

Winning Back Your Wayward Spouse

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3 steps that will get their attention

Few life experiences are more complicated and confusing than trying to navigate through a marriage when your spouse has veered off course. Despite past promises of lifelong partnership, you may find yourself married to a husband or wife who seems to be changing their mind. Once you were a team, but now they are heading off in a new direction; perhaps alone, or perhaps with someone else. So what do you do? Do you wait and hope they come back? Chase after them and try to turn them around? Do you just let go? This article is intended to help you determine the best course of action for encouraging your growth and your spouse's return.

Who should read this?

The following guidelines are written to a specific audience. These suggestions are meant for you if the following statements are all true of your situation:

- **Your spouse has had an affair.**
- **Your spouse is either ambivalent or resistant** to doing the work of restoring your marriage despite your willingness to do so. Whether or not the affair has ended (sometimes you don't know for sure), they make no consistent effort to reconcile with you.
- **Your spouse will not commit to a future with you.** They may tell you they don't love you anymore. Or maybe they say they love you but are no longer "in love" with you. Or maybe they just claim to be confused.

If you choose to follow the strategy outlined here, you should definitely *not* ask your spouse to read this. They need to get a clear sense that your choices originate from personal resolve rather than from some new strategy. Their awareness of these recommended steps will likely cause them react by criticizing "your plan" instead of responding directly to your intent.

Ineffective Focus: Managing Your Spouse

You want to do anything to save your marriage, but if you are not careful, your acts of desperation may actually push your spouse farther away.

I've known many betrayed spouses who, out of tremendous strength, offer grace to an unfaithful partner. Despite their deep pain, they express a willingness to work toward forgiveness and trust. Sometimes, this is the first step toward a rebuilt marriage that is deeply satisfying to both spouses. Sometimes... but not always. An unfaithful spouse may refuse this offer and send a clear message in return: *I'm not really convinced I want this marriage anymore.*

If that is the message you are getting, you may feel fearful and frantic. You want to do anything to save your marriage, but if you are not careful, your acts of desperation may actually push your spouse farther away. These acts of desperation include any of the following:

- Telling your spouse that nothing they do matters; that you will continue to love them no matter what.
- Assuming responsibility for the affair and promising to change.
- Constantly pleading with your spouse to stay.
- Insisting that your spouse continue in counseling even though they have no interest in it and put no effort into the process.
- Continuously blaming your spouse, trying to guilt them into doing what you want.
- Threatening your spouse.

When panic leads you to either appeasement or control, your attempts to manage your spouse are likely to have an effect that is opposite of what you desire; they will push your spouse *away* from you, not *toward* you. He/she will have an even greater desire to escape from your "neediness" or control. Your spouse may pity you and wish things were different, but can rarely return to loving again under those circumstances. More likely than not, they will begin to feel trapped and inwardly struggle against any sense of obligation to fix your marriage.

We easily recognize this problem in dating relationships. If one person tries to force another into a relationship by begging or insisting, we know the result will not be favorable. So why should we think this dynamic changes after marriage? It

doesn't. The only reasonable outcome to expect in this scenario is one of growing disrespect, not affection.

Here's what one husband wrote about his wife's response to his affair:

After [my wife] found out about my affair, I went through months of confusion about my choices. On one hand, I knew I didn't want to lose my family. But on the other hand, I still had strong feelings for the [other woman]... feelings I didn't have for my wife... so it felt like working on my marriage was something I did out of obligation, not out of love. This was obvious to her. She wanted to argue with me most of the time, as if she could change my mind by being forceful enough, but I hated her when she was attacking. All I could think of was "It sure was easier being with [the other woman]!"

I know that sounds bad. Part of me knew I should be doing more to fix my marriage, but I wasn't in love with her anymore. She was insisting that I love her again but I just wanted to run the other way. Sometimes she would get desperate and start crying, begging me to love her like I use to. I felt bad because I really didn't want to hurt her, but it made me pity her, not want her.

So what should you do if your wayward spouse remains distant and uncommitted? What actions are more likely to alter your spouse's retreat? Start by refusing to play the role of a desperate spouse any longer. Instead, take control of your part of the relationship.

Effective Focus: Managing Yourself

Your spouse is not in a healthy place right now. There is a real possibility that he/she may continue to make choices that hurt you. Even so, you have to accept the fact that you cannot control their behavior. Instead, you have to start focusing on what you *can* control: your own choices.

