

RECOVERY AFTER INFIDELITY



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RECOVERY AFTER INFIDELITY

After the devastating discovery that your partner has been cheating on you, it can sometimes feel as if it isn't worth the effort it's going to take to rebuild your marriage. Sometimes you wonder whether you'd be better off cutting your losses and ending the marriage now. Unfortunately, there is bound to be pain, says Shirley P. Glass in *Not "Just Friends" - Rebuilding Trust and Recovering Your Sanity After Infidelity*. I must admit that my own bias is on the side of working on the relationship. Although each individual has to make his or her own decision, I hope that it won't be a hasty one. Please take your time to figure it out while you read on.

SHOULD YOU PICK UP THE PIECES OR THROW IN THE TOWEL?

"I don't know what to do. I'm damned if I stay and damned if I go." *"Sometimes it feels like we've never been closer, and other times it feels like I'm sleeping with the enemy."* In some cases, the revelation of an affair can bring a moment of utter clarity. Some involved partners, as soon as they realize that they are on the brink of losing their marriage, know in their bones that they want it to survive. They may have swung easily from spouse to lover when they were living the double life, but once they are faced with the final choice,

there is no doubt they want to keep the marriage. It's as though they've been living in a trance and the shock of the revelation snaps them back to reality. Some betrayed partners also react with the same clarity of purpose. They know that no matter what, they want their errant spouse to stay and work with them to make the marriage stronger.

For others, the moment of clarity provides the energy to leave. Years of low-level dissatisfaction or downright unhappiness may have crystallized into the sharp realization that the marriage is over. When one partner externalizes those feelings by having an affair, the betrayal serves as evidence that the marriage is not working. As painful as the realization may be, either party can use it as a catalyst for deciding to divorce.

Nevertheless early decisions to stay or leave are not written in permanent ink. Even the person whose mind seems to be made up today can have a change of heart

tomorrow. The partner who is fed up or emotionally detached one day can initiate romantic overtures the very next day. The partner who is convinced he or she would walk through fire to save the marriage may end up walking into divorce court. Nothing you say or hear this early in the game is set in stone. Research shows that 25 percent of couples who file for divorce never complete the process.



Most couples, however, find themselves in a purgatory of indecision. People swing back and forth between wanting to stay and wanting to leave. Either partner may doubt that doing the work of trying to resurrect the relationship is worth it. At this point, throwing in the towel can look a whole lot easier than picking up the pieces, but I encourage you to wait for at least three months before you make a final decision.

It's no wonder that people get tired and feel like giving up. When they are together, they remind each other of the pain. He looks into her eyes and sees his fallen image. She looks into his eyes and sees someone who lied to her. It feels unbearable to both of them. Adding to the sense of unreality are feelings of despair and isolation alternating with moments of passion when they feel and intensity they haven't felt for years.

Whether the affair has triggered certainty or uncertainty, it is productive to remember that at this early point, anything can happen. Ambivalence is common during the first few months after disclosure.

In the first few weeks, everything is still shifting. Aftershocks are still ripping through the marriage, disrupting whatever stability has been hard won. Sometimes it's hard to tell exactly what you feel in the midst of all the confusion and high emotion. At this point, it may help you to tell yourself that your staying means only that you are committing to a process of grieving and healing. You're taking a close look at yourself and your marriage to face whatever problems there may be. You both need time to see how you feel in the aftermath of the trauma, when the aftershocks have subsided.

To figure out a rough timeline for yourselves, you need to look at the timeline of the affair itself. An affair that took a long time to heat up may take a longer time to cool down than one that ignited rapidly. When a friendship slowly progresses after many months or even years into a full-fledged love affair, the unfaithful partners may try to move backward across the timeline and maintain the friendship without the romantic attachment or sexual intimacy. Ambivalent partners will have great difficulty following the recommendation to cut off all contact with the affair partner.

Ambivalence Barometer: Walls and Windows

Assessing the relative placement of walls and windows in both relationships provides us with a way of measuring ambivalence. Walls and windows tell us how far the unfaithful partner has moved back into the marriage. We can get



an indication of where current loyalties lie by noticing what communication goes on between the marriage partners versus what remains between the affair partners. Keep in mind that things are constantly fluctuating. The window that's closed today may be thrown wide open tomorrow and vice versa.

Walls

In the first few months after the disclosure, there are many walled-off areas within the marriage. Involved partners are often reluctant to expose secrets and reveal continuing contact with their lover because they are not yet sure what they want. They may believe that telling the truth about their ambivalence would only upset their spouse. They play their cards close to their chest and do not want any decisions to be taken away from them. They may erect walls in both relationships in order to control the situation and keep it from blowing up before they have decided what to do.

Sid had not yet decided to end his affair and commit to his marriage. He wouldn't talk to Sally about the affair out of loyalty to his affair partner. He refused to talk to his affair partner about how marital therapy was going.

Injured partners may also put up walls to protect themselves from further betrayal. Sally did extensive detective work to see whether Sid was being truthful, but she was keeping the information "on hold" in case they ended up divorcing.



Windows

At the same time that Sally wanted to keep some walls solidly around her own espionage, she kept trying to get Sid to open more windows into the affair. Sid had opened some windows with Sally but was still keeping others tightly shut. He told Sally that occasionally ran into his ex-lover at work, but he made it sound much more casual than it really was. He was genuinely concerned about his affair partner, so he kept in touch to see how she was doing since the breakup.

Sid and Sally were both planning contingencies in case the marriage didn't work out. Sid tried to keep his lover "on hold" by checking in with her from time to time, a sign of his ambivalence. Sally was also keeping her options open by consulting a lawyer on the same day she cooked

Sid's favorite dinner as a surprise.

Two on a Seesaw

The ambivalence of one partner feeds off the ambivalence of the other as they teeter back and forth between staying and leaving. The betrayed partner easily becomes discouraged by the lack of devotion and remorse. The involved partner is put off by the betrayed partner's anxiety and hopelessness. Both of them long to look into adoring eyes that will convince them to stay.

Both partners may demonstrate ambivalence by withdrawing, attacking, or failing to initiate caring actions or affectionate gestures. Refusal to appreciate or acknowledge positive actions is another indication that commitment to work on the marriage is shaky.

Ambivalence in the Involved Partner

If you are the involved partner, you could be afraid of making the wrong decision and that this can set the course for the rest of your life. You may be paralyzed by the knowledge that one of the people you're attached to will be hurt and abandoned. You may not be able to bear the thought of living without one person or the other.

Making comparisons

If you have been involved in a romantic love affair, it is normal for you to doubt your love for your spouse. I have heard hundreds of unfaithful partners say, "I love you, but *in love* with you."

Keep in mind that when you compare your affair partner with your spouse, you are not really comparing two individuals. What you are comparing is how it feels to be in an idealized, romantic relationship with how it feels to be in a reality-based, long-term relationship.

To look at it another way, the choice you are making could be between *the part of you that wants excitement* and *the part of you that wants comfort and familiarity*. Each relationship calls forth a different part of your self.

You may be struggling to choose between opposites; between a business executive husband who is meticulous and dependable and a bohemian boyfriend who is disorganized and unpredictable. Strangely enough, the traits you love in your affair partner may be the exact opposite of the traits that originally attracted you to your spouse.



Frequently, what attracts you to your affair partner can end up being a problem later. For example, the energy and excitement that you fire you up in brief binges could be tiring as a steady diet. Just remember that no relationship can meet all your needs. You can't have it all.

Wanting both

When I hear that involved spouses can't decide, I surmise that they have already decided. What they actually want is to keep *both* relationships. The involved partner's undeclared wish is understandable, but the worst resolution of this dilemma is living with an extramarital triangle.

You may believe you can continue to spend time together - only without sex. The thought of going cold turkey and never having another shared moment with your love may seem beyond your powers to imagine.

Certainly, the longer the affair has lasted and the more satisfying it was, the harder it is to let go of it. Letting go takes time. The best solution, none the less, is to go cold turkey and stop the affair, so that you and your betrayed partner can commit to discovering whether the marriage has a chance of surviving.

Ambivalence in the Betrayed Partner

If you are the betrayed partner, you're probably more inclined to work on the marriage if your partner shows a strong commitment to you and goes out his or her way to be appreciative and attentive. If your partner is

still grieving the loss of the other relationship, however, acts of devotion may be slow to appear in the first weeks or even months after discovery.

It's important to stay centered while your partner is bouncing off the walls. Remember, inconsistency probably means that your partner is pulled in opposite directions by these two competing attachments. Take hope if the pendulum seems to be swinging closer and closer to you. Don't push your partner away or try to pull your partner in. Sink your feet firmly into the ground and declare your commitment to work on the marriage alongside your partner, as long as your partner is willing to meet you halfway.

When Nikki found out about Norm's affair, she was shocked and filled with self-doubt. Norm's behavior was so erratic that she didn't know whether she was committing or going. One minute he wanted to make love, and the next minute he told her he had signed a



contract to rent an apartment. Two weeks after he moved out, Norm begged Nikki to let him move back home.

Damage Control for Both Partners

During this period of instability, you both need to limit damaging interactions that could negatively affect your ability to reconcile. People tend to act out their ambivalence with confusing behaviors. It is preferable to label yourself openly and honestly as ambivalent. If you cannot throw yourself wholeheartedly back into the relationship, admit that you are struggling with your inner conflict.

As a betrayed partner, you should make it clear what you will and will not tolerate. For example, e-mails or phone calls to the affair partner that are open to you and are clearly for the purpose of terminating the relationship might be acceptable. Staying out late with no explanation probably unacceptable. Don't go berserk when these expectations are violated. Instead, talk about how you feel and give a realistic deadline of a few months' time for making a firm commitment.

Unfaithful partners should make it clear that they take responsibility for the injuries caused, but they do not have to accept days on end of verbal abuse. If you can't commit to completely severing the relationship with your affair partner, then you must commit to total honesty about the degree of your indecision.

A remarkable thing happens when you are honest with each other, even if it is about your ambivalence. You feel closer because taking down walls and opening windows results in greater intimacy.



Getting Off the Fence

Making the decision to go or stay is particularly difficult because both of you are feeling heartsick, stressed, and exhausted. You worry that the damage that's been done cannot be repaired. The involved spouse may be feeling hopeless about coming to a resolution and tired to the bone by the emotional storms that gather and break continually. If you're the betrayed spouse, you wonder whether you will ever be able to stop visualizing your partner with someone else. You don't know if you can ever feel special again. You don't know if you can ever forgive your partner for giving away what you considered sacred to your marriage.

