, 45% of adults reported that the pandemic has had a negative impact on their mental health due to increases in anxiety and stress about the virus (Panchal et al., 2020). In the aftermath of an affair, research shows that individuals experience the onset of symptoms of anxiety and depression (Cano & O'Leary, 2000; Couch et al., 2017), which may be exacerbated due to the current pandemic. In addition, the pandemic has had a significant financial impact on families. In a recent survey by the Pew Research Center, 43% of adults reported that they or someone in their household has lost a job or taken a pay cut during the pandemic (Parker et al., 2020). Significant financial loss is also a common consequence of infidelity (Crouch & Dickies, 2016), putting these couples at even greater risk for financial insecurity during this time. Furthermore, circumstances like unemployment, lack of social support, and increased stress that are commonly experienced during a pandemic have been identified as risk factors for interpersonal violence (Serrata & Hurtado Alvarado, 2019; Zahran et al., 2009) and data from other countries impacted by COVID-19, such as China, France, Brazil, and Italy, have reported up to a 50% increase in reports of domestic violence during the pandemic (Campbell, 2020). These trends are alarming for couples in the aftermath of an affair, as they are already at higher risk for increases in conflict, aggressive behaviors, and intimate partner violence, as consequences of the affair (Nemeth et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2012).

COVID-19'S IMPACT ON AFFAIR RECOVERY

Couples may also experience more difficulties in recovering from an affair during this time. The pandemic has limited couple's access to resources and social support, which may make it more difficult for them to cope with this significant stressor (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Gordon et al., 2004; Olson et al., 2002). In addition, couples are experiencing increases in anxiety and stress related to the virus as well as financial concerns (Panchal et al., 2020; Parker et al., 2020), which are requiring mental and emotional energy, consequently leaving less capacity to focus on and deal constructively with affair recovery.

Further, the practices supported by research and recommended for couples during affair recovery may be more difficult to achieve during this time of social isolation.

Heightened Arousal

Similarly to symptoms experienced after a trauma, couples in the aftermath of an affair experience heightened anxiety and increased emotional arousal, both of which can impede the affair recovery process (Gordon et al., 2004). Research shows that 86% of people have experienced trauma symptomatology in response to the pandemic (Case Western Reserve University, 2020) and these kinds of negative impacts on psychological health are linked to heightened levels of anxiety and stress about the pandemic (Panchal et al., 2020). Heightened emotional arousal resulting from both the pandemic and the affair may make it more difficult for couples to effectively regulate their emotions during this time. This can inhibit the healing process as both partners are low on emotional resources at a time when they are needed most, are feeling more irritable than usual and due to their close proximity, and may be more likely to lash out at their partners (Weiner-Davis, 2020).

Increased Time Together

The stay-at-home regulations in response to the pandemic can mean that couples are spending more time together than usual and also have limited options for taking a break from one another. After the discovery of an affair, many couples will take a break from each other ranging from spending more time apart to one partner moving out of the house for a period of time (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Olson et al., 2002). This separation can provide both partners with time alone to think and reflect and can be helpful for healing. While some couples stay in contact during this time of separation, the conversation is usually focused on necessary topics (e.g., arrangements for the children, getting bills paid) and provides them with protected time to not talk about the affair (Olson et al., 2002). The current pandemic has made spending time apart much more difficult for couples to achieve, not only potentially hindering the process of recovery, but forcing partners to consistently be in close proximity to one another increases reminders of the affair (Weiner-Davis, 2020). While communication is an important part of the healing process (Olson et al., 2002; Timm & Blow, 2018), constantly discussing the affair and the details of the extradyadic relationship may be more harmful than helpful to healing (Fife et al., 2013). However, there is a natural tendency for the injured partner (i.e., the partner who did not have the affair) to be overwhelmingly curious about the details of the affair and to request this information from his/her partner (Gordon & Baucom, 1998; Weeks & Treat, 2001). A lack of time apart may lead to conversations about the affair occurring before both partners feel emotionally ready to do so and consequently may result in the sharing of information about the affair that is ultimately damaging to the healing process.

Lack of Privacy

Infidelity is a much stigmatized phenomenon and carries a lot of social shame for couples who experience it. Responses to infidelity are plagued by intense and overwhelming emotions such as shock, anger, hurt, and despair, often resulting in yelling and the desire to distance from one another (Abrahamson et al., 2012). These intense emotions need space and time to be expressed and processed, which is more difficult for couples who have children in the home because they fear that their children will overhear them (Weiner-Davis, 2020). Research highlights the importance of protecting children from the negative consequences of parental infidelity (Negash & Morgan, 2016), leading many couples to desire to keep the affair a secret, which may be more difficult to do during the pandemic.

