

How to Connect Emotionally with Your Spouse After an Affair

This article is by Dr. Frank Gunzburg, author of ["How to Survive an Affair."](#)

Susan and Alex were sitting in my office trying to rebuild an emotional connection that had been destroyed by years of distance, neglect, and a short affair Alex was engaged in a year before. Susan started telling Alex how important the intimate connection they once had was to her. She said, "Alex, I used to love it when we were intimate." Alex said, "Ya, I know." And that was the end of the conversation ... or it would have been if I hadn't intervened.

The problem here was the same problem so many people have when they are trying to connect with their partner emotionally—the communication falls apart because each thinks he knows what the other means. It was absolutely clear to me that Alex didn't have the slightest idea what Susan was talking about. But those three little words—ya, I know—were about to kill a moment that had the potential to be truly powerful for Susan and Alex.

Knowing it couldn't stop there, I asked Alex what he thought Susan was talking about. He said, "Susan wants us to have more sex. All she can talk about is being intimate." Susan, of course, was aghast. Sex was the last thing on her mind, and she told Alex as much. He consequently became annoyed and confused and had a hard time continuing with the session. With a little gentle guidance he stayed. And the moments that followed became some of the most powerful in their relationship.

How to Deepen the Emotional Connection

When an intimate relationship is operating at an optimal level, the two people in the relationship touch each other emotionally by talking to and listening to one another in a passionate and sensitive way. If you have suffered some trauma in your relationship or you've grown apart over time, you may not be touching each other this way right now.

When this emotional distance goes on too long, it can be dangerous to a relationship. You run the risk of growing even further apart and your relationship

may eventually dissolve altogether. This primarily happens because people don't know how to intimately communicate. They talk and listen the way Susan and Alex did in my office. There are few words, or there could be a lot of words, a whole lot of assumptions, and too little investigation of what's going on for the other person.

The good news is that intimate communication isn't an inborn trait. It's a skill that can be learned. And learning this skill will help you connect to your partner on a much deeper emotional level. Let's look at how you do that.

Knowing When to Talk: Feel the Moment and Reach Out

The emotionally deepening moments in your relationship will not happen every day and shouldn't. They will be scattered throughout your relationship. So the first step to emotionally connected communication is learning how to catch the opportunities to deepen your emotional connection and take advantage of them.

Alex and Susan had that kind of opportunity when Alex chose to stay in session and continued investigating what his wife was telling him. But these moments can present themselves in many other ways as well.

Over the course of your lives together you may find yourselves sitting on a balcony looking out over a beautiful ocean view sipping a glass of wine or curled up by a fireplace, warm and relaxed. In these romantic, personal moments you can touch each other in ways that are intimate, but not necessarily sexual. You can touch each other with your understanding. Perhaps, in a moment like this your partner will open up and share something that's important to her with you. Or, you may willingly share a piece of yourself with your partner. When this happens it's time to open up and truly communicate with your partner. And when I say communicate, I don't mean simply talk the way we do every day. I mean learning HOW to talk and learning HOW to listen. Because despite the fact that we all learn to speak at a young age, very few of us really know how to communicate about feelings in depth. Luckily, you're about to learn.

Before I get to that I wanted to mention another issue. In some relationships traumatic events have made it very difficult to communicate intimately. You may find that you very rarely have moments like the ones described above. In my book ["How to Survive an Affair,"](#) I offer ways to develop communication and

rebuild intimacy. Even if you haven't suffered from an affair, some of those techniques may help you.

Being the Speaker: Sharing Your Soul without Sharing Too Much

You're sitting there by the fireplace, wrapped up in your partner's embrace, and you've opened up and shared some important part of yourself with your partner. This could be something you have discussed before or something brand new. It could be something about your relationship or about your personal life. It could be an aspect of your relationship or your partner you are concerned about or it could be something you truly cherish in your marriage. In essence, it could be ANYTHING that is meaningful to you.

Any part of yourself you share with your partner has the potential to deepen the emotional connection you have. So being a good, emotionally connected speaker isn't about what you say (as long as you are sharing something authentic and important to you), it's about how you say it. And there are a few important guidelines to follow when you are sharing with your partner.

The 3 Rules for Emotionally Connected Speaking

1. Share only one thing at a time. Human beings have cognitive limitations. If you share too many things with your partner at one time he will probably only remember the last part of what you tell him. So keep the packages of information small.

2. Don't make accusations. The reason for this rule is pretty obvious: If you become accusatory your partner will likely react by becoming defensive and the whole moment will evaporate. Don't let your voice sound angry or accusing, don't let the words you say be accusatory either. With a little thought there is almost always a way to share sensitive information about your partner or your relationship in a non-accusatory way.

3. Help your partner understand you. As the speaker, it's your job to help the listener truly understand how you feel or what you think about the issue you are sharing. In a good conversation a listener will ask questions, repeat back what the speaker has said and try to investigate the issue being discussed so he can understand it more completely. When this happens respond as openly and truly as you know how. Try and share yourself in a new way with your partner.

Following these three rules will help you engage your partner, deepen the conversation, and foster a new emotional connection.

Learning to Listen: Drop Assumptions and Begin to Investigate

Assumptions kill conversations. Take the example of Susan and Alex for instance. It was Alex's assumption that he understood what Susan was saying which nearly destroyed the intimate moment that was developing.

There's only one way to make sure this doesn't happen to you ... Assume nothing: Check out your assumptions and freely ask for clarifications.

