

Controlling Your Thoughts After an Affair

We recently were made aware of a survey that was conducted regarding the barriers to restoring sex life after infidelity. Of the 400 people that responded, 57% reported intrusive thoughts as the number one obstacle to restoring physical intimacy.

The respondents mentioned a variety of ways these thoughts manifested. Examples for the betrayed spouse included statements such as: *Visualizing my mate with another person; Imagining that my mate is fantasizing about the affair partner while making love to me; Imagining them in the same sexual positions that we're using; Obsessive thoughts about how my mate touched the other woman and if it was the same way I was being touched.*

The cheating spouses responded as such: *Thoughts about my affair partner while making love to my mate; Worried that my spouse would think that I might be thinking about the person I had the affair with; or images of porn intruding in our intimate times.* IMPORTANT NOTE...If you're reading this and you're dealing with an affair please don't assume this is a problem your mate is having. The percentage of respondents who were cheaters was much lower than those who were hurt.

Number two on the list of barriers (coming in at 34%) is feelings of inadequacy stemming from comparing self with the affair partner: *Wondering how you measure up physically and sexually with the other person; Them having sex is like a tape playing over and over again in your head...you wonder if you are pretty enough, skinny enough, and if you are sexually stimulating and pleasing to your spouse.*

This is a HUGE roadblock...We've always felt the most destructive form of questioning was that of comparison and this statistic seems to confirm that belief. Affairs are based on wanting what you don't have and marriages are based on having who you don't always want.

The motivational systems driving affairs are very different from those in marriage. Regardless, there still remains the belief that *"it has to be about me since I'm the one you cheated on"* and the answers to those comparison questions go on and on in the minds of the hurt spouse.

Number three in the list of barriers (coming in at 29%) was trust. Here are some examples of these statements: *The lack of trust and feeling exclusively loved, respected, and cherished by him to be able to be vulnerable enough for such an intimate act of openness, trust, and oneness; How can I be one with someone I am not even convinced truly wants to be wholly one with me?; Trusting that my husband was "safe" for me again was a HUGE obstacle. Once I determined to trust (and my husband was consistent in his behaviors), it opened the door for intimacy. But it took a while for me to reach a point where I could be vulnerable with him... even to let him see me naked was a big deal at first.*

Number four on the list is forgiveness. (21%) These individuals expressed difficulty with reengaging because of their anger and resentment. Examples of these statements: *Having sex is the same thing as saying "I forgive you."; Even when legally separating in some states, having sex with your estranged spouse is saying "I forgive you" and the separation is void; What if you are not ready to forgive?; What if the betrayer has done nothing to work toward trust and forgiveness? Why would you want to have sex with them? It only rewards them for bad behavior in my opinion especially for those of us who had a very healthy sex life prior to the affair.*

Another notable theme was feelings of repulsion, lack of desire, or feeling disconnected. Not knowing how they could rekindle desire for their mate. Some admitted they had not dealt with the infidelity and thus had poor communication/emotional intimacy, anger, guilt, shame, and fear of rejection. Another small, but notable category were the people who said they weren't sure if it was "too soon".

When a couple suffers an affair, their sex lives are almost always affected. For some, there are a great many questions that come up in terms of when, how, and if they will have sex again; what it will be like when they do; and how they will know when they are ready to make that step.

Though many of the emotions reflected from the survey above are from people who have experienced sexual affairs, I can assure you I have felt the exact same emotions and have seen the same images during, and after Doug's emotional affair.

I too have seen the images of my husband with another woman, even if only at work or out to lunch. I had the obsessive thoughts. I compared myself to the other woman. I didn't trust Doug. I experienced great anger and resentment.

If you have read our blog, *Emotional Affair Journey*, then you may have read about our experiences and opinions on all of these topics, but I really haven't touched much on these topics as they pertain to sex after an affair.

Regardless on whether it's sex after the affair or just trying to make it through each day after the affair, the main culprit in the survey and in our own situation was the plague of negative thoughts. The key is being able to control these thoughts.

