

Rebuilding Trust in Your Marriage After an Affair

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Successfully rebuilding trust after an extra-marital affair is possible but it can be difficult, lengthy and overwhelming. An affair can have a devastating effect on marriage and can be an agonizing crisis for a couple. Responses to the discovery or revelation of an affair range from sadness, shock, despair to anger, rage and confusion. It is important to understand that rebuilding after an affair is a process which includes six distinct stages. The stages include denial, shock, anger, rage and then finally acceptance and forgiveness.

Making the decision to stay together and remain in the marriage is a huge step and is often a fluid decision. In other words, staying together may seem like a good idea at certain times. At other times it may seem too difficult and painful to do. Many couples try to rush their “recovery,” when in reality, time and distance are needed to help heal the relationship. When either partner is experiencing pain and grief, the recovery process can seem endless.

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By engaging in an affair and violating marriage vows, the fundamental elements of marriage, trust, honor and commitment are damaged. When a partner finds out that their partner had an affair it can cause them to question their beliefs about marriage and their perception of their partner. In other words it damages the emotional safety of the marriage.

There are several steps to go through to recover from an affair and the most difficult step can be to rebuild trust within the relationship. In order for a spouse who participated in an affair to rebuild trust, some of the following suggestions may be helpful:



Stop it, End it!

A great first step is to stop the affair and end all contact with the third party. Be sure to detail for your spouse how you are going to do this. Refuse any and all contact with the person. If the person contacts you in any way be sure to tell your partner even though it may be upsetting to them. Do not go places where you are likely to see this person. If you do happen to see the

person, tell your spouse. If you work with the person it may even be necessary for you to leave your job. This may seem like an extreme response but the process of repairing trust may require such measures. Continue to reassure your partner that you are not having any contact with the third party. They may not believe you at first but with time they can begin to.

Talk openly

Talking about the affair may be extremely painful and embarrassing. The spouse may want to know all the details or just a few.

It is important to answer all

questions that are asked completely and honestly. When information is not offered willingly, the partner who learned of the affair will sometimes use their imagination to fill in the gaps and subsequently imagine the worst. Initially, the spouse may need to ask many questions repeatedly. It may seem to be the only thing the spouse can talk about and this is a normal reaction. At times it may also seem that the affair is being discussed almost obsessively. Over time these discussions will occur less frequently and can be limited to a specific time so that the discussions do not overtake the marriage. In order to rebuild trust, the both partner need to speak and hear the truth at all times. Any kind of cover-up or minimizing will create further distrust.

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Do Not Lie

Engaging in an affair is a series of lies, mistruths, deceptions and secrecy from the beginning. Do not withhold any information from your spouse as he or she may already be questioning all of your behavior during the time frame of the affair. Be willing to answer any questions without being defensive or falling into the “victim” role. A partner who recently learned of infidelity will need to “re-learn” the fact their partner can be trusted. Any lie, even a small one, will be a tremendous set back in rebuilding trust. Set a new precedent to answer any and all questions honestly. This is easier said than done, but when attempting to rebuild trust, it is critically important.

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Be Accountable

The person who engaged in the affair must be accountable to their partner. This is an exhausting process but is a key step in rebuilding trust. The life of the partner who was unfaithful must become

an “open book” at all times after the affair. Their spouse must be given the opportunity to check cell phone calls and text messages, phone records, credit card slips, pockets, purses, personal email accounts and the websites that have been visited. The spouse will also need to know where their spouse is going, with whom and what they will be doing and if plans change. This may seem like an invasion of privacy, but it is simply a consequence of the bad choices that damaged the trust. In some cases, the spouse who is attempting to

rebuild trust may choose not to check up on these things. They must have the option to do so. Being proactive will help promote trust.

Apologize and acknowledge

Apologize for the deep pain that has been caused by the affair and be sincere and truly apologetic. Apologies may need to be made again and again before they take affect. Acknowledging the deep grief and sorrow they have caused to their spouse is a key step. After an affair the history of the marriage has been forever changed; and these changes must be acknowledged as well as the damage they have done to the marital relationship. Both partners will need to be reassured of their partners' positive intents towards the marriage. Apologies are important but actions will ultimately foster the rebuilding of trust.