Here are 3 steps you can start making right now that are most likely to get your spouse's attention:

Step #1: Let Go

Tell your spouse you want your marriage, but that you know you cannot work on building a strong marriage until he/she is certain about their commitment to do

the same. If you've been trying to control them, admit it. Apologize for trying to do something that wasn't your job to do. Let your spouse know that from this point on you will no longer attempt to control them. They are free to make their own choices. Let them go.

This will result in a radical shift in your relationship. You will feel very vulnerable because there is certainly a chance your spouse will exercise this freedom by moving farther away from you. You have to be willing to let that happen. Before you take this step, make sure you are prepared in these two ways:

1. *Be honestly committed to letting your spouse go.* You have to understand that your spouse may actually take you up on the offer and will be out of your reach, at least for a while. If you give this "letting go speech" as a manipulative ploy to get them back quickly, they will see right through your insincerity. You must be willing to stop all of your investigative patterns at this point (no more checking up on where they are, checking emails, demanding accountability, etc.). All those behaviors are appropriate when a wayward spouse is committed to earning trust back, but not if you are letting them go. You have to be willing to risk their bad choices for a period of time.
2. *Be ready to give this some time,* even if your spouse immediately tells you they don't want you to do it. Some spouses resist this kind of change because they realize they're losing power in the relationship. They may become angry and accuse you of making things worse (see Q&A section below). Or they may immediately break down and promise to give you everything you've been asking for. Your caution should be on high alert. If you give in too quickly, you'll likely experience a moment of blissful hope followed by your spouse's swift return to the old pattern of non-commitment. If your spouse says they truly are committed to working on this, let them know that you need time to feel confident about their decision. Make sure they back up their commitment with a plan of action (counseling, etc.).

How far do you let them go?

If you know your spouse is in another relationship, you may need to ask for

physical separation. I've watched many relationships caught in a "Pendulum Pattern" where one person swings back and forth between spouse and lover. This can go on a very long time, but the pattern will lose its momentum if you remove yourself from the equation. The type of separation (moving out of the house or just moving out of the joint bed) depends on your situation, but some type of physical separation is recommended in an ongoing affair.

If your spouse's indecision is rooted in emotional confusion without active affair behavior, then this separation may not require moving out of the bedroom. In this case it simply means that you are letting go of your expectations. You are taking the pressure off them and are going to focus on other things.

How long should you let them go?

That's up to you. You'll probably want to seek help from a counselor or trusted person as you try to figure out how long you will wait, but one thing I do encourage you to do: Have an end date in mind. You can always adjust your deadline, but you should have some sense of how much time you are willing to give your spouse.

Step #2: Limit Your Availability

This choice is a very important one. Your spouse needs to experience your shift in the relationship. Up to this point, you've been easily available to them, but they do not value this and may have lost respect for you. So back off. You need to create some distance between you and your spouse, not out of anger or revenge or manipulation, but out of a need to focus more on yourself and less on your spouse. You need to limit your availability in these ways: give less tenderness, less talk, and less time.

Stop trying to get your spouse to a better place; start doing those things that help *you* grow.

Less Tenderness

If your spouse is in a physical affair, you need to stop all affectionate behavior. This is not a competition between you and the other person; it's something your spouse has to figure out for him/herself. As long as affection is being given to someone else, respect yourself enough to stop all all romantic or sexual

behaviors. (Your spouse may argue about this, but stop contributing to their bad behavior.)

If your spouse is not in a physical affair, you may still have moments when affection is expressed, maybe even sexually, but it's important that you not be the primary initiator. In fact, being a bit aloof is actually more enticing than always being ready-and-willing. Your spouse should definitely get the sense that you don't *need* to be with them.

Less Talk

Up to this point, you probably have been talking to much. You need limit the amount of communication (talking, texting, emailing, phone calls, etc.) you have with your spouse. Keep away from emotional conversation. If your spouse invites you to talk about how you feel, give an honest answer, but keep it brief. You should focus on business-of-life communication (schedules, paying bills, responsibilities, children, etc.) and avoid bringing up relationship issues. The key here is to focus on communication that allows you to remain confident, calm, and in control.

Less Time

You should be less available to your spouse. I don't mean that you should selfishly refuse to do anything with him/her, but I do mean that you need to make sure your calendar includes some activities/events that are just for you (or you with the rest of your family). You are capable of finding meaning and enjoyment in life apart from your spouse; they need to experience that.

Step #3: Focus on Growth

You've been focused on changing your spouse, now it's time to focus on changing YOU. Your contentment in life should not be bound to whims of your spouse or the circumstances of your marriage. Of course, these both affect you deeply, but they should not control your contentment. Rather, your satisfaction in life should be firmly rooted in your contentedness with who you are and who you are becoming.