When trying to control my own thoughts after the affair, I implemented a three-step process so that I could clear my mind and control my thoughts. It worked for me. If you work hard, it can work for you as well.

What follows is a 3-step program for looking at your negative thoughts, challenging the believability of these thoughts, and replacing them with more self-affirming statements.

If you tend toward skepticism, it might be difficult for you to believe that these techniques are effective. However, these techniques are adapted from sound psychological healing principles that have proven effective in helping people that suffer from all kinds of negative thinking in study after study.

Please take your time and work through each step completely. If you do this, you will amplify the effect of the work that we are about to do.

Step 1: Track Your Thoughts

Thoughts drive your feelings. When you think about something negative you tend to feel bad. On the other hand, if you think about something positive, you tend to feel good. This is simply common sense.

However, when you are wrapped up in difficult, negative emotions, it isn't always easy to see what thoughts are behind your painful feelings. When you have been

injured in an affair, this is often the case. You are so overcome with feelings of betrayal and rage that you sometimes fail to see what thoughts are behind these feelings.

To make this situation worse, it is sometimes hard to tell one difficult thought from another when you are caught up in a seemingly endless stream of negative thoughts and feelings. Thoughts don't always happen as single elements. They are often caught up in our fantasies or emotions. As such, they are sometimes hard to see for what they are.

If you feel like you are having a hard time distinguishing your thoughts from your feelings, or even one thought from another, thought tracking can be an immense help to you. Even if you don't seem to have these kinds of problems, this first step will help you get a good track record of what you are thinking and will allow you the opportunity to see if there are any consistent patterns to your thoughts.

Take one week and track your negative thoughts about the affair. Just as with emotions, it is very difficult to effectively change your thoughts until you take the time to look at them.

Because each affair situation is different, it's impossible to give you a list of common thoughts people have. Instead try and find out for yourself what common thoughts you are having about the affair.

Get yourself a notebook and every time you have a negative thought about the affair, take note of the following information:

- What time the thought occurred.
- What you were doing when the thought occurred.
- What the thought was.
- How the thought made you feel.
- Whether you acted on the thought in any way.

Be as thorough as you can about this process. Clearly, you won't be able to record every single thought you have. That's okay. You don't need to. But be persistent in your efforts, and they will pay off.

If you find that you are having a flood of thoughts, just note whichever ones you can, and let the rest go. If you can only get a clear picture of one thought, take notes on that one. Do what you can, and don't do more than that.

Track your thoughts in this fashion for at least a week. It is important that you do it for at least a week so you can obtain enough information for the next part of this activity. If you wish, you can continue tracking your thoughts longer.

After you track your thoughts for a week, take the time to look back over your entries. Take note of a couple of things. First, check and see if there are any traceable patterns in your thinking. For example, do certain thoughts tend to come up at certain times of day or after certain activities? Do you wake up having certain thoughts in the morning or go to bed with them at night?

Secondly, check to see if particular thoughts consistently lead to particular emotional or behavioral responses. For example, you may notice that every time you go into the bedroom you are reminded of the affair, and consequently, you feel like an awful partner. This thought pattern makes you feel hopeless.

Researching the way you think is not a purely academic exercise. Rather, it allows you the foresight to know what you *expect* to think and feel in certain situations. If you learn your own patterns, you can prepare to challenge and combat them.

Step 2: Challenging the Believability of Your Thoughts

Now that you have a fairly good record of your negative thoughts about the affair and you have examined various patterns in your thinking, it is time to start challenging these thoughts.

In order to do this, you are going to take various negative thoughts you had over the last week and put them to a reality test. You can certainly use this process for thoughts that are coming up for you right now as well. However, it is useful to

start practicing this skill on a thought you already recorded. Once you hone the skill, you can put it to use at your command.

The Reality Test

Choose one of your challenging recurring negative thoughts. The thought that you choose should bring up some discomfort and negative feelings for you. Your goal in this part of the exercise will be to undermine that discomfort by disproving the reality of the thought.

Do this exercise by writing responses in your notebook. If you think you can do it in your mind, you may want to reconsider. This exercise is much more powerful when you write it down.