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Make Amends

The offending spouse must make amends to their partner in a way that has meaning to that person. This needs to be discussed and verbalizing what amends may be helpful is a good step. Some potential amends may be emotional reassurance and displays of trustworthiness. Other amends may be more concrete such as *I will empty the cat box every day because I know you hate doing that, or I will be the one who stays home when our child is sick.* Making amends is a gesture of good will and good intentions towards the offended spouse.

It is important to know the potential causes of an affair so that when those causes show up you will be aware of their negative potential.

Beware of the Root Causes

People have affairs for various reasons. For some it can be a character issue, a narcissistic and self-absorbed approach to life or a sense of entitlement. It is important to know the potential causes of an affair so that when those causes show up you will be aware of their negative potential.

Some Common Causes of infidelity include:

- Insecurity or boredom in the marriage
- Enjoying attention from a third party
- Feeling lonely and disconnected from a spouse
- Boundary issue

Don't Play the Blame Game

Choosing an affair is not a good response to marital problems. While there are many reasons people choose to engage in affairs, it must never be blamed on the other partner or on the marriage in general. There are many options available for troubled marriages including counseling and marriage education classes. If the partner who was unfaithful was unhappy in the marriage, or had a deep sense of anger or resentment towards their spouse, the best approach would have been to be honest and have sought out ways to address their concerns. This is a time for both partners to be honest with themselves and each other and look at behaviors they may need to change to have a healthier more satisfying marriage. It is a time for both people to grow as individuals and as a couple. Reestablishing boundaries and expectations within the marriage is crucial for a new beginning.

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Be Patient

Rebuilding trust after an affair takes time and patience. A good estimate for how long it will take before signs of normality emerge is at least six months. Often it can take up to two years to rebuild the marriage and ability to trust. This amount of

time may feel overwhelming but try to look at it in terms of a long marriage, two years out of forty or fifty years together is really not that much time!

The stages of affair recovery and rebuilding trust include:

- a period of crisis
- disorganization
- loss of belief in the partner and the marriage
- shattered dreams

...and after a period of several months

- reorganization and redefinition of the marriage.

The key to rebuilding trust is proven behavior and accountability over time. The partner who broke trust must reassure their spouse that they are glad they stuck with them and gave them another chance. The offending spouse must express appreciation to their partner throughout the rebuilding process.

Don't let the affair define the marriage

Rebuilding trust is difficult, and can seem overwhelmingly painful and challenging. It is important for couples to remember the strengths they have had in their marriage and why they chose to be together in the first place. It

is helpful to reminisce about their early days as a couple. Looking at wedding pictures and family photo albums together may be a good activity to remind couples of happier times. Couples need to start doing the things they used to do together when they were happy. Restoring the fun and friendship in the marriage is a key step in rebuilding after infidelity. They need to recommit to the relationship and make time for one another each day. It is important to remember that most people are trustworthy and that it is possible for trust to be rebuilt. Each spouse must restore trust in themselves and their marriage.

It is important to understand that rebuilding a marriage after an affair is a process which happens in stages. Making the decision to stay together and remain in the marriage is a huge step that can reap big benefits.

The bottom line when it comes to infidelity is that after it invades a marriage, successfully rebuilding trust can be difficult, lengthy and overwhelming. It is however possible to achieve the goal of

rebuilding trust with diligent commitment to working towards recovery. It is important to understand that rebuilding a marriage after an affair is a process which happens in stages. Making the decision to stay together and remain in the marriage is a huge step that can reap big benefits. There is marriage counseling available as well as marriage education courses, workshops and programs to assist in healing wounds caused by infidelity. Couples must make an effort to not rush their “recovery,” time and distance are necessary to help heal the relationship.

The NHMRC would like to thank Katherine Robredo for her contributions to this tip sheet. Katherine is a marriage and family therapist. This is a product of the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center, led by co-directors Mary Myrick, APR, and Jeanette Hercik, Ph.D., and project manager, Patrick Patterson, MSW, MPH.