In addition, the common ways that they would get alone time and space from their partner (e.g., going to work, going to a friend's house) without drawing their children's attention to it are more limited and couples may be forced to spend more time together or risk disclosing their marital struggles to their children (Weiner-Davis, 2020). Furthermore, the risk of accidental disclosure may be higher during this time as children are more likely to overhear their parents' conversations as parents are being forced to have more of these conversations within earshot of their children than prior to the pandemic.

Rebuilding Trust

An important component of the recovery process is the rebuilding of the trust that was lost as a result of the affair (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Bird et al., 2007; Fife et al., 2013; Gordon et al., 2004; Olson et al., 2002). The process of rebuilding trust is slow, takes a lot of conscious effort from both partners, and often is not linear (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Gordon et al., 2004; Olson et al., 2002). Involved partners (i.e., the partner who had the affair) will often demonstrate their trustworthiness in a variety of ways to begin rebuilding trust in the relationship. In order to start the rebuilding process, the involved partner must agree to stop seeing the affair partner and put boundaries in place to avoid accidentally coming into contact with that person (Fife et al., 2013; Gordon et al., 2004). For example, the involved partner will go to a different gym if the affair partner exercises at the same one. In some cases, avoiding contact with the affair partner requires a more significant change of circumstances such as switching jobs, if the affair partner was a co-worker. Even with taking these additional measures, the involved partner may unexpectedly come into contact with the affair partner, and should tell their partner immediately in order to continue to build trust (Fife et al., 2013). When leaving the house for leisure purposes, the involved partner may also need to put additional measures in place to help their partner feel secure about their whereabouts and behaviors, such as taking the kids with him/her to the grocery store (Olson et al., 2002). The current pandemic has altered the ways in which couples are able to work on rebuilding trust as some of the strategies that were helpful before (e.g., taking kids to run errands) may not be feasible or advisable now. On the one hand, the drastic decrease in social contact with people outside of the home may be helpful for injured partners to begin rebuilding trust as they have more reassurance that the involved partner is not coming into physical contact with the affair partner (Weiner-Davis, 2020). However, this does not eliminate other forms of virtual contact for which couples will still need to work together in order to put boundaries in place. Furthermore, the boundaries that couples would ideally set up at the start of the recovery process around physical contact with the affair partner are likely not being put into practice during this time. However, at some point, when the restrictions around COVID-19 are lifted, couples will be forced to encounter these challenges and establish boundaries around these, which may feel like they are going backwards in the recovery process. The need to go back to the basics of building trust around physical encounters could be prohibitive to the couple's overall process of recovery.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEALING WITH INFIDELITY DURING COVID-19

The foundation of making it through affair recovery during COVID-19 starts with emotional regulation skills. While emotional regulation skills are always an important component of affair recovery, couples also need to understand that many experts are considering the uncertainty around COVID-19 to be akin to a chronic trauma, and as a result, it can also impair executive functioning, such as memory, concentration and ability to inhibit impulses. The increased uncertainty and feelings of anxiety surrounding the pandemic

may make it more difficult for individuals to regulate their emotions during this time, and therefore more important that couples focus on implementing emotion regulation strategies during recovery. We also recommend that couples acknowledge these increased difficulties and attempt to give themselves and each other more “grace” for mistakes and strong reactions during this time.

Couples should take steps to address their heightened arousal both individually and as a dyad. Individuals’ efforts at prevention might best take the form of managing their own reactions to stressors stemming from COVID-19 while also making efforts to maintain and improve connection with their partners to increase their relationship’s resilience to these stressors. There are a number of effective emotional regulation strategies that couples can employ to manage their increased stress in response to both the pandemic and the affair. First, naming and acknowledging feelings of anxiety, dread, sadness, and other vulnerable emotions is an important first step in managing these feelings (e.g., Linehan, 2015). Second, linking these feelings to situations and evaluating which parts of these situations can be addressed and which require acceptance allows individuals to reclaim some sense of predictability and control over events, while also helping to recognize areas where they might need to practice acceptance of uncertainty and lack of control (e.g., Linehan, 2015). For example, injured partners may acknowledge the dread that they feel when thinking about the regulations being lifted and their partner going back to work, as this will erase some of the comfort that they have felt with their partner always being home. While they do not have control around if and when their partner goes back to work, they do have control over how they choose to handle that as a couple. Third, self-care routines such as exercise, eating well, getting enough sleep, and building in supportive social contact with friends who will not take sides also help individuals create the internal resources to cope with these heightened stressors (e.g., Snyder et al., 2007). During the pandemic, individuals may need to be more creative about the ways that they are receiving this social support, as it is much harder to get space and time away from their partner (and children). For example, individuals may find that having these conversations with others works best from the car or in a private room after their children have gone to bed, or perhaps with proper precautions they may even be able to get some in-person support. Finally, recent research has suggested that increased mindfulness and mindfulness practices can facilitate forgiveness processes and interpersonal functioning (Johns et al., 2015), which can be practiced from anywhere, and therefore extremely feasible for both partners to focus on implementing when healing during a pandemic.