If you are having a hard time keeping your thoughts straight, do the best you can at writing them down in your notebook. Doing so will greatly maximize the effect of the exercise.

Write down the thought you have chosen to work with. Then, ask yourself the following questions:

- How realistic or logical is this thought in the world at large?
- Is there an argument against the thought?
- What actual evidence do I have that this thought is true?
- Even if it were true, what would it practically mean for me and my situation right now?

Try and answer these questions as objectively as you can. This is a little tricky, because it is so easy to get caught up in the story we are telling ourselves. The story supports our distorted thinking and makes it more difficult to get an objective perspective.

If you suspect that you might not be able to look at these things objectively, go through the exercise and then run your answers by a trusted friend. Sometimes that can help give you a little additional perspective.

If you can go through the process you will often find that the distressful thoughts you are having don't have as much truth value in them as you are investing them with. When you are faced with a situation as extreme as an affair, sometimes your thoughts run away with you.

These negative thoughts, in and of themselves, aren't bad, and they certainly aren't unnatural. The problem with them comes when we allow unrealistic negative thoughts to start controlling our physical and emotional lives. You have certain thoughts, and they make you sad. The truth is that you have more control over that process than you think.

There are certain kinds of thoughts you should be particularly aware of and challenge whenever they come up. Challenging these thoughts will help you obtain some control over the way your thoughts influence your feelings.

Be particularly aware of the following kinds of thoughts:

- **General ideas** that contain "always," "never," or "all the time." For example, "He always acts like this," or, "I'm never like that."
- **Labeling yourself or others.** Examples include "I'm stupid," and "He's no good." The truth is that you might have done or thought something stupid, but that doesn't make you stupid. Similarly, he might have done something very bad, but that doesn't mean he is without redeeming qualities.
- **Extreme statements** like "I am an awful husband." These kinds of thoughts are related to the first two and potentially healthier.
- **Necessary punishment.** The idea that every single bad deed must be punished or it is a tragedy.
- **My way or the highway.** The idea that if everything doesn't go the way you expect or the way you want, it is a tragedy.
- **The world out there.** The idea that external events out of your control cause most of your unhappiness.
- **Excuses.** Statements that begin, "You have to understand that ..." generally mean a proposed excuse will follow.

- **I've been down so long.** The idea that things have been going badly for so long that it is hopeless to do anything about it now.
- **I have to find the answer.** The idea that it is awful if I cannot find the answer to my own problems.

When negative thoughts like these come up, give them the reality test. Look at them from an objective perspective, and see if you can find out whether they are really true or something you are investing in for other reasons.

Learning that a great majority of the thoughts that come into your mind about the affair aren't even true puts you in a much more secure psychological space.

Step 3: Using Self-Affirmations

Self-talk is a powerful influence on the way people think, feel, and act. Self-talk is the stuff we internally say about ourselves all the time. Everyone has a certain amount of self-talk going on most of the time. We constantly judge ourselves and talk to ourselves (in our minds) about these judgments.

Perhaps through your self-talk you have pretty much convinced yourself that you are a terrible partner. That idea can lead to many other ideas that can make it difficult for you to remain positive about yourself and your relationship.

However, if you can catch this process while it was occurring and replaced your negative self-talk with realistic self-affirmations, you would dramatically change your outlook on yourself and the affair.

During this next step, you must consider leaving any skepticism at the door. In today's society, the idea that you can "accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative" makes most of us shudder a bit. We are cynical and skeptical enough to believe that any attempt at encouraging positive thinking in our lives is a losing battle.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Nothing can help you more in your situation than to remind yourself that you are a worthwhile, lovable person.

Of course, we will temper these self-affirmations with a bit of reality. I am not going to try and have you convince yourself that you are the single greatest person on the planet and that you deserve to be the queen or king. It is unlikely you would buy that anyway. But I am guessing that right now you are feeling more like the lowest person on the earth, and that isn't a healthy or realistic place for you to be either.

