

Fifteen Steps to Surviving an Affair

By Sari Harrar and Rita DeMaria, Ph.D. from *The 7 Stages of Marriage*

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Six Steps for the Unfaithful Spouse

Your marriage can survive an affair. Healing from infidelity is hard, painful work; both of you must be committed to repairing the damage, rebuilding trust, and reconnecting. The unfaithful spouse must be willing to stop the affair, provide all details honestly and completely, and take the steps necessary to prove his or her trustworthiness. Stopping secrecy and building a more honest union are the keys. If you make a commitment to follow these strategies with your whole heart, your marriage has a good chance of surviving the affair — and emerging stronger on the other side.

1. Promise to stop the affair — and to stop seeing your lover — immediately. Agree to sever all contact. This lifts secrecy and creates a sense of safety for the betrayed spouse. Stopping an affair goes beyond no dinner dates or sex. All phone calls, in-person conversations, and quick coffee breaks together must stop. If you work with the person with whom you had an affair, keep your encounters strictly businesslike — and tell your spouse everything that happens. Avoid private lunch dates and closed-door meetings. It's also important to report any chance meetings with your former lover to your spouse before he or she asks about it. Talk about your conversation. If your former lover contacts you, announce that too.

2. Answer all questions. More and more marriage experts agree that couples heal better after an affair if the adulterous spouse supplies *all* of the information requested by his or her betrayed partner. In one study of 1,083 betrayed husbands and wives, those whose spouses were the most honest felt better emotionally and reconciled more completely, reports affairs expert Peggy Vaughan, author of *The Monogamy Myth: A Personal Handbook for Recovering from Affairs*, who developed the international Beyond Affairs Network. "I've talked with plenty of people who say with pride that they never talked about the affair," she says. "That's not healing. You need to reach the point where you can talk about it without pain. If you never, ever discuss it, you cannot recover. My own husband had 12 affairs over seven years. I'm convinced the main reason I recovered was his willingness to answer all of my questions." It's counterintuitive — many spouses (and therapists) think that going over the details will only further upset the aggrieved partner. Truth is, willingness to talk rebuilds trust. The key is not holding back — no more secrets. If you leave out details that emerge later, your spouse may feel newly betrayed.

3. Show your spouse empathy, no matter what. The single best indicator of whether a relationship can survive infidelity is *how much empathy the unfaithful partner shows* when the betrayed spouse gets emotional about the pain caused by the affair, according to infidelity expert Shirley Glass, Ph.D.

4. Keep talking and listening, no matter how long it takes. You can't speed up your spouse's healing process, and you shouldn't ever negate its significance. Be ready to answer questions at any time, even months or years after the affair has ended. In addition, listen to his or her reactions without anger or blame. *Use the Active Listening Tool.*

5. Take responsibility. Blaming your partner for the affair won't heal your marriage. Showing sincere regret and remorse will. Apologize often and vow to never commit adultery again. It may seem obvious to you that you'll never stray again, but your spouse may have worries, so renew your commitment to your spouse as your one-and-only.

6. Don't expect quick or easy forgiveness. Your partner may be in deep pain or shock. Expect tears, rage, and anger.

Nine Steps for the Betrayed Spouse

The betrayed spouse must take the job of healing seriously — by not minimizing or trying to speed up the process and, at times, by setting aside overwhelming anger and despair in order to learn more about what's happened. You want to scream and rail at your partner. You want all the details about the affair. Above all, you want the secrecy to stop. These strategies can help you find what you need to heal, to repair your marriage, and to move forward.

1. Ask lots of questions. At first, you may want all the factual details: How often did you meet? When did you cross the line from friends to lovers? What sexual acts did you share? How many times? Where? How much money did you spend on him or her? Who else knows about your affair? Later, your questions may shift as you think about your partner's emotions, about the reasons he or she was pushed and pulled into the affair, about whether the affair has turned a spotlight on a hidden weakness in your own marriage.

2. Balance your rage with your need for information. You want to scream, cry, and lash out — but big emotions may prevent your spouse from making the full disclosure that leads to recovery. To get the truth (and form a tighter connection with your spouse), be compassionate about your partner's emotions. "When you get all the facts, you're not obsessed anymore," Vaughan says. "The only way your spouse will be willing to answer is if you can manage not to lash out and attack every time. *Use The I Statement Tool.* Spouses who've had affairs are afraid to reveal everything because they're worried it will become a marathon, with a downward spiral of out-of-control emotions." If one of you becomes upset, it's time to stop the discussion for now.

3. Set a time limit on affair talk. Restrict yourselves to 15 to 30 minutes. Don't let the affair take over your lives. Do ask questions as they arise instead of building up resentment and long lists of questions. "Don't let your worries go underground. Keep talking," Vaughan says.

4. Expect curveballs. The spouse who had the affair may become angry or even accuse you of betraying him or her. Keep the focus on the affair itself.

5. Talk about how the affair has affected you. Discuss your doubts, disappointments, feelings of betrayal and abandonment, anger, and sadness. *Use The I Statement Tool.* As your partner builds a wall between him- or herself and the former lover, help open a window of intimacy between the two of you. Don't hold back.

6. Don't forgive quickly or easily. You must grapple with your pain and anger first and rebuild trust. *Use The Forgiveness and Forgiving Your Teammate Worksheets.*

7. Find support. Reconnecting with family and friends, and even finding a support group to join, can help you feel less isolated.

8. Spend time together without talking about the affair. Connect as friends and romantic partners by doing the things you've always enjoyed.

9. Forgive only when you're ready. You'll never forget an affair, but the painful memories will fade with time. Forgiveness allows you to move past the pain and rage and to reconcile with your partner. *Use The Forgiveness and Forgiving Your Teammate Worksheets.* Take this important step only when you feel ready to let go of your negative feelings, when your partner has been completely honest and has taken steps to rebuild your trust. *Recognize that forgiveness is a decision and that in the beginning you will likely have to forgive the incident repeatedly when the hurt and pain are felt.*

If you want to learn more about marriage coaching to help you and your spouse heal from an affair, call MarriageTeam 360 450-6042 or e-mail at info@marriageteam.org.