Think things through before you act. Although there are seldom any easy answers, here are some thought-

provoking questions for unfaithful or betrayed partners who are undecided:

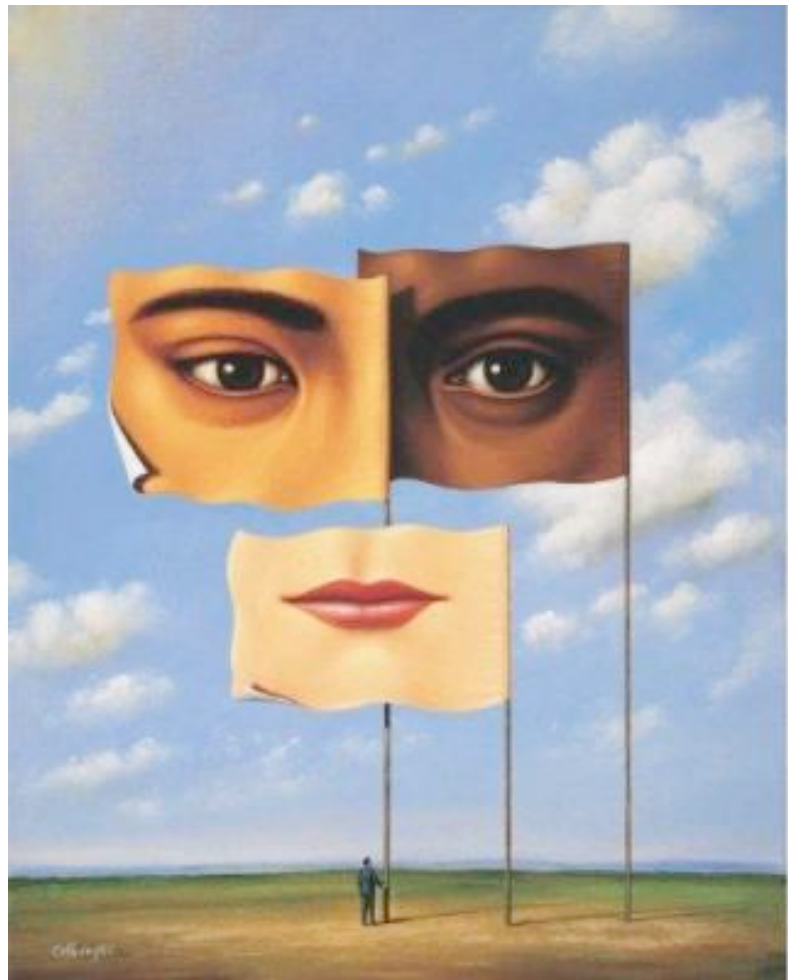
- What would your life be like without your spouse - in the immediate future, five years from now, and twenty years from now?
- What do you remember about the good times you've shared with your partner?
- Do you *love* your partner, down deep? (Not liking him or her is different from not loving.)
- Do you *like* the fundamental type of person your partner is? (Not liking him or her is not the same as the disappointment you may be feeling.)
- Are you and your partner basically compatible?
- Are you willing to understand what vulnerabilities set the stage for the affair?
- Are you willing to work toward forgiving and being forgiven for the ways you could have hurt each other?

Questions Betrayed Partners Can Ask Themselves

- Is this infidelity part of a larger picture of cheating and lying?
- Has this kind of thing happened before?
- Do you trust your partner to tell you the truth about other things?
- Is your partner generally dependable and trustworthy?
- Is your partner understanding about your pain?
- Is your partner willing to allay your anxiety by being accountable?

Questions Involved Partners Can Ask Themselves

- Does your affair partner want children?
- If you already have a family, do you want to be raising another family in the future?
- What would it be like for you and your affair partner to raise stepchildren together?
- How would your children handle your marriage to the person who broke up their intact families?
- If the traits that attracted you to your affair partner were to become exaggerated, would you still be attracted?
- What would it be like when the passion of a forbidden love wears off ten years from now?
- Would you still want to divorce your spouse even if the relationships with the affair partner doesn't work out?
- What happened to the dreams you once had about what it would be like to grow old together with your spouse?



Other Considerations

- *Guilt or duty:* If the only thing that holds you now is a sense of obligation or duty, that's an okay place to start but not an okay place to end. If you feel stuck because of financial or religious barriers to divorce, you are signing up for an empty-shell marriage. Your obligation should be to enhance your marital relationship so that good comes out of suffering.
- *For the children:* Marriage as martyrdom is a poor role model for your children's future relationships. Don't dedicate yourself to a life of misery. If you're staying only because of the children, then start connecting with your spouse through family activities but don't let that be the end point.



•*Repair work:* Leaving a bad marriage without trying to repair it first is like trying to sell your house right after a rainstorm flooded your living room. Once you have finished cleaning and redecorating, you might decide to put it up for sale. If you leave while you are feeling devastated, depleted and demoralized, you'll always wonder whether you made the right choice.

•*Strength or weakness:* Don't stay because you're too weak to end it and too afraid to be on your own. Stay because you're strong enough to handle the emotional roller coaster. Stay because you are independent enough to take care of yourself. Don't leave because you're running away from conflict. Leave because you've done everything possible for many months and there's absolutely no sign of progress.

- *Reality check:* People tend to carry their psychological problems with them to the next relationship. Old, destructive patterns are perpetuated unless you deal with them, and second marriages may have the added strain of blended families and stepchildren. Statistically, there is a 50 percent divorce rate for first marriages and a 70 percent divorce rate in second marriages. Relationships that began through betrayal and broken trust often end up having their own problems with trust.

Picking Up the Pieces

Time is almost always on the side of the marriage if both spouses are patient. Wait at least three months, and try to be hopeful, even when the immediate situation is ambiguous and unresolved. Dealing with the fallout from infidelity should lead to either a better marriage or an unavoidable divorce.

Look for progress from week to week instead of from moment to moment. Setbacks and relapses are common at this stage. Let things play out. Once you have decided to stay together, you can follow a proven pathway to cope with post-traumatic reactions together.

HOW TO COPE WITH OBSESSING AND FLASHBACKS

"I couldn't go to movies or listen to love songs. Everything became a reminder of how I had been betrayed." Post-traumatic reactions occur when we've been exposed to life-threatening events. However, betrayed partners whose *psychological* safety is threatened by infidelity commonly display these same clusters of symptoms, and the symptoms can occur over a long period of time.

Intrusion

Intrusion comes from the traumatic images associated with betrayal, such as the moment of disclosure, the suspected intimacies of the affair, or the string of lies preceding the disclosure. TV talk shows, love songs, or even ordinary physical objects that were benign before the revelation now seem electrified with the pain of betrayal.

Lovemaking scenes in movies may create vivid images of illicit sex. Words like "loyalty" can trigger a whole train of intrusive thoughts regarding the treachery in your marriage.

Obsessing

Betrayed partners cannot seem to stop obsessing about the affair until they have all the answers, which can take months. They turn over lies and unanswered questions incessantly in their heads. They develop fixations on visual images, snippets of conversation, and puzzling memories that don't quite add up. They invest a lot of energy in discovering the truth about earlier lies. They question and reexamine all the details of their life together that made perfect sense before, in an effort to reconstruct the real truth.

The need to recapitulate and go over minute details means that the tape of the betrayal runs over and over, on and on, seemingly for ever - a continuous loop of details cycling through memory.



Belinda found it difficult to work through the damage of her husband's one-year love affair. She was obsessed with a love letter she had intercepted. Although En claimed he wasn't emotionally involved with the other woman, the passionate and loving language told a different story. The poetry, which Belinda hadn't heard from him for many years, haunted her. It was as though Belinda wanted to make more pain for herself by contrasting how romantic he was with his affair partner with how unromantic he was with her. Every time she talked to her husband, his reassurances sounded false and hollow. For a very long time, Belinda's reality was that love letter.

Usually, the unfaithful partner suppresses and the betrayed partner obsesses. To escape accountability, the involved partner may promote forgetting by denying or minimizing the magnitude of the betrayal. Before discovery, cheating partners do what they can to discourage or dismiss their naïve partner's worries or suspicions. Now they may try to perpetuate their own guiltlessness by making routine apologies, claiming that the affair was minor or meaningless, redirecting blame toward the betrayed partner, or insisting that it's time to get over it and move on. Anything to avoid having to recount guilty chapter and verse.

How to Deal with Obsessive Thoughts

Until you take steps to grapple with shattered assumptions and construct a story about the affair that makes sense to you, you will be prone to obsessing. Obsessive thoughts may intrude throughout the process of recovery until healing is complete, although they tend to



subside as safety and openness are established in the marriage. When obsessive thoughts are too intense or obtrusive, it is important to be able to control them. Following are some techniques that have worked for others:

Write Down Your Thoughts

Writing provides a safe way to express and let go of thoughts

and feelings without concern about the effect they may have on other people. Keep a journal or write letters (which you don't send) and just let the feelings flow out of you onto the paper. Give yourself permission to write uncensored thoughts and follow your obsession to the point of exhaustion.

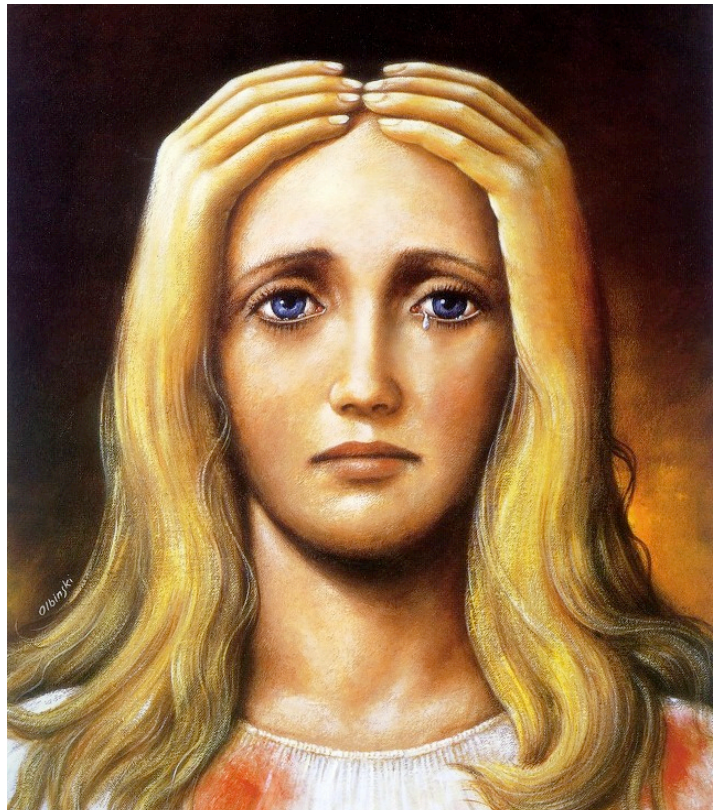
Control Your Thoughts

You can control your obsessive thoughts by using these techniques:

- *Schedule worry times:* You can discipline yourself to worry or fret only during certain designated times of the day and for a specific amount of time, from fifteen minutes to one hour. If a thought intrudes at any other time, tell yourself that you can't think about it now; you have to wait until your next scheduled "worry time."
- *Change the channel:* Imagine a remote control inside your mind that can surf from channel to channel. Whenever you're invaded by unwanted images, switch to another program.
- *Practice thought-stopping:* The moment a negative thought or image begins to intrude, shut your eyes and tell yourself sub-vocally to "stop." Imagine a red stop sign and think of the word "stop." Wear a rubber band around your wrist and snap it. Or press your fingernails into the palms of your hands.