Couples will also need to work as a team to manage these intense emotions and to prevent interactions from escalating and causing more damage. One such strategy is to develop a specific safety plan for managing their interactions. Time-out techniques, as described by Epstein and Baucom (2002) might be particularly helpful in getting both members to agree on strategies to interrupt negative reciprocal cycles that are escalating beyond a mutually agreed upon point. Couples should be encouraged to view these “time-outs” as more akin to the time-outs taken by sports teams so that they can reengage more effectively as a team when they are done than the kind of time-outs imposed upon children who are misbehaving. While the strategies for engaging in a time-out may be more limited during the pandemic, individuals can still find things to do (e.g., go for a walk, listen to music, and do an exercise video at home) that will help them to calm down during the time-out period so that they are able to effectively reunite with their partner.

Furthermore, another recommendation is to schedule times to talk about the affair rather than having these discussions when emotions are running high (Snyder et al., 2007). This strategy serves two purposes, the first of which is to reduce the likelihood of emotional dysregulation during the conversation because the conversation does not start when an individual is emotionally triggered or upset. The second purpose is to manage the

amount of time that the couple spends discussing the affair, which may be even more important in a time period where partners cannot get a break from each other, and it would be easier to fall into a pattern of constantly talking about the affair. For many understandable reasons, injured partners will often find themselves to be obsessed and ruminative about the affair, which can lead to the affair taking over the couple's daily interactions. While this impulse is normal and understandable for a variety of reasons (see Gordon & Baucom, 1998), it ultimately can be a damaging and emotionally exhausting cycle for both partners and further inhibits their process of healing. Taking time to schedule these discussions can help couples to exit this cycle in that it assures the injured partner that the problem will not be ignored and allows them time to process the affair dyadically. It also helps the involved partner to not be blindsided by discussions at all times of the day and to know that there are some limits on the amount of discussion required, which is crucial during this time where couples may be sharing the same physical space for most of the day. This latter benefit is useful to both partners because setting this limit can often increase the involved partner's willingness to be part of affair explorations if they know that there are some safe parameters around the discussion.

Scheduling these talks also enables couples to find privacy for these discussions, which is generally more difficult to do during the pandemic. If affair discussions are left to "just happen" when emotions are running high, they are more likely to take place in more public parts of the house and create greater risk that children will overhear and become possibly triangulated in their parents' relationships. Couples can create privacy around these conversations by selecting a secluded place where the talks will occur—such as in their bedroom with the door shut and perhaps some form of white noise running at the door to discourage any curious eavesdroppers, on a walk through the neighborhood, in a garage, or even in their cars. Clinicians should encourage couples to be creative with how they find time and space to process the affair and to not give up quickly due to the increased challenges, which is something that they can continue to do even when engaging with couples through teletherapy. The involved partner often is experiencing a great deal of shame about this role, which in turn can lead to avoiding discussions so that this shame is not triggered. They will often use these privacy barriers to stymie attempts by the injured partner to engage around the affair, which may be easier to do during the pandemic because there is a greater lack of privacy at all times. Helping the involved partner to acknowledge the shame and the desire to avoid, and to think through the consequences of continued avoidance, can be a useful first step in addressing these barriers. Further, helping that same partner to consider the advantages of scheduling these talks can also help reduce the stonewalling behaviors, and create expectations that will help both partners feel more comfortable and confident in navigating this novel and stressful process.