Too many people assume they know what their partner is thinking or feeling. So, instead of using an intimate moment as an opportunity to connect on a deeper level, they blow their chance. This eliminates the possibility for an emotionally connected conversation.

When you take on the role of the listener (which you want to do anytime your partner is trying to share something meaningful with you), it's your job to drop your assumptions and investigate what's being said so you can deepen your understanding of your partner. There are two major ways to do this.

2 Techniques for Investigating What's Meaningful to Your Partner

The best techniques I know to investigate what's truly going on for your partner are:

1. Repeat back your understanding of what your partner has told you and ask if it's accurate – this means explaining what you heard rather than parroting the words—but if you cannot formulate any other response, parroting is an option.

Instead of simply assuming you know what your partner means when she shares something with you, you should repeat what you think she has said and make sure your understanding of it is accurate.

For example, if your partner has just told you she gets frustrated when you come home late from work, because it interferes with your time together, you might investigate this by saying: "I think you are saying that you really want to spend time together and when I come home late from work you are disappointed

because it is like I robbed us of the extra time that could have been our time together. Is that right?" This opens up the opportunity for your partner to expand on or change what she has said so that you can understand her true feelings more clearly. You might nail it the first time ... but that rarely happens.

It's far more likely that your partner will revise her statement, expand on it, or contradict it completely. Allow it to happen Why allow it? Because this is exactly what's supposed to happen.

Don't get frustrated if the revised statements don't match the original. A conversation of this nature isn't about finding the "truth" in an objective sense, it's about finding out what's true for your partner. That's how you deepen your emotional connection.

Let's say you repeat back the statement above and she responds by saying: "Well, that's not really it. What really frustrates me is that you don't call and tell me you're going to be late. If you could do that it would help me rearrange my own plans to accommodate your schedule." Notice this statement doesn't match the original. It contains a lot of new information and in some ways it even contradicts the original.

This kind of thing is liable to happen in emotionally connected conversations. That's because people develop their thoughts in the moment, based on the back-and-forth of the conversation. That's what your partner is doing, and your job to help her do it. So, instead of becoming frustrated, use these moments as an opportunity to develop the discourse.

2. Ask open-ended questions. An excellent way to keep this interaction going, deepen your understanding of what your partner is trying to express to you, and help her develop her thoughts is to ask open-ended questions. An open-ended question is a question that requires more than a simple "yes" or "no" answer. It's an investigative question that helps tease out a person's thoughts and feelings.

There are a lot of instructions about how to develop open-ended questions in ["How to Survive an Affair"](#) and the techniques are too complex to go into here, so I will let you refer to that book for more suggestions. But one easy way to know whether or not you are asking an open-ended question is your partner's

response. If she expands on the issue you are discussing in a non-defensive way, you have probably successfully executed a good open-ended question. Some people, however, are just good at giving free information even without open-ended questions.

Continuing on with the example above, you could respond to your partner's new statement with a recap followed by an open-ended question or request for more information. The recap gives your partner the opportunity to correct your understanding of what was said or what was meant, if it needs correcting.

You might say: "I understand that it bothers you when I don't call home if I'm going to be late. Tell me more about what the experience is like for you." This gives your partner a further opportunity to expand on the issue, share more information, and reveal more of herself.

All of this, in turn, gives you the chance to deepen your understanding of your partner. At some point, though, you have to risk stating your own understanding of what was meant. This takes time and it takes some energy, but it's worth it because it allows you to powerfully connect to your partner about something that's important to her.

There are a few more things you need to know to become a master listener, and that's what NOT to do when you are in the listener role. If the 2 techniques above are the listening "dos," these are the "DON'Ts".

The Listening DON'Ts

1. Don't get defensive. However your partner responds, think about it as if she were talking about someone else to help you remain non-defensive. Don't contradict what your partner says even if it's not the *truth*. If she says, "You never call me." Don't respond by saying, "I do TOO!!" This will kill the moment and destroy your developing connection. Instead, take the hit for what's being said. You can take it. And even if it doesn't seem true to you, it's true for your partner otherwise she wouldn't have said it.

2. Don't take the spotlight off your partner. As you begin to understand your partner's feelings you should share this understanding with her. But you need to do this without taking the spotlight off her. In other words, don't turn this into

what *you* think and what *your* experience is. Tell her that you can see how she feels, or you could imagine why she would feel that way, but don't start talking about "a situation you had" that was similar or how "you feel when that happens." The speaker is the one that's sharing here, and it's the listener's job to try and understand what's being said. Let her keep the spotlight. It's the only way you will understand her better.

When it All Comes Together

In moments when this process works as it should you can see the intimacy grow on your partner's face. You can see the change and emotional deepening happen before your eyes, and can often feel it yourself too. That's what happened with Susan and Alex that day.

When Alex overcame his initial anger and frustration he was able to investigate what Susan was really talking about, and it changed the way they understood one another.

Alex said, "Susan, if it's not sex you're talking about, then what kind of intimacy are we discussing here?" Susan responded, "I love it when you touch me with your words. I love it when we talk. I love it when we share with one another."

I watched as Alex's frustration melted away into quiet thoughtfulness in that moment, and for the first time I could see what brought these two people together in the first place.

I got to be witness to a special event that day. I watched as a conversation took place that helped Susan and Alex start to rebuild and deepen an emotional connection that had been dormant for a long time. The same thing can happen for you.