Who do you want to be? What is your understanding of the design or purpose for your life? What does God want for you? What in you gets in the way of realizing

those things? What are your passions? What do you enjoy that you haven't done in a long time? What have you always wanted to do? What new things get you excited or make you want to learn?

Stop trying to get your spouse to a better place. I hope they eventually get there, but the only person you control is you, so start being intentional about doing those things that help you grow.

Where to Start

Before you start this process of self management instead of spouse management, think it through. Consider your choices and be determined to make them. Talk with a counselor or trusted friend who can continue to support you.

If you're ready, start by writing a letter to your spouse, telling him/her that you are "letting go." Once you've written it out, put it away overnight and read it again tomorrow. Do you avoid sounding harsh or judgmental? Is your hope for your marriage clearly communicated? Will your spouse understand that you taking a hands off approach? Does it sound like a threat (it shouldn't), or like you are really making a significant shift? Rewrite it until you are satisfied.

Now you have a choice. If you want, you can give the letter to your spouse, ask them to read it, and then invite them to ask any questions. But I recommend that you ask your spouse to listen without interrupting while you read the letter to them, answer any questions they have, and then give them a copy to read again later.

What to Expect

If you take these steps, these shifts will likely occur:

1. *Conflict diminishes.* You and your spouse will no longer be locked in a control struggle and so you will likely experience a calming in your relationship. This may not be the return to passion that you're longing for, but it will be a welcomed change for you both.

2. *Confidence increases.* As you take control of your part in this relationship, your desperation will subside and your confidence will build. You'll begin to feel less

like a victim and more like a person who is capable of walking through the deep pains of life.

3. *Considerations change.* Before, when your spouse felt trapped, he/she likely struggled with the question, "Do I really want to stay in this marriage?" but now that you have stopped grasping and have started moving independently the question may become, "Do I really want to lose this marriage?" Instead of feeling pushed away, they may feel themselves being pulled back toward you.

If the pain of losing you is stronger than the payback of separation from you, then their motivation will begin to shift and real change is possible.

Questions & Answers

Q: How much time should I give my spouse before take these 3 steps?

A: You should make the first one (Let Go) immediately. Trying to get what you want by demanding or pleading will never produce the results you want. You can be honest about what you want and about the disappointment or pain you are experiencing, but waste no effort trying to control your spouse.

Depending on your circumstances, you may continue to stay plugged into the relationship and focussed on caring for your spouse for a while. This period of grace should only be granted if your spouse is not actively involved in another relationship, and should only last for a period of time (a weeks or a few months). If your spouse's behavior does not shift in a way that moves them consistently toward you, then you need to move with determination and take steps 2 and 3.

Q: My spouse says the pressure I'm putting on them to make a choice is actually pushing them farther away. What if things get worse instead of better?

A: Your spouse probably won't like the steps you're taking because it means they are losing control. This claim of "You're pushing me away" is just an attempt to play on your fears. But it's simply not a true statement. Your marriage is stuck because your spouse, not you, has been indecisive. But you don't have to be a slave to their indecision; you have the right to make healthy choices. Make it very clear that you are not the one who questions what you want; you are not the one who has been uncertain.

Do these choices guarantee your spouse's return? No. In fact, it's possible that when you let your spouse go, they leave. For good. But in my opinion (supported by the experiences of the many couples I've worked with), if a spouse is that set on leaving it's better to move toward a quick resolution rather than enduring the long, agonizing death of your marriage.

Q: Isn't this just being manipulative?

A: That depends on your core motive. If you do these things simply to get your spouse back then, yes, it is manipulative. And if that's true, you will likely stop taking these steps as soon as you think it's not "working."

But if you recognize that you cannot control your spouse and that it is important for you to make healthy choices *despite what they do*, then your motive has more to do with changing yourself than changing your spouse. Even if your spouse never turns back toward you, you'll be heading in a healthier direction.

The additional benefit of these choices is realized if/when your spouse senses they might be losing you. If the pain of losing you is stronger than the payback of separation from you, then their motivation will begin to shift and real change is possible.

Q: Don't these steps contradict forgiveness? Isn't it more virtuous to forgive my spouse unconditionally?

A: These steps have everything to do with trust, but nothing to do with forgiveness. I hope you will forgive your spouse even if they never give you what you long for. But you cannot experience an intimate relationship with someone whom you do not trust and a "wayward spouse" is, by definition, acting in a way that is untrustworthy.

Let me go a bit further and say that I believe these 3 steps will be even more powerful if your spouse knows that you do forgive them (or are willing to work toward forgiveness). Make sure you understand and explain the difference between forgiving and trusting.