As described above, one of the ways couples typically begin to move forward is for the injured partner to gradually begin to engage in more trusting behaviors with the involved partner. Initially, soon after the affair occurred, the injured partner might "check up" on the involved partner to make sure that they were where they said they would be, with who they said they would be with, and doing what they said they would be doing. These checking behaviors will not need to occur as frequently if the partner cannot move around freely due to COVID-19, and so partners may need to find another way to build trust. However, even during times of social distancing and stay-at-home orders, many couples may find themselves needing to leave the house for essentials (e.g., groceries, doctor appointments) or if one or both partners are considered an essential worker, and so opportunities to establish boundaries and set expectations may still exist. For couples who are primarily not leaving the house, they can redirect these strategies to checking in about virtual behaviors such as phone calls, text messages, and Face Time/Zoom/Skype calls, which will still allow them to practice setting these boundaries and building skills around

disclosure. For example, if the involved partner were to accidentally come in to physical contact with the affair partner he/she would need to disclose that to the injured partner, and the same principles apply if the involved partner is contacted by the affair partner. In fact, contact by the affair partner in any form is something that should be disclosed to the injured partner, but with the current pandemic these instances of virtual contact may be more likely. We have found that there are emotionally risky behaviors that can also build trust and connection between the partners, and perhaps could be better bridges to recovery. For example, given that one of the major damages an affair incurs comes from the fact that the involved partner puts their own needs over the securing of their partners, engaging in behaviors that actually or symbolically are the opposite can start to rebuild trust. To pull from previous recommendations, when an involved partner who experiences a great deal of shame and discomfort in processing conversations is willing to show up for the scheduled meetings and to approach them with honesty and nondefensiveness, these behaviors can go a long way toward demonstrating a willingness to prioritize their partners' needs over their own. A continued pattern of these behaviors can help to build up trust between the partners even when they are less able to move around in the world.

While many of the recommendations provided in this paper thus far are directed at the couples, research tells us that over 50% of couples who experience infidelity will seek out support through therapy (Peluso & Spina, 2008). Therefore, it is important to consider how clinicians can best support these couples despite the fact that many clinicians are now using teletherapy, as a way to balance the ability to continue to provide services while also complying with social distancing regulations. While teletherapy is a great resource for couples experiencing affair recovery during the pandemic, clinicians may need to further adapt their usual procedures to best meet the needs of these couples during this time. First, finding space and time away from the children may be more difficult but necessary when discussing the affair and the relational consequences of this. Clinicians can support couples in a dialogue about the best way to receive services during this time such as selecting a private space (e.g., in a car, in a bedroom with door closed and white noise machine running) and time (e.g., early in the morning, late in the evening) in which they will be able to achieve the necessary privacy for session. The selection of unusual times will also require more flexibility on the part of the clinician to accommodate this. Second, clinicians should discuss a "safety plan" with the couple that they can use should a session become so emotionally charged that one partner removes themselves from the screen. While these situations do occur in more traditional, in-person therapy formats as well, the clinician has a lot less control over ensuring both partners' safety with teletherapy and will want to make sure from the start that the couple has a plan that they both feel comfortable with. Third, clinicians may need to be more intentional to check in with couples about their routines and in particular any changes, or pending changes, to these. The changes may be subtle, such as one partner having to attend a couple of in-person meetings for work without going back full time or the decision to let their children have play dates again, but any change in routine could present new challenges to the couple for navigating boundaries and expectations and the clinician can play an important role in helping couples to do this. Finally, clinicians should create space in session for both partners to process their feelings, added stress, and uncertainty surrounding COVID-19. Couples may have a tendency to only want to focus on the affair in session, as this is their primary reason for seeking services. However, it is also important to acknowledge and encourage both partners to process their reactions to the pandemic as this is an added, and unique, stressor on top of the significant amount of stress experienced as a result of the affair.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, infidelity is a wrenching and devastating event that is difficult for couples to navigate even under the best of circumstances. Experiencing this relational trauma during a global pandemic that is also traumatic with far-reaching social and economic consequences is even more overwhelming. This context can intensify and exacerbate normal emotional reactions to affairs and complicates efforts toward recovery. Couples will need to dig deep and intentionally build emotional resources to meet these challenges. However, all is not lost in this context and there is hope for couples' recovery during this time. After many years of working with couples to deal with the discovery of an affair, we have found that couples can be astonishingly resilient. If they are able to work as a team to address their individual needs and to jointly address the barriers COVID-19 presents, this process can bring couples closer together and create relationships that are healthier than prior to the affair. We have had many couples express that while they would never wish an affair to have happened, they are grateful that it made them see pre-existing problems in their relationships and themselves that they are better off for having addressed more proactively. Furthermore, some couples are finding that COVID-19 gives them more opportunities to address and explore their issues, and some are finding the context of loss and grief are heightening their desire to prioritize their relationship and to value the time that they have together. Thus, COVID-19's vast and life-changing impacts can create added challenges and barriers in couples emotional and social lives, but as the cliché suggests, it also can create opportunities for immense growth for these couples and the clinicians who are trying to help them.

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