Flashbacks

One night, Colleen woke up at midnight and realized that Cliff hadn't come to bed yet. She got up and found a light shining under the closed and locked door of his computer room. Even though she totally believed that Cliff's Internet affair was over and that he was working on a work project, she went into a panic. It triggered a flashback to the nights when he used to lock himself in the study at 3:00 A.M. and indulge in sexual affairs on-line. Like others who experience flashbacks, on this night Colleen experienced the physical symptoms that accompanied the original trauma.



How to Cope with Flashbacks

When flashbacks occur like a bolt out of the blue during a period of progress and goodwill, it is natural to feel discouraged, as if the uncontrollable emotions will never end. You will know that healing is nearly complete when flashbacks are twinges rather than painful re-experiences. These are ways of coping alone or with your partner:

- *Face flashbacks together:* During therapy, couples may receive flashback training based on compassionate communication skills. The essential lesson is for the betrayed partner to learn how to share flashbacks without blaming and for the unfaithful spouse to empathize and listen.

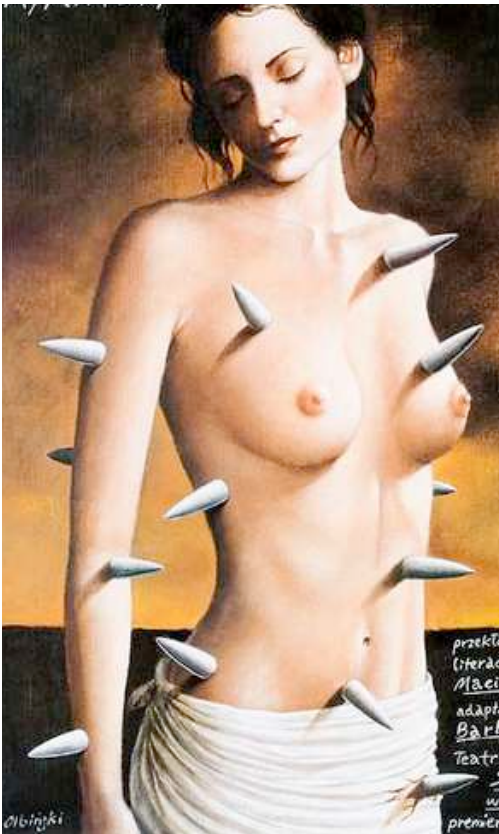
- *Predict or avoid flashbacks:* Couples can learn to predict situations that could evoke flashbacks and talk about how they can handle them together. Yvette's husband added miles to his daily commute to avoid the city park where she used to go for walks with her affair partner.
- *Ride the wave:* Sometimes flashbacks are unavoidable. Once it begins, you should not try to block it - this may only intensify it. Say to yourself, "This is just a flashback. It will pass." If you stand up to a wave while you're in the ocean, you're liable to get knocked down by its force. Riding the wave will move you safely along toward the shoreline.

Constriction

Some traumatized individuals describe feeling numb, show no interest in normal activities, and are detached from other people. Many betrayed persons vacillate between intrusive thoughts and excessive emotionality on the one hand and constrictive symptoms of avoidance and withdrawal on the other hand.

Exhaustion caused by preoccupation with the betrayal can lead to a state of not wanting to think about it, hear about it, or talk about it. After all the high drama, emotional constriction sounds like a relief; not to feel anything, not to care. But this is only a temporary state. First you get numb, then you bleed.

Betrayed spouses who appear inexplicably calm after disclosure, who express no feelings, ask no questions, and display almost no emotion are probably numb. This is a protective strategy for events that are too intense or painful to bear. During the recovery process, the constricted partner gradually thaws out as the details of the betrayal are integrated into a new reality. This process of emotional integration hurts the same way that frozen hands ache unbearably as they warm.



Hyperarousal

Long after the revelation of a betrayal, people remain supersensitive and super alert. The nervous system goes into overdrive, ready to react to any additional threat. The betrayed partner who is experiencing hyperarousal is like an automobile engine that is idling on high. Just as it takes one little tap on the gas pedal for rapid acceleration, it takes just one cue to increase the pulse and reactivate the sweat glands. Rational acts of self-preservation become exaggerated into irrational acts of overprotection. Double-checking the facts turns into a full-time preoccupation. Prudent watchfulness becomes paranoia.

Physiological Hyperarousal

Carolyn was still experiencing hyperreactions one month after she found out Chas was having an affair with Roxie, a friend from church. She was so

anxious she felt she was going to jump out of her skin. She had trouble falling asleep and then woke up in the middle of the night. In the morning, she was exhausted and didn't want to get out of bed. She couldn't concentrate on anything for very long. She lost her appetite completely. She said, *"I've lost weight, but I don't feel thin. I just feel unwell."* The anti-anxiety medication prescribed by her doctor deepened her depression, and she began to experience fleeting suicidal thoughts. Continuing therapy and a switch of medication to antidepressants helped stabilize her mood swings after a few weeks.

Psychological Hyperarousal

It is important to express emotions without being out of control. Rage and other intense feelings are common, but be careful not to add any more scar tissue. Words used as weapons have infinite power to wound. Jack confessed that no amount of time or loving communication had been able to erase the memory of Jolene's words when she found out about his affair: *"She screamed unspeakable things. She told me that I had been a disappointment to her sexually. She said she hadn't wanted to marry me in the first place."* Although this couple decided to stay together, Jack says that his wife's words still repeatedly echo in his ears.



Think of the extra wounds you'll both carry into the future when you hurl terrible insults at each other. Look for ways to hasten the healing instead of continuing to rip off each other's scabs. People give themselves permission to be out of control because they feel justified. You can choose to contain your anger. Develop methods of containing rage and despair through self-soothing techniques such as hot baths, massage, meditation, and deep breathing.

Hypervigilance

Watching for further signs of danger is an important survival technique. Betrayed partners who become unrelenting sleuths have turned their internal radar on high alert. They are bloodhounds running down the clues. Every scent of possible betrayal requires immediate investigation.

Olivia felt that she had somehow morphed from a relaxed, trusting person into a paranoid maniac.

Despite her wish to avoid the subject, she avidly grilled Oren about every detail of his workday. Despite his complete and rational accountings, her doubts continued. *"Every time I call the office and he's not there, I freak out. Every time he's fifteen minutes late, I'm convinced he's with her."*

Although *vigilance* in these uncertain situations is appropriate, *unceasing hypervigilance* can destroy the relationship it is intended to preserve. Unfaithful partners who are wrestling with their own ambivalence will be put off by their partners' exaggerated need to

know the “facts.” They will be worn out by their partner’s extreme sensitivity to the suspicion that they are lying again.

How to Handle Hypervigilance

- *Be accountable:* Although extreme hypervigilance is not conducive to recovery, it is reasonable for the unfaithful partner to be accountable for his or her whereabouts. Straightforward answers will alleviate anxiety.
- *Check it out:* It is perfectly reasonable for the betrayed partner to become a detective, but it is totally destructive to become an inquisitor. An inquisitor jumps out with twenty questions and tries to find out everything there is. In contrast, a detective checks things out, follows up, and tries to get useful information. If suspicions persist, check them out. Invest in a private investigator if necessary. Every time something checks out as okay, trust starts to rebuild. But what if you discover more lies? Then the relationship ends up further back than when you started, and you are sadder but wiser.
- *Let it go:* At some point, the betrayed partner does have to hang up the detective gear. If persistent hypervigilance endures beyond a year despite investigations that corroborate truthfulness, the cause may be unresolved trust issues from previous relationships. If detective work becomes a new lifetime career because your partner keeps deceiving you, you need to either let go and accept that you are married to a philanderer or find a new partner.

New Crises

Let’s say that the conditions for recovery are optimum: the affair is ended, the couple has committed through the issues, and both partners are actively seeking to create safety and goodwill. *Still*, other shoes are going to drop. Most couples experience relapses and new crises especially in the early stages of recovery. No matter how well you may be working together as a couple, the behavior of the affair partner, which is not under your control, can also provoke a crisis.



Making the transition from less openness and more lies to more openness and fewer lies will generate new information about previous deceptions. The new information will reverberate painfully until it has been absorbed. When something happens that shatters your fragile new stability into a million pieces, you feel as if you’re right back where you started.

Uncovering Previous Lies

Two months after she had discovered that Ken had been taking his assistant to out-of-town conventions, Kris was feeling pretty good about their progress. Then one day, she began thinking about about a conference he had attended six months earlier. After doing some careful checking, she discovered that the conference flyer he had shown her had been a fake. He had really spent the weekend at a resort with his lover. It took several weeks for the two of them to resolve the pain created by the revelation of his incredible trickery.

Handling the Affair Partner's Intrusions

Perhaps the greatest source of crisis is an unplanned encounter with the affair partner. If a



couple knows that the affair partner will be present at a social event they must attend, they can discuss ahead of time how best to demonstrate polite but firm solidarity as a couple.

Often, as the bond between the couple grows stronger, affair partners will escalate their campaign of sabotage. They may make harassing or self-disclosing phone calls to the betrayed spouse, relentlessly pursue their former lover, or threaten suicide.

After the involved partner has said clearly and forcefully that the affair is over, they can manage intrusions together by creating a *unified front* for dealing with the affair partner. It is extremely important that the the involved partner *not* handle the affair partner unilaterally. It must be clear to the affair partner that there will be no continuation of a secret relationship and the the married lover is committed to the marriage. The betrayed partner must not blame his or her spouse for

the affair partner's behavior. In fact, escalating intrusions can be perceived as acts of desperation by the affair partner because the affair is truly over.

Relapses

Setbacks are inevitable, so it is important not to confuse a *lapse* or *relapse* with a state of total *collapse*. A lapse is a little slip with quick recovery, and a relapse is a regression to t prior state of distress followed by a slow recovery. In contrast, a collapse is complete disintegration with little hope of recovery.

Sooner or later, the betrayed partner will react with bitterness, sarcasm, or blaming to something the involved partner has honestly shared. Inevitably, at some point, the involved partner won't have the patience to endure one more hysterical outburst. Without meaning to, one or the other will have a poor response and set off a chain reaction of emotional explosions.

You can short-circuit a chain reaction by suggesting that you both calm down first. After you have some distance, you can discuss the relapse as a source of information about areas of your relationship that need further work. The resulting discussion is an opportunity for the two of you to practice compassionate communication.

How to Take Care of Yourself

Talking to a therapist can give you a safe space to work through your individual and relationship issues. However, it may not be possible to work on relationship issues until both partners are more stable. While working on feeling the feelings and establishing a certain degree of stability, taking care of the business of work and family, following daily routines, and creating some pleasure to offset the pain is an important part of trauma recovery.

Be sure to get enough sleep. Don't escape through overeating, overdrinking, oversmoking, or overusing drugs. Exercise, eat nutritiously, and participate in centering activities like meditation or yoga. When you take care of your body, you have the added benefit of taking care of your mind and emotions, because mind and body are really two aspects of the same organic system. In the process, you improve your mood, boost your confidence, and restore your personal resources.