Now take the same thought that we worked with in the last exercise. Do some reality testing on it as you did before. Ask yourself whether the thought is realistic or logical and whether you can find an argument against it. See what evidence you have to support the thought, and what would practically change for you if the thought were true.

Now, using what you learned in your reality test, turn that thought into a more realistic, self-affirming statement. Here is a possible example:

"As the final step in overcoming the idea that I was a failure as a wife, I told myself, 'I'm not a perfect partner. No one is. But that doesn't mean I'm a failure. I have worked hard to be a good wife, and I feel I have done a good job at it. I love my husband and my family. I work hard to take care of them and to meet their needs. I may not always succeed in this, but I do my best, and I will keep doing my best. The fact that I am working to keep my relationship alive, right now in this difficult time, is a testament to this.'

Once you produce your self-affirming statement, make it a practice to call it to mind every time you think the negative thought that has been plaguing you.

To assist you in this process, I would like to offer you a few examples of some negative thoughts and the self-affirmations created to counter these statements. You can model your own statements on the ones below:

- **Negative Thought:** I'm so worthless that my partner doesn't love me anymore. That's why he cheated.

Self-Affirmation: Everyone is worth something, including me. My partner cares about me; we have been together a long time. This may not be the height of our relationship, but we can learn to get back to a place of loving and caring for one another again.

- **Negative Thought:** He must be a better lover than me. That's why she cheated.

Self-Affirmation: I have no proof that he is a better lover than me. I may not be the greatest lover in the world, but my partner has been satisfied with our sex life in the past. Indeed, being a bad lover is not the same thing as not being a great lover. Sexual techniques are learnable, and I can learn to fulfill my partner in new ways.

- **Negative Thought:** This means our relationship is over. It will never be the same way again. My life is ruined.

Self-Affirmation: Our relationship is not over. We are working on it right now. Many people have gotten past infidelity and recreated a loving, intimate relationship. We can too. It will take time and work, but we can do it.

Once you generate your self-affirmations, keep them with you at all times. Write the thoughts on cards and carry them around with you so you can pull them out anytime negative thoughts are troubling you. Doing so will go a long way toward helping you overcome your negative thinking and rebuild your self-confidence. From time to time, review all your cards, even when the thoughts are not troubling you.

Follow this 3-step program with each of the thoughts you noticed you were having in the thought tracking exercise. Once you have enough practice, you naturally will start challenging your negative thinking and replacing such thoughts with self-affirmations.

Obsessions: What to Do When the Plague of Images Won't Go Away

In some cases people become completely consumed with thoughts about the affair. This is a little different than the negative thinking we have explored up to this point, although it is related.

Obsessive thinking is marked by an ongoing stream of negative thoughts that carry on even when you are trying not to have them. These thoughts seem to have a life of their own. When people are bound up in obsessive thinking after an affair, they are only able to put thoughts or images of the affair out their head for

a short time. Sometimes they are unable to put these thoughts or images out of their mind at all.

If you are obsessively preoccupied with an abstract thought, try putting the 3-step program for overcoming negative thinking that you just learned to work for you. You have to focus on continually keeping records of your thoughts, challenging the believability of them and replacing them with self-affirming statements.

In the case of obsessive thinking, you must engage in this process more rigorously than with other kinds of negative thinking. Each time you have a negative thought, counter it as much as you can. Each time it creeps into your mind, replace it with a self-affirmation. In this way, over time, you are likely to reduce the impact it has on your life and eventually eliminate it altogether.

We hope that you have enjoyed this report and can use the concepts to achieve some measurable results. Please do yourself a favor and at least give the techniques described above a try. Over time they will help to eliminate the negative thoughts that circle your mind.

There are indeed many heartbreaking barriers to sex and everyday life after infidelity. If nothing else, we hope you know you are not alone. Odds are there are others like you who want to heal, and those who have already overcome the same barriers you now face. Please don't give up. There is hope.

Hopefully, over time you will be able to overcome these obstacles and, in the meantime, you should consider a mentor who has already recovered. A mentor's experience will give you options you never imagined.

Take care!

Linda and Doug