

Preface

A husband whose wife is having an affair; a child sexually abused by his priest; a soldier ordered into an unsafe battle by his commanding officer; a single mother who is overworked and underpaid in her secretarial job; a group of people sharing the same ethnic heritage who are denied access to leadership roles—in each of these cases, there is mistreatment and injustice. Infidelity, abuse, treachery, workplace exploitation (in a society valuing fairness), discrimination (in a society valuing equality), and injustice (in a society valuing justice) are examples of betrayal. Betrayal can be mundane or a central threat to our well-being.

Betrayal violates us. It can destroy relationships and the very trust we need to be intimate in our relationships. It can and does damage the social fabric that creates the bonds for a healthy society. In the case of children, the effects can last a lifetime. Betrayed children may grow into adults who fail to trust the trustworthy or who too readily trust people who further betray them. Whether being too willing or too unwilling to trust, difficulty with trust not only interferes with relationships, but also eats away at a strong sense of self. Those who were betrayed as children often suffer severe self-esteem problems, as well as depression, anxiety, and even psychosis.¹

Yet even though betrayal is often in our very midst and of critical importance, we frequently don't acknowledge the mistreatment or notice the betrayal. We shield ourselves from the awareness of it. Whether the betrayal is in our closest relationships, in our workplaces, or in our society, we often have a powerful motivation to remain ignorant.

We remain blind to betrayal in order to protect ourselves. We fear risking the status quo, and thus our security, by actually *knowing*

too much. At the same time, there are costs to our ignorance. This is a very real dilemma that we frequently face, yet rarely recognize fully. Too often, we deal with this dilemma by implicitly choosing to remain unaware, in order to avoid the risk of seeing treachery or injustice. The victim who sees the mistreatment is likely either to confront the betrayal or to withdraw from the situation and the relationship.² That confrontation or withdrawal may lead to a good outcome, or it may risk inciting a crisis that is very threatening for a disempowered or dependent person. In contrast, by remaining unaware of the mistreatment, the husband, the child, the soldier, the working mother, or the oppressed group may not be able to escape the injustice. The best way to keep a secret is not to know it in the first place; unawareness is a powerful survival technique when information is too dangerous to know.

Knowledge of betrayal is always destabilizing. Whether we are the betrayers, the observers, or the betrayed, to *know* about betrayal is likely to provoke actions that disturb the status quo and threaten our security. Consider the recent crisis in the Catholic Church: denial and cover-up of sexual abuse gave way to acknowledgment and investigation. All sorts of arrangements and power structures were threatened as a consequence of this crisis. Even when we are not the direct victims, a fear of disturbing the status quo and thus jeopardizing our own comfort, perhaps even our survival, motivates us to remain blind to betrayal.

Systematically not seeing important instances of treachery and injustice is an observable, ubiquitous psychological phenomenon that we call *betrayal blindness*. We have discovered in our work as a research psychologist (Jennifer J. Freyd) and a clinical psychologist (Pamela J. Birrell) that this *not seeing* is all around us, ultimately resulting in negative consequences, both in our personal lives and in our society.

Betrayal addresses five primary questions about betrayal blindness: (1) What is it? (2) Why do we do it? (3) How do we do it? (4) What does it do to us? (5) How do we break free of it?

In chapter 1, we examine the story of Julie Stone, a bright professional woman who was completely blind to the infidelity of her husband. Julie is not alone. Her case illustrates aspects of betrayal that we all can recognize and learn from. In chapter 2, we investigate betrayal in childhood through the stories of Rebecca and Kevin,

each of whom suffered many betrayals during their childhood. Both Rebecca and Kevin had to remain blind to their betrayal, although the types of betrayal they experienced were different in detail. (In this book, we use real-life stories to explain and illustrate the research and the theory. We have, however, changed the names and identifying details of the people whose stories we used, to preserve their privacy.) Chapter 3 continues to explore the scope of betrayal and betrayal blindness by considering the stories of a sixteen-year-old girl molested on a plane by her coach, and a sixteen-year-old boy captured and imprisoned in a Russian work camp. Their reactions illustrate both the effects of betrayal and being blind to it.

Chapter 4 introduces the concept of institutional betrayal. It is not only people we trust who can hurt us, but trusted institutions as well. For instance, we can remain blind to betrayal by employers, churches, educational institutions, and governments when we depend on them.

What motivates victims of betrayal, perpetrators of betrayal, and those who witness betrayal to remain ignorant of something so significant in their lives? Chapter 5 explores these questions through the story of Hendrik. Concepts such as betrayal trauma, social contracts, cheater detectors, and fight-flight-and-freeze are introduced and explained.

How do we keep information about betrayal from our awareness? How do we know and not know at the same time? Chapter 6 begins to answer this question through the story of Samantha. We first learn about Samantha's blindness regarding infidelity and then, in chapter 7, we examine her blindness to abuse and domestic violence. We learn that blindness to relational betrayal often includes blindness to abuse and other forms of violence. Chapter 8 reviews research on underlying psychological mechanisms that blind us and keep us blind. We explore concepts such as meta-cognition, directed forgetting, and alexithymia in our explanation of underlying psychological processes.

What impact is betrayal blindness having on us? Chapter 9 describes the toxic effects of betrayal and its blindness on individuals, relationships, and institutions. Toxicity includes dissociation, borderline personality, intergenerational abuse, revictimization, and a host of other problems. Cathy's story illustrates many of these effects. In chapter 10, we begin to address the question of how to stop

being blind by considering the impact of telling and knowing about betrayal. Telling and knowing can be risky, as we illustrate with a very close and personal story that affected us.

Telling and knowing can also be healing, as Sean Bruyey's story in chapter 11 attests. How would the world be different if we were more aware of what is really happening in our lives? Chapter 12 further examines how healing from betrayal and its blindness can blossom into hope and justice. In this chapter, Cathy shares her healing story and Beth tells her experience of betrayal in therapy and her return to wholeness.

In chapter 13, we continue with our own story and describe coming full circle from betrayal to intimacy to hope. Chapter 14 offers suggestions to prevent betrayal and betrayal blindness and provides approaches to healing. It is meant for those who have been betrayed, their friends and supporters, and the institutions that may have betrayed them. Paradoxically, the very blindness we may rely on for survival in the short run can lead us astray in the long run. Fortunately, if we so choose, we can learn to become less blinded by the treacheries and injustices that are there for the seeing. We need only learn how to transform blindness into insight.