Being active is one of the best antidotes for both the jitters and the blues. Schedule satisfying activities back into your life. Some of these activities can be done together, but some of them need to be done apart. Take a course or finally enroll for that diploma that you've been thinking about. One errant husband decided to start swimming laps again, both for the physical benefits and the emotional benefits of time alone to grieve the loss of his lover. Laughter enhances the immune system. Watch funny movies. Get involved in a special project that will energize you. Listen to music that gives you sense of wellbeing.

REPAIRING THE COUPLE AND BUILDING GOODWILL

In the midst of all the pain you've been experiencing, a safe harbor and a glimmer of hope will emerge. From this calm, sheltered place you and your partner will be able to experience more comfort and pleasure in each other's company than you have for some time. At first, these small islands of pleasure will be interspersed unevenly over the troubled waters, but gradually you can use them to build bridges of good faith and goodwill. To do the hard work of exploring the meaning of the infidelity, you will need to build a foundation of commitment, caring, and compassionate communication.

You and your partner can work together to create a healing atmosphere that is calm, where information can be shared and where caring begins to bind you together again. Even in this early stage of rebuilding, blame and jealousy can disappear as kindness, consistency, and honesty come to characterize the way you interact.

Repair 1: Getting Back to Normal



First, you can reclaim the couple who used to look forward to time alone together. Some couples may recall how much better things were just a short time ago - before the affair. Others may have to go back many years to a time before the children were born or before their careers took over their lives.

In the midst of the chaos, you have to get back to normal routines and responsibilities. You can begin to bridge the gap between you by collaborating on household decisions. Scheduling family time and couple time is preferable to leaving it

up to chance. Planning recreational activities with friends, children, and extended family can solidify your bond.

Begin and end each day by sharing information about scheduled activities, daily frustrations, and simple achievements. For example, in the movie *The Story of Us*, the family played the "high-low" at the dinner table every night. The parents and the children

each talked about the high and the low points of their day. This is a wonderful way to create a sense of shared experiences.

Take Time Out for Fun and Companionship

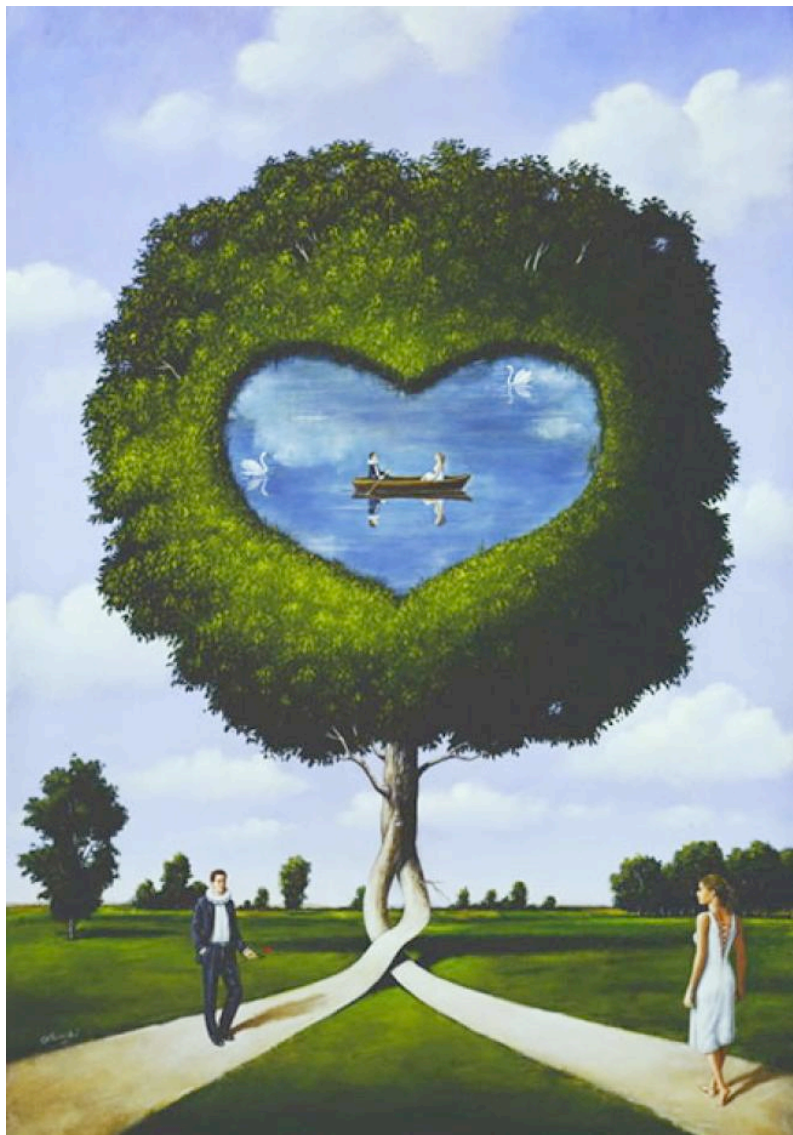
One of the first steps in getting back to normal is to increase your enjoyment in each others' company. You are more likely to feel connected when you laugh and have fun together. How long has it been since you planned time together just for fun or for a romantic date? Put fun and companionship back into your life. Set aside time for movie dates, but don't pick anything too heavy. Athletic activities, such as tennis, biking, or working out at the gym, provide structured time together when you use up some of your negative energy and come out feeling renewed.

Or just go out for a bite to eat. If you are still in crisis, don't ruin your time out with gut-wrenching conversations. Make your meal together a true *time-out*. Stick to mundane discussions, superficial pleasantries, or intellectual sharing about current events or interesting tidbits that you've read about or heard.

Make Love, Not War

Renewing your sexual relationship may be a natural, spontaneous act born out of intense feelings. On the other hand, one of you may feel dead sexually. Perhaps you alternate between these two extremes. The bottom line is to respect the feelings of whoever is not yet ready for prime time sex. Do find out what kind of touch or affection your reluctant or uninterested partner would be willing to accept, such as holding hands or goodbye/hello hugs at the front door. Back rubs and foot massages can be a good way to break the ice and achieve some mutual relaxation.

When the betrayed partner is tempted to obsess about either the sexual details of the infidelity or about how to fix the couple's sex life, it is important to bear in mind that only eight percent of men who cheat say that sexual dissatisfaction is the prime cause of their infidelity. For 92 percent of men surveyed by M. Gary Neuman, cheating was not primarily



about sex. By far the majority of cheaters reported that it was about a feeling of emotional disconnection and hopelessness about their ability to make their partners happy.

Recall Your Past Together

Recount for yourselves examples of productive, caring interactions you've had with each other in the past. To make it safe to explore your past together, though, avoid comparing your glorious past with your miserable present; you don't want remembering to become a chronicle of how much you've lost.

Dream About Your Future Together

Look ahead to the future. Think about what your lives together could be like in five years, after you have healed from this trauma. Think about future graduations, weddings, grandchildren, and retirement.



Work together on the immediate future by asking yourself the solution-oriented “miracle questions.” If you work up tomorrow morning and a miracle had occurred while you were sleeping, what would your relationship look like? What would each of you be doing differently? What would your friends, children, and other family members notice about the way you treat each other?

Repair 2: Fostering Positive Exchanges

Every marriage maintains a reservoir of goodwill, a metaphorical line of credit, against which expenditures can be made when needed. Infidelity often bankrupts this joint asset. For a while at least, the relationship balance is in the red. The shock of discovery and its aftermath create large debits, and new credits are few and far between. As soon as you can, though, start making caring deposits that you will be able to draw on during this crisis of deficit spending.

It is not surprising that the betrayed partner feels some jealousy about the time and romance that have been stolen from the marriage or that the involved partner misses the attention and romantic feelings of the affair. Just a few caring gestures will begin to establish the same kind of positive energy in the marriage that were present in the affair. The relationship needs real, tangible solidity that can be built on. The betrayed partner will see that the involved partner has taken steps to walk back into the marriage. And the involved partner will feel hopeful about experiencing the good feelings that evident in the affair.

The responsibility for building up your joint assets falls on both of you. The betrayed partner shouldn't have to do all of the work so the involved partner will stick around, and the involved partner shouldn't have to make up for the betrayal by doing all of the work. Invest in your relationship without keeping a tally of who does what.

Don't make the mistake of *choosing righteousness over happiness*, although the impulse to do so is understandable. If you are serious about making your marriage better, within a few weeks you must begin gradually to soften toward giving and receiving tokens of affection and caring. Your emotional link to each other will be directly proportional to how many positive exchanges you share with each other.

Ways of Caring

The security needs of the injured partner may conflict with the autonomy needs of the involved partner. Caring is shown by recognizing and accommodating these opposing wishes. The caring behaviors of the involved partner can focus on making the injured partner feel less anxious and more secure. Caring behaviors by the injured partner can focus on curtailing actions that might feel smothering.

Little Things Mean a Lot

When it comes to caring, small gestures can have big consequences. Turning the steering wheel of a ship just one degree to the right carries the ship miles away from the original destination.



- *Show caring through body language and affectionate gestures.* Sometimes reaching out for each other in simple gestures does more to repair the connection than words can. You can hold hands in the movie theater, speak in a gentle voice, and cuddle up in bed.
- *Show caring by expressing concern and understanding for each other.* Listen willingly to each other's pain. Sometimes, the best thing you can do is allow each other some space. Knowing when to be quiet and let things be as they are for a moment is a healing and, sometimes, a heroic act.
- *Show caring by performing tasks that show consideration.* Bring your partner a cup of coffee in bed. Make the arrangements for a relative's visit. Drive the carpool to give your partner a much needed break.

Bull's-eye Caring

Bull's-eye caring is when you hit the target right in the center. Too often, our efforts don't hit the right spot with our partner. Task-oriented individuals who love it when their partner cleans out the garage are usually not inclined to initiate the emotionally expressive caring that their partner may desire. Most people give what they wish to receive, rather than what the other person really desires.

Express Appreciation

The best way to get a positive cycle going is to respond to any kind of positive behavior with appreciation. Unfortunately, people tend to react more immediately to negatives than to positives. Because the negative is more powerful, you need to counteract negative messages by using affirming words and gestures as often as you can.



Give Positive Feedback for Positive Mirroring

It's hard for a long-term marriage to compete with the positive mirroring that went on during the affair. In the affair, unfaithful partners love the way they look when they see themselves reflected in their lovers' eyes. After the revelation of infidelity, they may be consciously avoiding the eyes of the betrayed partner because they are uncomfortable with the tarnished image that is reflected back. The betrayed partner also misses the adoring glances of yesteryear. Both partners long to feel special again. One way to polish the mirror in your marriage is to consciously show appreciation and give compliments.

When you approach your partner and see the appreciation in your partner's eyes, that is positive mirroring. When your partner approaches you and sees caring and affection mirrored back, that is also positive mirroring. In a relationship that is working well, both people experience and increase in self-esteem and self-confidence because the other person is sending

signals that say, "You are a special person." "You are lovable." "You deserve my respect."

