

How women and men forgive infidelity

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If you willingly have sex with another person, it pretty much doesn't matter whether you feel it's your fault. Credit: Shutterstock/NTB scanpix

Infidelity is one of the most common reasons that heterosexual couples break up. Researchers who have studied 160 different cultures find this to be true worldwide.

However, men and [women](#) look at different types of infidelity differently.

- Men usually regard physical infidelity—when their partner has sex with another person—more seriously than women do.
- Women regard emotional infidelity—when their partner initiates a close [relationship](#) with another person—as more serious.

Both sexes forgive similarly

Despite experiencing the different types of infidelity differently, men and women are about equally willing to forgive their partner. And the new findings show that the degree of forgiveness is not related to the type of infidelity.

"We're surprised that the differences between the sexes weren't greater. The mechanisms underlying forgiveness are more or less identical between genders," says Professor Leif Edward Ottesen Kennair at NTNU's Department of Psychology.

He has co-authored a new article in the *Journal of Relationships Research*. The article addresses infidelity and the mechanisms behind forgiveness.

Perceived threat to the relationship most important

A research group at NTNU recruited 92 couples for the study. These couples independently completed a questionnaire related to issues described in hypothetical scenarios where the partner had been unfaithful in various ways.

- One scenario describes the partner having sex with another person, but not falling in love.

- In the other scenario, the partner falls in love with another person, but does not have sex.

So how willing are people to forgive their partner? It turns out that men and women both process their partner's infidelity almost identically.

Most people, regardless of gender and the type of infidelity, think it unlikely that they would forgive their partner's infidelity.

"Whether or not the couple breaks up depends primarily on how threatening to the relationship they perceive the infidelity to be," says first author Trond Viggo Grøntvedt, a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Psychology.

The more threatening the infidelity feels, the worse it is for the relationship.

Willingness to forgive

Whether partners believe the relationship can continue also depends on how willing they are to forgive each other, especially in terms of avoiding distancing themselves from their partner.

Of course, great individual differences exist, even within each gender. People react differently to infidelity, according to their personality and the circumstances.

"A lot of people might think that couples who have a strong relationship would be better able to tolerate infidelity, but that wasn't indicated in our study," says Professor Mons Bendixen at NTNU's Department of Psychology.

Blame and infidelity

Another aspect plays a role in cases of emotional [infidelity](#), where no sex has taken place. To what extent can the unfaithful partner be blamed for what happened?

"The degree of blame attributed to the partner was linked to the willingness to forgive," says Bendixen.

The relationship is at greater risk if the partner is required to bear a big part of the responsibility for ending up in an intimate relationship with someone else.

"The blame factor doesn't come into play when the partner is physically unfaithful," Grøntvedt says.

If you voluntarily have sex with someone other than your partner, it's more or less irrelevant whether you think it was mostly your fault or not. Possible forgiveness does not depend on accepting blame.

More information: Trond Viggo Grøntvedt et al. Breakup Likelihood Following Hypothetical Sexual or Emotional Infidelity: Perceived Threat, Blame, and Forgiveness, *Journal of Relationships Research* (2020). [DOI: 10.1017/jrr.2020.5](https://doi.org/10.1017/jrr.2020.5)

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