

## How to Close the Door After an Affair

By Lynn Margolies, PhD

Temptation mixed with opportunity is a recipe for people to stray — especially during difficult or lonely times in a marriage. Those times can include the aftermath of an affair.

An affair that is suddenly exposed or ends poses a particular risk situation for a vulnerable marriage with an unfaithful spouse. Feelings of loss, conflict and pressure can make it difficult to let go of the illicit relationship, compounding the lure that led to the affair in the first place.

Effectively establishing closure with the affair partner — including ceasing all contact — helps guard against relapse and is an important beginning gesture toward restoring trust in the marriage. This is not the time to rely on good intentions and discipline alone.

Affairs happen in up to 45 percent of marriages. Although often overlooked and underestimated, *opportunity* is a primary risk factor. Opportunity poses the most danger when people:

- are not onto themselves and fail to accurately assess their vulnerability to acting on temptation;
- fail to consciously register the potential affair partner's intentions;
- do not make an explicit decision, or plan, to protect themselves from acting out.

Taking steps to remove temptation and close the door securely protects the unfaithful spouse from continued secret contact during the chaotic transition out of the affair relationship. The unfaithful spouse not only feels guilty about having the affair, but often feels torn and guilty about ending the affair relationship. During the goodbye process, he or she is prone to give the affair partner mixed signals, even if unconsciously.

The email below was written by Michael to the “other woman” after he was found out by his wife. See if you can find the problems in this goodbye email intended to finalize the affair.

*Dear Jane,*

*I am sorry but I can't see you anymore right now. The worst has happened. My wife found out about us and forbids me to have any more contact with you. I wish things could be different and that you and I could be together.*

*I hope you can understand that I have to try to see if my marriage can work for my kids. I know I can't ask you to wait for me though, but who knows what the future will bring? I will always love you and will hold you in my heart.*

*If you want to talk, I can try to make that happen so we can say goodbye in person.*

*Love always,  
Michael*

Michael fell into all the common traps: blaming his wife instead of owning his decision; expressing longing; wavering; feeding the attachment; failing to align himself with his wife; failing to set a boundary around his marriage; offering hope and leaving the door open for continued cheating.

These pitfalls not only risk Michael's chances of restoring his marriage, but also lead Jane on, making it harder for her to let go and recover. Jane predictably read between the lines, searching for hope and encouragement — and affirmation that this farewell message was for not for real.

Jane identified the following traps:

- **Can't**– doesn't take responsibility and own his decision
- **Right now**– implies hope for the future
- **The worst has happened**– reinforces this is not what he wants
- **My wife forbids**– blames wife, fails to take responsibility and doesn't own the ending as his decision
- **I wish ...**- reinforces desire
- **For my kids**- fails to show shift in allegiance to his wife
- **Wait for me...who knows what the future**- offers hope
- **I will always love you...**- feeding the attachment
- **Talk...in person** – opens the door to temptation and likely acting out

In ending an affair, the unfaithful spouse often suffers grief, feelings of loss and preoccupation with the affair partner. These feelings may need to be processed in the context of therapy where the function and meaning of the affair can be understood, rather than acted upon. Successful endings of affairs typically do not involve processing feelings with the affair partner because the likelihood of doing so will further intensify the attachment and lead to re-engagement. If there is something else that needs to be said, it should be with the spouse's full awareness and consent.

People who have difficulty emotionally letting go of the affair partner even after having cut off contact usually are continuing the relationship in their minds through remembering and fantasizing. Fantasy provides the fuel for affairs — leading up to them, perpetuating them, and then making it difficult to back away or let go. Swept away by the addictive, intoxicating power of the “rush,” romantic fantasy and infatuation is confused with the complexity of intimate relationships and real life. The failure to believe that one is caught in a fantasy drives the process, leading to the false belief that this feeling is sustainable and a rigged comparison with a marital relationship. (See: “Who said it’s not your affair?” “How to mend a broken Marriage,” “When fantasy crosses the line”)

The goal of the final communication with the affair partner is to break the cycle of temptation and opportunity by demonstrating a shift in allegiance to the spouse, and dispelling hope that the affair will continue now or in the future. A simple “Dear John or Jane” email is indicated, and should be done with full transparency with one's spouse. The essential message should be that the affair partner is unwelcome now and that any future attempts to communicate will not get a response. Since this is the point of the email, there is no way to spare Jane from feeling rejected without sabotaging the purpose of the email. Paul's letter below is an example of good-bye email that effectively delivers the message and functions as a bridge to repair his marriage:

*Dear Jane,*

*I have made a decision. I want to be with my wife and family. I no longer want to continue our relationship or keep any secrets from my wife. Everything is out in the open. I realize now that I used poor judgment in getting involved in this in the*

*first place and am sorry for that. I plan to get help to understand how I could betray my own values as well as my family.*

*I know this is abrupt but that is the only way. We both knew the risks we were taking. Please respect my decision to no longer have any contact. I will no longer respond to any email, text, calls or other attempts to communicate with me.*

*Paul*

Paul's email anticipates what might happen. He discourages further reconnection, and sets a firm boundary to pave the way for a clearing for him and his wife.

Many marriages shattered by affairs can be repaired and come out stronger, but they only have a chance once the unfaithful spouse has let go of his attachment to the affair partner. Predicting and planning for risky situations reduces opportunity and temptation, and is a good way to protect oneself from becoming overtaken by feelings and out of control. Defensive strategizing involves being onto oneself, making intentional decisions to set clear boundaries and limits on ourselves, and distancing from behaviors and situations that increase risk.

Alternatively, denying risk, avoiding thoughtful consideration of what's at stake, minimizing small boundary infractions, or overestimating one's resolve all set the stage for an eventual crash and the possibility of losing it all.