Give Credit Where Credit Is Due

According to M. Gary Neuman who wrote *The Truth About Cheating - Why Men Stray and What You Can Do to Prevent It*, appreciation is the key to it all. The overwhelming majority of cheating husbands report that what drives them into a lover's arms is that they feel

emotionally disconnected due to the fact that they feel underappreciated by their wives. Emotional disconnection? Appreciation? Doesn't that feel like a woman is talking? Says Neuman, the big lie we hear over and over again is that women are the emotional ones, whereas men are like rocks, doing their thing, needing only lots of sex to be happy.

This does not mean that the answer is to run to your husband and talk about mushy stuff. Classical talking is not the best way that men usually relate. Despite his bravado, a man deeply needs to hear how wonderful he is and to be appreciated for what he does right. Make no mistake, men are emotional beings who are looking for warmth, kindness, and appreciation. Somehow, many women have concluded that whatever is expected of a man - holding down a good job, being a good father, taking the family on vacation - is not worthy of appreciation.

As the bar gets raised, appreciation diminishes. As a woman appreciates her husband less and less and focuses on what he does not do more and more, her motivation to be thoughtful and caring understandably decreases and it's an immediate step toward a man feeling emotionally disconnected from his wife. This logical process makes up 54 percent of the problem that contributes to cheating, say the men surveyed by Neuman.

Cheating men wanted their wives to give to them in a host of ways, whether it be a neck massage, initiating sex, buying them their favorite CD, cooking a special desert, saying how wonderful they are, or any other thoughtful gesture. The men in Neuman's research admitted that they needed to do the same for their wives. But in

their minds, the main contributor to their cheating was that they had come to feel that thoughtful gestures were sorely lacking.

However, many cheating men say that they don't want their wives to tell them daily that they are hard workers with simple comments that they'd find condescending - they want their wives to *show* them through gestures that they are appreciated. They want their wives to really understand how hard they are trying to do the right things.



"I didn't know how to tell my wife. What was I going to say, 'Love me, tell me I look handsome, that I'm hot'? That's not me. She may want to hear it but I wanted her to do things that meant something to me and I probably wasn't so good at telling her. I mean I did, but I didn't."

Jason was a divorce attorney, of all things, and made a relatively good living. But bills were always an issue, and the two kids cost more every year. Somewhere along the line Jason found out that his wife didn't really like him. And the funny thing was that he didn't



necessarily disagree. "She had convinced me that I was an underachieving, insensitive husband. And so we kind of settled into this space where we'd be okay for a while and we could still have fun on vacation but if I didn't want to spend as much money on my kid's party, I was the bad guy. If I came home late because I was working so hard, I was the bad guy. I couldn't win no matter which way I turned. After a while I figured I wasn't a very good husband. Regardless of what I did, I couldn't make my wife happy."

Jason stopped expecting the loving gestures he had received from his wife when they were falling in love and early in the marriage. And as far as sex went, "We's have it once in a blue moon and then, ironically, it was like she was doing me a big favor. It was like, 'Hurry up already'."

Jason wasn't getting love from his marriage and perhaps didn't have a healthy approach to help his wife see that. I could've been his fault for not

communication things in a nonthreatening way, or perhaps he wasn't willing to make time for fun and pleasure with his wife. Everything changed the day Cheryl rented space in the office next to him.

"Cheryl wasn't prettier than my wife, not a better person, not classier, none of that. Cheryl was a person who liked to please people and she knew how to make you like her. It's so pathetic when I think of it now, but she was so complimentary and 'Let me do that for you, you've had such a long day already' that I was hooked very quickly."

Cheryl quickly convinced Jason that he wasn't an awful husband. Jason was feeling like a dog and Cheryl threw him relatively small bones, which he gladly chewed up. "It just felt good to hear that I was sexy, accomplished. She was starting out as an attorney so she really respected my legal knowledge. Finally, someone was telling me ow good I was at what I do, sort of like it was when my wife and I started out. Cheryl made me believe I was a fantastic lawyer and a great provider. I became her mentor in a way, and what can I say... it just felt so good."

Many cheating husbands share Jason's sentiments. They just have wives who sent a message that are less than adequate husbands. I don't think these wives say it in so many words, but these men seem to get this message because there is more conversation about what they are doing wrong than right. And I can't say that the women are wrong, either. Perhaps their husbands *are* insensitive, lazy, selfish, but somewhere along the line men who cheat begin to believe that their wives *define* them this way. There is a distinct moment when they settle into an "I can't win" sort of place.



I can't tell you how many times I've heard, "At work and with my friends I can do no wrong. At home I can do nothing right." *Be alert to the caring things your partner does for you each day and share your appreciation.*

Enhancing Mutual Appreciation and Bull's-eye Caring

When people get a chance to hear how they are appreciated, they are often quite moved and goodwill is exchanged all around. The purpose of the following two exercises is to let your partner know what things you appreciate or would like to see more often as part of your daily life together.

Exercise: What Pleases Me about You

List ten things that you appreciate about your partner. These could be actions that are pleasing to you, even if it is a rare occurrence, or specific things about the kind of person your partner is that pleases you. Be positive and specific.

Example: I really like it when you give me compliments about how I look.

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.

- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.



Instructions for Sharing “What Pleases Me about You”

Sit down facing each other. Alternate turns by going back and forth and sharing one item at a time. Avoid negative comparisons about the way it used to be *before* the affair. As you share each entry, you can say why the particular behavior or personal characteristic is significant, or you can relate a specific example that illustrates your point. Elaborating on each point makes this exercise much more meaningful.

Exercise: The Newlywed Game

A. Guess List

List five specific things that you believe your partner would appreciate if you did them. Be positive and specific. For example, “You want me to give you a hug when I walk in the door” instead of “You don’t want me to ignore you when I come home.” Do not refer to the infidelity.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

B. Wish List

List five specific things you would appreciate if your partner did them. Be positive and specific. Don’t refer to the infidelity. For example, do not request “I wan to be able to trust you” or “I want you to stop asking me questions about my lover.”

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Instructions

1. You read one item from your Guess List.
2. Your partner tells you whether you have a match with one of the items on his or her Wish List. Continue comparing all your guesses with items on your partner’s Wish List.
3. Now it’s your partner’s turn to compare his or her Guess List with your Wish List, and you tell them whether or not they have a match.
4. After both of you finish reading your Guess Lists, share any of the items on the Wish Lists that were missed or guessed incorrectly.

If you or your partner weren't too successful on "The Newlywed Game" because you don't know what pleases each other, you may have a communication problem. Perhaps you don't express your wishes clearly and need to strengthen your "I want" muscles. Or perhaps you don't listen to your partner's wishes and need to strengthen your "I hear you" muscles.

Sometimes, a "wrong" guess can uncover an unexpressed desire. Gina guessed that Gary wanted her to cook big dinners every night. He said, "Well, actually, I didn't have that written down, but, come to think of it, I would really, really, like that." And then she went on: "I think you want me to initiate sex more often." And he said, "Now, *that's* a bulls-eye!"

For his part, Gary learned something new, too. He didn't realize that Gina wanted him to initiate affection that wasn't a prelude to sexual intercourse. They agreed that he would initiate nonsexual affection more often and she would initiate sex in an obvious way touching him rather than by her usual passive means, such as wearing a new nightgown to bed.



Resistance to Caring

Sooner or later, either partner may feel some resistance to the caring process. Resistance can be to *doing* caring things, to *receiving* caring things, or to *acknowledging* or appreciating caring things. Resistance to caring can indicate that the involved partner still has a strong emotional

attachment to the lover. The unfaithful partner who acts too loving in the marriage may feel disloyal to the affair partner. In the worst situations, resistance is a sign that the affair isn't over.

One can spot resistance when you hear someone saying "Yes, *but*...": "Yes, you cleaned the dishes, *but* you didn't sweep the kitchen floor." When you follow something positive with a "*but*," the other person will soon learn that nothing is good enough.

Another sign of resistance is to discount your partner's actions or efforts: "You're only doing that to look in front of the therapist." "I know you really don't want to have sex with me. You'll probably resent it later."

Overcoming Resistance

At this point, if you are staying together only for the sake of the children, you may develop additional, stronger reasons later as your relationship improves. Use whatever resources you have to create a warm, loving family environment. Over time, your original motivation can evolve into staying together because of the pleasure in the marital relationship.

Even if you can't quite manage to be caring yourself and are reluctant to go overboard with appreciation, you can at least notice your partner's efforts.

*"The flowers you brought home look pretty in the sunroom."
"Dinner tonight was delicious."
From these little seeds fully expressed appreciation and mutual caring can develop.*

Don't wait for your partner to initiate just because you feel that you deserve special treatment. One betrayed husband put it this way: "I can't believe I'm supposed to be nice to my wife after what she did to me. The truth is, a lot of the time I want to hurt her. I want her to feel some of the pain of the rejection and hurt that I'm feeling."

Walk the walk before you feel the feelings. Sometimes people are under the mistaken impression that they have to "feel" it before they can do it. It's good to know that behavior can sometimes precede actual feelings. If you can act appreciative even before you feel it, the chances are good that loving feelings will follow. Act as if your relationship is as secure and caring as you would like it to be.

Be the kind of partner you have always wished for, so that you will know you've done your best. The attitude of "If you do something nice for me, I'll do something nice for you, is and excuse not to change. If you act the same way you'd behave if you were married to your "dream" partner, your own dreams are more likely to come true.

Treat any display of affection as valid "in the moment," not as a sign of eternal commitment. This will free you and your partner to act spontaneously when you feel some warmth toward each other. If too much significance is attached to displays of caring, the unfaithful partner may guard against showing more devotion than they feel, to avoid communicating a commitment they don't feel yet.



Give freely, but don't act as if you're giving in. There's a big difference between *giving* and *giving in*. If you *give* willingly to please your partner, you will feel like a winner. But if you *give in* out of guilt or because you feel coerced, your resentment will make losers of you both. And if you think that sticking to your guns and refusing to please your partner is a winning position, think again. There is no way that you can win if your partner loses. Think of your caring actions as giving to the relationship - a definite win-win situation for you both. What is good for the relationship will be good for you.

Repair 3: Learning Compassionate Communication

"My spouse doesn't understand me the way you do" is a common refrain in affairs. Unfaithful partners often say that a significant attraction to the affair partner is feeling so accepted. What they are really saying is that their lover was skilled at listening and empathizing.

Compassionate communication skills are indispensable to the recovery process after an affair. The goal of compassionate communication is to use language as a means of creating a more intimate bond. Whether or not you and your partners were good communicators before the affair, your recovery together requires that you become so now.



Tool 1: Inhibit, Inhibit, Inhibit

Think about your intent. If your intent is to vent your spleen, then it doesn't matter how you say it. You may feel better afterward because you've gotten rid of all those toxins, but the other person feels poisoned. If your intent is to help the other person understand where you're coming from or make a request for change or do something differently, how you say it makes a big difference. If you come on too strong, even if you're not nasty but merely overly persuasive, the other person will resist being influenced by you.

Inhibit nasty outbursts. One zinger will erase twenty acts of kindness. So often, after the explosion of discovery, people react by using words as weapons. It is tempting to attack with anger when you are actually afraid and to become insulting when you are hurt or jealous. Staying conscious of your goal to increase

safety and goodwill will enable you to exercise some self-control. Too many emotional outbursts get in the way of future healing.

Inhibit negative cycling. One of the things that characterize distressed couples is tit-for-tat negativity. This happens when partners feed off each other's words or facial and body expressions until the negativity escalates to a high pitch. Don't add more fuel to the fire. Don't allow yourself to be triggered by your partner. The best defense is *not* a good

offense. When you come to an impasse over some point, table it, take time out, and make an appointment to talk about it later.

You can disagree without being disagreeable. It's natural to disagree, but for your own good you have to hear what your partner is saying. Get to the bottom of what is being discussed. When partners can hear each other and accept each other's point of view (regardless of whether they agree with it), they are making progress. One way to be sure you are getting the point is to acknowledge each other's statements. The usually decreases the contentiousness because people tend to soften when they feel they are being heard and understood. A partner who believes you heard the main point is more likely to listen to *your* point of view.

Inhibit rehashing. Don't get into conflicts about conversations that occurred in the past. Couples get hung up on what they did or didn't say last week, and they become furious about their clash of memories. Just let it go, and say, "Okay, let's start fresh. what is your position on this issue *right now*?" After you state your present positions, check it out with your partner that you heard each other accurately this time. If you can't discuss some topics safely, you can come up with a shared list of forbidden topics that you agree not to bring up until safety and goodwill have been reestablished in your relationship.

Inhibit interrupting, contradicting, and confronting discrepancies. What for each other to finish before speaking. It takes remarkable restraint to hold back when your partner says something that seems inappropriate or downright dishonest. You might be inclined to stop unwarranted attacks by rushing in to defend yourself, or to stop what you perceive as unmitigated lies, but your partner won't hear your point of view while he or she is still talking. Wait until your partner is completely finished and then state your perspective as calmly as possible.

Inhibit analyzing, mind reading, and editorializing. You will not get any relationship awards for your brilliance at analyzing your partner's motives. In fact, you will probably achieve high honors in the resentment category. Very few people are warmed by the notion that their partner knows their intentions better than they do themselves.

Tool 2: Play Ping-Pong

Too many conversations sound like people at a board meeting who remain silent without listening until it is their turn at the mike. Because these ego-driven individuals are interested only in *servicing* the ball, they rarely acknowledge other's comments. People who enjoy talking to each other have a rhythm of going back and forth like a good game of Ping-Pong.



Don't hold the ball. Break your message down into short chunks so that the other person can absorb and respond to it. If you hold on to the conversational ball too long, your partner is likely to glaze over and drop out of the game.

Take turns. Dialogues are much more productive than monologues. Only on debating teams does each person make a long speech and then listen quietly for the rebuttal. You

are striving for real communication, not a debate where one of you scores points off the other.



Practice alternating between being the speaker and being the listener. As the listener, listen attentively and let your body language signal your receptivity. Don't interrupt. When the speaker is finished, acknowledge what you've heard and then respond with your own perspective.

Tool 3: Use "I" Messages as the Speaker

Many individual use "I" and "you" in exact opposition to the techniques that foster c o m p a s s i o n a t e communication. When they are in the role of speaker, instead of saying, "I am hurt that..." they say, "You never think about me." When they

are in the role of listener,

instead of saying, "So what *you* think about that is..." they respond with, "I think that..."

Focus on expressing your own feelings. First go inside yourself and figure out what you are thinking and feeling. Express yourself directly without emoting, blaming, or interpreting. When you stick to how you feel, you partner cannot argue with you or become defensive. For example, "I get so scared and anxious every time we get a hang-up phone call."

Focus on positive aspects in your requests for change. The basic template is this: When you do A (*this undesirable thing*), I feel B (*some negative feeling*). When you do C (*the thing I desire*), I feel D (*some positive feeling*). The goal of this kind of communication is for the speaker to express wishes in the manner that will have the greatest likelihood of influencing the other person without creating a defensive response.

Jessica was in the car talking to John on the cell phone. He said he would be home from the office at 6:00 and make the salad for dinner. She got home at 6:40, but he wasn't home yet. When he opened the front door at 7:00, she said, "When you told me you were going to get home before me and make the salad, I felt happy. When I came home and saw you hadn't done it, I was disappointed." This was instead of saying: "You never get home when you say you're going to" or "I should have known better than to think you'd keep your word."

John Gottman found that in happy couples, wives broached touchy subjects with "softened startups," and husbands showed respect by accepting the influence of their wives.

Tool 4: Be a Good Listener

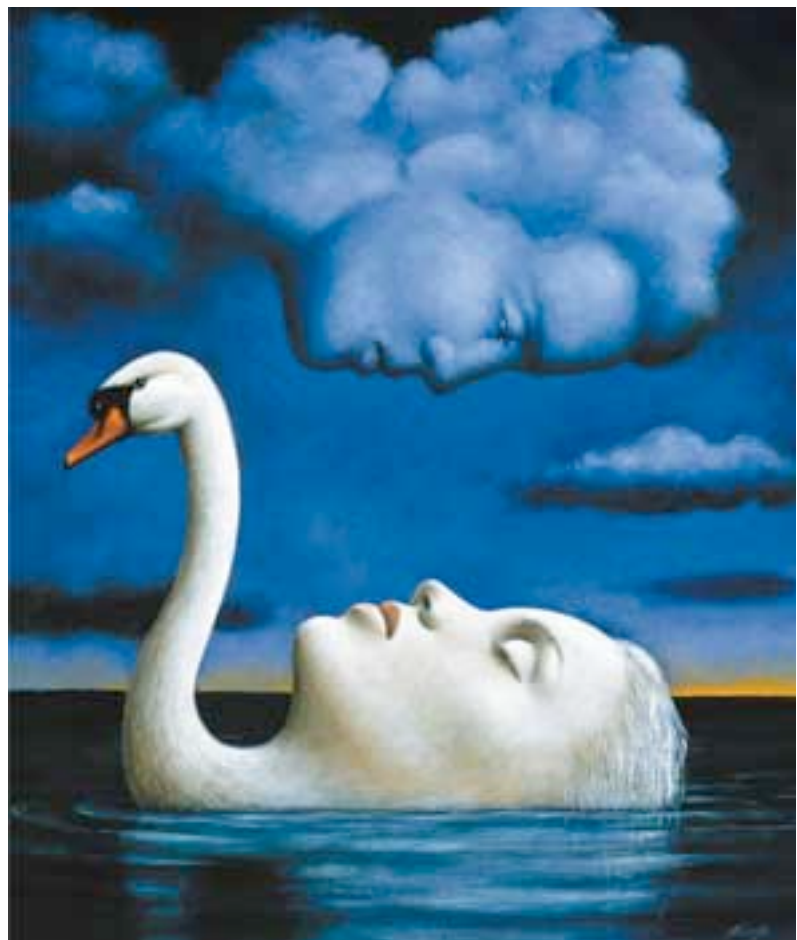
Women often complain that their male partners are poor communicators. Injured partners similarly complain that the involved partners don't communicate with them about their feelings or about the infidelity. What they usually mean is that their partners don't talk enough. The complaining partners think that they themselves are good communicators because they have a lot to say. However, communication is not a two-way street in which you talk and then I talk. If we just talk and talk, nobody is listening. Without listening, there is no real communication.

Communication is a four-way street, in which messages are not only sent, but received: you send -> I acknowledge receipt of your message -> I send ->

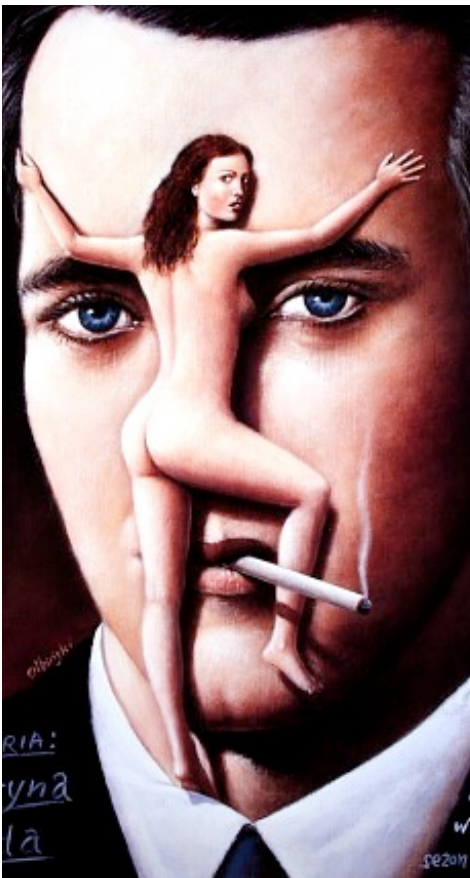
you acknowledge receipt of my message. The best way to encourage you partner to talk more is for you to listen more and talk less.

Each of you can demonstrate with nonverbal behavior that you are listening. Maintain eye contact and nod your head if you resonate with what is being said, or engage in back-channeling utterances like "Uh-huh," which means *I hear you*. You will both gain confidence that your partner is willing to participate in the process of healing the rift.

Acknowledge what you hear. The heart of active listening is to acknowledge that you heard not only to your partner's words but also to his or her inner voice. You can demonstrate active listening on three different verbal levels:



1. *Reflecting* is the foundation of active listening. A reflecting response is a mirror that acknowledges what you just heard, like a sounding board that echoes the transmission. For example, "So, what you're saying is that it makes you very anxious when we get hang-up calls."
2. *Validating* is the next level of active listening. When you validate your partner, you substantiate the validity of what he or she is saying. For example, "You're right. We've been receiving a lot of hang-up calls lately, and it could be (the affair partner) trying to contact me."
3. *Empathizing* is the deepest level of listening. You exhibit empathy for your partner when you show that you understand the underlying emotions behind the message. For example, "You must feel a wave of panic when we get one of those hang-up calls because it might look to you that like my affair isn't really over."



Provide support without problem solving. Put your fix-it remedies in storage until your partner actually asks you directly, "What do you think I should do about this?" Try to relate to your partner's emotions without trying to solve the problem. Gayle told Gordon how impossible her boss had been that day. When Gordon said, "I told you that you should quit that job." Gayle thought, "Next time, I'll keep my frustrations to myself." What she really wanted was a sympathetic shoulder to cry on. Gordon learned that Gayle was more comforted when he said, "I know you had a really rough day today. I understand how upsetting it is to have a boss whose such a jerk."

Provide support without empty reassurances. It may be counterintuitive, but validating your partner's worst fears is actually very helpful. You may be afraid that by validating the negative, you will intensify your partner's negativity. Many people believe that acknowledging the reality of their loved one's fears will only make things worse. But minimizing feelings will make your partner feel all alone, and the burden will seem even heavier. As strange as it may seem, taking your partner's concerns seriously is not only validating but actually relieves some of the emotional distress.

It is difficult to listen to a partner's pain in any case, but it is particularly true if you are the cause of the injury. A natural response is to offer reassurances, such as "Don't think about it. It's going to work out fine." However, reassurance does not feel like support. *Reassurance feels like cheerleading in the middle of a funeral.*

Instead of saying "Time heals all wounds," you can comfort each other by acknowledging "Of course you're upset. Anyone would be upset."

Compassionate Communication Do's and Don'ts

DON'T SAY

You had time for an affair, but you don't have time to help me with the kids.

DO SAY

I realize you're under a lot of pressure at work. That's why it means a lot to me when you are able to help with the kids

DON'T SAY

What did you do all day that you didn't have time to call the plumber?

DO SAY

I know you had a busy day, but I was hoping you'd call the plumber. I'm worried that the septic system might back up.

DON'T SAY

All you are interested in is having intercourse. You're never interested in foreplay.

DO SAY

Do you have any idea how turned on I get when you kiss my face and my neck?

DON'T SAY

Why can't you make time for us to go away together? You don't want to be alone with me.

DO SAY

I feel disappointed that you're too busy for us to go away together. I am hopeful and excited if we have a trip to look forward to.

DON'T SAY

You pushed me in somebody else's arms because you didn't give me enough attention.

DO SAY



I was feeling lonely so I was vulnerable to attention from somebody else.

DON'T SAY

You shouldn't make such a big deal out of my little fling. You're only pushing me away with your superdramatics.

DO SAY

I feel really uncomfortable when get so emotional. I never realized how much it would hurt



you because it didn't mean so much to me at the time.

DON'T SAY

I bet you didn't talk nasty to your boyfriend.

DO SAY

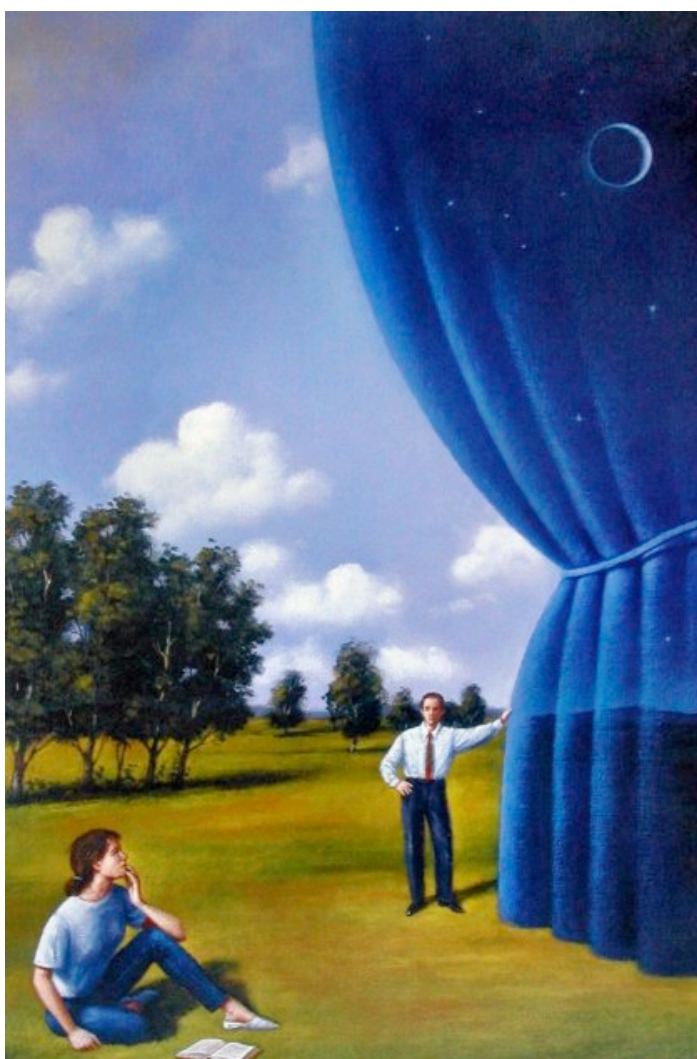
I get really hurt when you are sarcastic to me because I picture you talking sweetly to your boyfriend.

Creating an Empathic Process

One of the best predictors of how successful a couple is going to be in saving their marriage after infidelity is how much empathy they have for each other. More important than the actual problems that exist in the marriage is whether each person can walk for a while in the other's shoes. Can the involved partner feel what the betrayed spouse is going through and understand the humiliation, anger, and the need to go over and over what has happened in the past? Can the betrayed partner feel the loss and the guilt that the unfaithful spouse is living through?

You need to shift from playing singles and being on opposite sides of the tennis net to a doubles game where the fallout from the affair is tackled together. Every little step you take toward each other counts. Little investments that you make now can lead to big dividends.

Find the place inside your relationship where you are still connected by caring and affection. Expand that spot until it grows larger. Know that there is reason to hope. The communication skills you learn and practice will always serve you well.



THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

So far, we have worked on feeling the feelings, establishing safety, and coping with the traumatic reactions. Now it is time to construct a story about who each of you is and what has happened in your marriage and in the affair. This can only be accomplished in an atmosphere of caring, commitment, and compassionate communication. Of course, there will be setbacks, ups and downs. They are part of the normal process of recovery.

A vital part of trauma recovery is telling the story of what happened. The only way for someone to comprehend what seems an incomprehensible event is through the search for meaning. After any personal loss or unimaginable catastrophe, we need to piece together

what happened and talk about the experience. Expressing the emotions and telling the story is the best pathway to healing. If you don't know the story of the affair, you may recover but you will not heal - the wounds will still be there.

When you're telling the story of the affair, how you talk together is even more important than what you say. The story of the affair is not just about what happened in the affair itself. The story must include the context in which the affair occurred.

THE STORY OF THE AFFAIR

Because affairs are secret, betrayed partners can't resolve their grief over their loss of innocence until they know what really happened. Unfaithful partners who lie about the details cause more harm than good because the only way to restore the betrayed partner's sanity is to be honest about what has, up to now, been concealed.

The burning question for betrayed partners is: "How do I know you won't betray me again?" They can only answer this by knowing what led to the infidelity and what kept it going. Discussing the affair now that goodwill has been established will help put it to rest for both partners. The final story of the affair should be co-constructed by both partners to account for all the secrets, unanswered questions, and contrasting interpretations and attributions.

Although involved partners may resist sharing the story of the affair, it's important to realize that anything that's good for the relationship will ultimately be good for them personally. Also, involved partners need to tell the story of their *own* recovery: to understand how and why they crossed the line into an affair. Letting the secrets out of the bag helps them detach from the affair partner and dissolve the romantic fallacy.



Telling rebuilds trust and releases the secret ties that bind. Forbidden fruit is exotic and enticing. As long as the affair is kept in a glass bubble and worshipped as a sacred happening, the romantic attachment to the affair partner is likely to persist. Talking about the affair in some detail takes it out of that bubble and exposes it to the cool light of realistic scrutiny. It loses its magical power.

Keeping secrets erects barriers. Whenever you're trying not to spill the beans, you are inhibiting your own natural impulses with internal warnings: Be careful! Don't tell! Don't show! Instead of being free and authentic, you become artful, subtly crafting your verbal responses to influence your partner's impressions and reactions. It's hard to be truly close to someone when you're hiding something of significance from him or her.

Protecting information about the affair means that the betrayed spouse is the outsider in an extramarital triangle. Sharing the details is an act of positive demolition. The involved spouse dismantles the structure that kept the injured spouse outside in the cold and replaces deceit with hope.

How to Tell

You will have to draw on all of the compassionate communication skills and shift from an adversarial process to an empathic process for discussing the story of the affair.

Pitfalls to Avoid

Avoid getting locked into escalating power struggles. In a pressurized atmosphere, the more the betrayed partner pushes for information, the more the involved partner pulls away. The more the involved partner retreats into a corner, the more the betrayed partner applies coercive tactics to open up.

For Betrayed Partners

- *Control destructive outbursts:* If you go ballistic every time your partner shares, you are teaching him or her that it's better not to share.
- *Silence is golden:* You will learn more if you close your mouth and open your ears.
- *Curtail your interpretations:* Diagnosing your partner's problems is not relationship-enhancing, even if you happen to be a licensed psychotherapist.

For Involved Partners

• *Avoidance:* Perhaps your usual pattern is to avoid anything that creates conflict. Use the crisis to become more assertive by telling the whole story and facing up to your partner's negative reactions.

• *Denial:* Denying the basic facts concerning the affair will perpetuate mistrust.

• *Stonewalling:* Retreating and refusing to talk may be your usual way of avoiding discomfort and conflict. Tell your partner that the tongue lashings are teaching you to hold your tongue.

• *Discounting:* Refusing to accept the seriousness of the problem is a way to deny responsibility. Using the words "yes, but" may indicate the absence of genuine remorse.



The Three Stages of Disclosure

Not every couple proceeds through all three stages of disclosure. Some remain mired in a destructive truth-seeking process, and others never get beyond the neutral information-seeking process. The final and desired stage is a healing exploration characterized by an empathic search for deeper understanding.

Stage 1: Truth Seeking

During truth seeking, the dialogue sounds like an NYPD interrogation of a criminal who is withholding incriminating evidence. The betrayed partner launches the inquisition by setting truth traps, and the unfaithful partner covers up until cornered with undeniable proof of wrongdoing. This adversarial process is never recommended as a way of getting at the truth. When both partners are hostile and feel alienated, it's impossible for any honesty or healing to come out of such a destructive process.

Stage 2: Information Seeking

Before you can know the meaning of the affair, you have to gather some data. What counts most is *how* you do it. The best way is to engage in a neutral process of information

seeking, as if you were a reporter covering a story. In this way you and your partner might sound like an interview on the *Larry King Show*: professional and cordial, but not especially close.



If you are the betrayed partner, don't use new details to point out old lies. Instead of dwelling on how much you were deceived during the affair, show appreciation that your partner is being honest at last.

If you're the involved partner, try your utmost to discuss matters that you'd prefer to keep in a locked box, either because you cherish the memories or because you feel ashamed. Don't muddle your brain by inventing new lies that you will have to keep track of. If you're worried about how your answers affect your partner, ask him or her, "*How is this information going to help you to heal?*" Then, answer truthfully.

Stage 3: Mutual Understanding

In stage 3 you focus on understanding what the affair means to both of you. The dialogue you engage in sounds like two people who love and care about each other working together to understand the beginning, middle, and ending of the affair. You're reaching consensus about what happened in the past and optimism about your future capacity to cope.

Conversations become introspective, respectful, sensitive, and free-flowing with information. They contrast sharply with earlier interactions that were glib, slippery, and hostile. It hurts, but you want to understand.

Ironically, it's not uncommon for some couples to experience a honeymoon period as they share their deepest and most intense feelings with each other. They may lie in bed at night holding each other while talking about the affair. Couples who get to this level of intimacy have a rare opportunity to know each other in a deep way that unblemished couples may never have the opportunity to realize.

What to Tell

The betrayed spouse's need to know is the determining factor for how much detail and discussion are necessary. Some want to know everything; some seek only the basic facts. Each couple must figure out what details to share by following their own unique path. You will learn through trial and error what is healing and what only adds more scar tissue.

If you are the betrayed spouse, ask yourself whether you can without seeing or hearing things that would be upsetting. Pay attention to whether you feel better a day later or whether the details are haunting you. If they are haunting you but you also feel better, then there is a part of you that is healing. Let your partner know so he or she can see the part that's healing as well as the part that's hurting.

For some individuals, an obsessive need to know the details is characteristic of their innate coping strategies. These are the people who get on the Internet and know more about a disease than their doctors do. There is no way in the world that such people can let go of their partner's infidelity until they have heard it all.

Reconciling Different Perspectives and Mistaken Beliefs

Part of the hurt and confusion of an affair is the sudden, wrenching realization that your partner does not think or feel exactly as you do. After all these years, you find that your assumption about how much alike you are is really an illusion. Ian said, "I don't understand how anyone who prays in church every Sunday could commit the sin of adultery." Ian believes that he would never violate the teachings of their church, so he can't understand how Ilene could ever have been unfaithful.

Many errors of assumed similarity are derived from sex differences. Men and women generally have different perspectives on sex, love and infidelity, yet they assume that their partners feel and think the same way they do. Women tend to view their husband's infidelity through the lens of love, whereas men tend to view their wife's affairs through the lens of sex.



Many a betrayed wife has said, "I don't believe you didn't love her. You must have loved her if you had sex with her." Most women cannot understand how a "happily married man" would want sexual intercourse with another woman, whereas sexual variety appears to be a reasonable desire to men.

One man who caught his wife meeting secretly with a coworker found it almost impossible to believe that she could have been emotionally involved without having sex. When she told him that they had sat in the car talking for hours, he rejected her explanation and insisted that this man must have appealed to her because he was able to give her multiple orgasms. Nonetheless, her affair had been emotional only.

Questions to Answer

Questions about specific details are frequently an entryway into a deeper story. For example, questions about what gifts or cards were exchanged are really probing for how invested the unfaithful partner was in the affair - emotionally and financially. One unfaithful wife and her affair partner made cassette tapes for each other with special love songs. Although it was extremely painful for the betrayed husband to listen to the romantic words of the songs, it helped him realize why it was so hard for his wife to let go of the affair. He was also shaken by what he had neglected. Ultimately, he was inspired to bring more romance back into their marriage.

The following ten questions may guide your exploration of the circumstances of the infidelity and the meaning behind it. Discussing them will give you the raw material from which to co-construct your story.



1. What did you say to yourself that gave you permission to get involved?

Through discussion with Lisa, Les figured out how he let himself be drawn into an affair with Fiona, a new colleague at work. He recognized that it started off with his compassion for Fiona's situation. He was moved by her tale of a distressed marriage, a disabled child, and a terminally ill father who lived with her.

Les admitted that he was flattered by Fiona's idealizing him when she compared him to her insensitive husband. He pictured himself as her protector rescuing her from her troubled life. He felt gratified that he could add a little joy to Fiona's life. In contrast, when Les and Lisa went to five-star restaurants, Lisa took it for granted as part of their lifestyle.

When involved partners share their feelings on this level, they are letting their betrayed spouse inside their mind and reforging their

bond. They not only are discussing what occurred, but together they are gaining insight into the underlying dynamics.

2. After the first time you had sex, did you feel guilty?

Asking about guilt reveals the internalized values of the unfaithful partner. Some people never feel any guilt about getting involved. Some people feel so disgusted with themselves after their first extramarital sex that they get together again with the affair partner as soon as possible: another dose of aphrodisiac offers them a temporary escape from their self-loathing.

3. How could you let it go on so long if you knew it was wrong?

Affairs are both messy and glamorous. The forbidden, unstable nature of secret affairs keeps passion flowing years beyond what's common in a stable relationship. Unfaithful spouses often appear to be addicted to their lovers. They fail in their efforts to end the affair time and time again, pulled back by a magnetic force they can't seem to resist. Only with great determination are they able to break the spell.

The affair may have started as an emotional affair and continued because the sex was so great. Or it may have started because the marriage was in a slump but continued because it assumed a life of its own long after the marriage improved.

It is as important to understand how the affair ended as it is to understand what sustained it. The ramifications of an affair that was ended by the unfaithful spouse before disclosure are very different from an affair that was ended either by the affair partner or by the ultimatums of the betrayed partner. If the affair ended abruptly, the attachment will be harder to break than if the affair died a natural death. It's easier to put a relationship behind you if you're the one who made the decision to leave.



4. Did you think about me at all?

If the unfaithful partner had been thinking about the betrayed partner, he or she wouldn't have gotten involved in the first place. The act of infidelity is not about the person who is betrayed - it is about the person who is doing the betraying. Betrayed spouses often see themselves as the central character in a spouse's affair and believe that every step was taken with them in mind. "How could you do this to me?" they ask. The reality is that the involved spouse probably didn't consider his or her partner much at all. Simply put, unfaithful partners seldom anticipate the tragic consequences or the pain they inflict.

It will probably be hurtful for the betrayed partner to learn that although unfaithful spouses have difficulty suppression thoughts of their lovers at home, they are unlikely to think about their spouses while they are in their love nests. Intrusive thoughts of lovers flow from the necessity of maintaining secrets, but it takes little energy to suppress thoughts of socially sanctioned marriages.

5. What did you share about us?

The betrayed partner has an understandable interest in knowing how much of a window the affair partner had into the marriage. They might also want to know how he or she and the marriage were portrayed.

Some unfaithful partners give positive accounts of their marriages and glowing descriptions of their spouses, to the bewilderment and chagrin of their affair partners. Others describe their spouses as cold and distant. In any case, if you are the unfaithful partner, it's important for you to talk to your spouse about real problems in the marriage that you've discussed only with your affair partner.

6. Did you talk about love or about a future together?

If you are the involved partner, admit it if you ever shared dreams of "riding off into the sunset" together or said "I love you" in the heat of passion. I have seen it backfire when

betrayed partners found incriminating love letters or e-mails after involved partners denied exchanging words of love or dreams of the future.



If you are the betrayed partner, make a strong effort to hear the story without filtering it through your own subjective lens. Infidelity does occur without falling in love. You must be open to versions that vary from your belief system.

7. What did you see in the affair partner?

Betrayed partners are prone to place all the blame on the affair partner, preferring to believe that their gullible spouse was manipulated and seduced. They may be unwilling to accept that the person to whom they're married took an active role, and therefore displace a lot of the anger and rage onto the affair partner. Involved partners must

recount the ways they encouraged the affair and invested energy to keep it going.

Al and Amber quarreled about their divergent perceptions of his affair partner, Zelda, who worked for him. Amber regarded Zelda as "a bitch and a manipulative slut who was out to get Al's money." In reaction, Al glorified Zelda's competence and loyalty. But the more Al talked about Zelda, the more he realized that he could never have maintained a long-term relationship with her because of her mood swings. Amber, on the other hand, grew to understand that Zelda's constant praise and high energy appealed to Al. Finally, they arrived at a combined picture of Zelda as a hard-working woman with a charged



personality who used flattery to get what she wanted.

Betrayed partners vacillate between glorifying the lover as an incomparable rival and disparaging him or her as a despicable human being. Questions about the physical appearance, personality, and intellect are attempts to see whether they measure up to their rival in sex appeal and achievement. These questions aren't helpful, as they seldom reveal the lure of the affair partner. In fact, many betrayed partners are astounded to see affair partners looking rather ordinary. The appeal of the affair is frequently in the positive mirroring or the sounding board it provides, rather than in the lover's charisma.

8. What did you like about yourself in the affair?

Instead of focusing on what the affair partner was like, it is more productive to focus on what *the unfaithful partner* was like in the affair. New relationships allow people to be different: more assertive, more frivolous, or more giving. A strong attraction of affairs is the opportunity to try on new roles: the insensitive, detached husband becomes energized by his own empathy and devotion; the sexually uninterested wife is exhilarated by newfound passion and erotic fantasies.

A good question for the involved partner is: "What did you experience about *yourself* in the affair that you would like to experience in the marriage? Perhaps the marriage can begin to foster these positive aspects of the self. In fact, the betrayed partner may have been wishing to see those qualities all along and may find it hurtful that the involved partner enjoyed them first with somebody else.

9. Were there previous infidelities or opportunities, and how was this time similar or different?

This is an opportunity to examine any patterns of infidelity or near misses that may be relevant to how this affair unfolded. Explore past experiences of slippery slopes and blurred boundaries.

Partners who were too accepting of an earlier infidelity can mislead their spouses into thinking it's no big deal to be discovered. One unfaithful husband said that his affair had been worth it. It had taken him only two weeks to pay for something that had felt good for six months.

10. Did you have unprotected sex?

Sadly, this is one of those questions that you must ask. Ignoring the risk of disease or pregnancy is a thoughtless act. Few people regard affair partners as a possible source of infection, so they don't take the necessary precautions to have safe sex. Regardless of protestations, both partners should be tested for AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

Search for Meaning

It takes many conversations before a couple is able to reach a consensus on the complex issues involved in infidelity. And it is unrealistic to expect that will agree on all dimensions.

One of the greatest obstacles to the recovery of Grace and Gavin was their dispute about the meaning of his extramarital sex. Grace went ballistic when he said he had always been committed to her and was only having a little fun. According to Grace, a sexual relationship that went on for two years was clearly an affair. Gavin would not agree that he had an "affair" because he had never been in love with Tina.

After several months of conflicting perceptions, Gavin and Grace were finally able to agree on the meaning of his sexual infidelity. Gavin realized that he was afraid of aging and declining sexuality. He had been avoiding sexual intercourse with Grace for the year preceding his infidelity because of erectile dysfunction. Tina's attention was flattering because she was much younger; he felt as if he had found the "fountain of youth." His excitement temporarily overcame his impotence. He had had many casual partners before marriage, so he didn't perceive occasional sex with Tina as an "extramarital affair."



When they were able to see his infidelity through each other's eyes, they felt more deeply connected. Gavin finally understood that what was trivial sex to him was a profound betrayal to Grace, and Grace accepted that Gavin's sexual affair was not about love or about a failing marriage.

THE STORY OF OUR MARRIAGE

“I thought we had a happy marriage. Now I’m hearing that you’ve been unhappy for years.” No story of an affair is complete without discussing the complex factors that set the stage for an affair. The vulnerabilities that create the context for an affair are best explored with help of a professional counsellor or therapist. Understanding what led to the affair is not a simple recounting of attraction and opportunity but a complex weaving of personal and relationship vulnerabilities.

When people marry, they bring almost mythic assumptions to the union, including these: *If we love each other, you will not cheat on me; if we have a good marriage, we will be safe from infidelity.* Regardless of what marital problems may or may not have preceded the affair, both partners need to use the aftermath, which can be from three months to two years, to strengthen the relationship. How long this takes depend on a lot of factors, including how distressed the marriage was before the affair. This time of rebuilding should be designed to examine and strengthen. Needless to say, exploring problems in your marriage is not intended to excuse the betrayal. A roof needs to be repaired regardless of whether it collapsed because of a slowly decaying frame or was in great shape before it was struck by lightning.

With the help of a trained professional, you should discover what factors in the marriage could have set the stage for an affair. If your marriage has been troubled - or just a little bit off track - going through this investigative and rebuilding process can help to build a stronger relationship.



