

Understanding Your Betrayed Spouse - A quick reference manual for unfaithful partners.

YOU BETRAYED YOUR PARTNER. NOW COMES THE FALLOUT.

They discovered your adultery. You ended the affair and promised you'll never cheat again. But the stress from their emotional devastation lingers. And you don't see much change – at least, not as much positive change as you expected. Many times, any visible changes are for the worse. You observe them bouncing back and forth like a ping-pong ball, moment to moment, from one emotion to the next. They're unpredictable. There's no discernable pattern. Their nerves are frayed. They can't sleep. They can't eat. Their thoughts are obsessive. Intrusive visions and flashbacks assault them without warning. They cry at the drop of a hat. They feel empty, used up, exhausted. The stress consumes their energy and their life until they feel like there's nothing left. It's terrible.

It's an ordeal for you to witness their tortured, depressed and angry states, and what's worse; you don't know what to do. You're not alone. Unfaithful spouses never dream they'll get busted, so when confronted with their adultery they're always caught by surprise; first by their partners' knowledge, then by their intense agony. Indeed, unfaithful partners never think about what they'll face "after" until after. The fact is: Though they inflict it, adulterers are unprepared for the onslaught of their spouses' overwhelming emotional distress. Is this real? Is this permanent?

As you watch them sink lower and lower, wallowing in an emotional abyss, you wonder where the bottom is, when they will hit it, and if they will ever ascend from it and return to "normal." You ask yourself, "Is this real?" Then you ask, "Will this ever end?"

The simple answers are: Yes, it is real. And, yes, it will end. But recovery takes a long time, often years, and much depends on you. Can you be remorseful, apologetic, loving, patient, empathetic and soothing over an extended period of time? Can you commit to openness and honesty at all times – and forevermore being faithful to your spouse?

Be honest with yourself: If you can't or don't want to get over your affair, if you don't feel shame and remorse, and if you can't generously provide appropriate support to your spouse, then now is the time to consider ending your marriage and spare your marital partner further pain. (If this is the case, you need not read any further.)

But if you have put the affair permanently behind you, if you feel and can freely express your remorse and shame for your unfaithfulness, and if you can commit to supporting your spouse through their excruciating anguish, then you have an excellent chance of rebuilding from this disaster you've wrought to a happy, satisfying, caring and loving marriage. The following is intended to help you help your partner, and in turn yourself, through this horrible time and jumpstart your journey to recovery.

So, take a couple of deep breaths... and let's start with three foundational facts:

- **What you're seeing in your spouse is a normal reaction to a life-changing event.**
- **Your spouse needs to grieve for as long as it takes in order to recover and heal.**
- **You can be a positive influence on their recovery.**

Now, go back and reread them several times. Let them really sink in. When you can repeat them without looking, continue.

Your first mission is to learn.

Learning about your partner's myriad reactions to your betrayal allows you to recognize, understand and properly respond to them as they occur. Doing so will help you get through this horrible initial stage, which can last a long time.

Below you'll find a little of what your spouse is probably experiencing. They may shift from one reaction to another, or they could experience multiple reactions concurrently. And don't be surprised if they return to previous states many times. Where applicable, we've added some tips to help you to assist your partner through this. In some cases, however, there may be little for you to do except to simply "be there."

Most importantly, remember at all times: Your infidelity has traumatized your spouse. Act accordingly.

SECTION 1 - THE WILD PATCHWORK OF EMOTIONS

DISBELIEF: They expect to wake up any minute from this nightmare. It can't be true. They don't believe it. This is natural. They trusted you and don't want to believe you did what you did. It is common for this to occur in the very first moments of discovery. (Note: If some time elapsed between the discovery of your affair and the confrontation, you may have missed this when it happened, but it is also possible for your spouse to return to disbelief.)

SHOCK: They are numb and often seem dazed. Their emotions are frozen. Their senses are dulled. They go through the motions mechanically, robotically, but can't seem to apply sufficient concentration to their day-to-day lives.

REALITY: "Oh my God. It really happened." They feel they're getting worse. Actually, reality has just set in. It's as if a ton of bricks just fell on them and they're buried beneath them. They don't know where to turn, or can't. Don't discount the likelihood that they feel shamed by your infidelity. So, they may be reluctant to seek support from friends and family. Be available to them for emotional support and encourage them to talk freely with anyone they choose. Suggest therapy as a means to help them through their trauma, but never accuse them of "being irrational" or "acting crazy." Be supportive and encouraging. Commend them for seeking help.

CONFUSION: They're disoriented. They can't think straight. They become impatient, disorganized and forgetful. More frequently than usual they go to a room to retrieve something, but once they get there they can't remember what it was. This is very upsetting to them. Bear with them. Be gentle and be helpful. Help them find their misplaced purse or locate their lost keys. Know that they will eventually come out of the fog. Also be aware that their confusion, as with other states listed here, may be set off or magnified by certain "triggers." (Note: Read more about "triggers" below.)

PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS: They may sleep or eat too little – or too much. They may suffer physical aches and pains, numbness or weakness. They may feel unusually tense and develop headaches, abnormal tics, twitching or shaking. They may feel sick to their stomach and vomit, or their digestive system may react with

constipation or diarrhea. Weight loss is common. Usually the symptoms fade gradually. If these symptoms persist, make sure they check with a doctor to rule out other causes. Encourage them to eat well and to exercise – but don't nag. You might instead take control of their diet by preparing healthy, well balanced meals. If you don't cook, take them to restaurants where you know they serve nourishing food and, if necessary, order for them. If they're not exercising, initiate taking long walks together. It's a good way to ease them into a healthy exercise regimen, which is always a good stress reliever, and will provide opportunity for you to begin constructively re-establishing your "couplehood."

CRYING: Deep emotions suddenly well up, seeking release as crying, uncontrollable sobbing and even screaming out loud. Allow them their time for tears. They can help. So can you. When they cry, give them your shoulder. Hug them. Help them through it by gently encouraging them, to "get it all out." Be certain to verbalize your remorse for causing their pain. They need to hear this from you. (Note: Right now, genuine, complete and repeated apologies are the best "general use" tool you have in your repair kit. That is why you'll see many more references below. Read "Apologize" in Section 2.)

SELF-CONTROL: They control their emotions to fulfill their responsibilities, or to simply rest from the pain. Self-control can shape and give rhythm to their grieving, but be on the lookout for constant and rigid self-control. It can block healing. They need to reduce their emotional pressure to regain equilibrium. Allow them to vent when it happens. Be aware: Too much self-control means they are storing up much anger and will release it powerfully, like floodwaters breaking through a dam. So don't be alarmed if they suddenly lash out at you, your affair partner, or even themselves. Understand that the release of anger is necessary to heal. Though it may not feel this way to you when it happens, it's beneficial.

NEED TO KNOW: They will ask lots of questions. Their curiosity may be insatiable or it may be limited. Different people have different needs and tolerances for information, but they need information to process their trauma, move through it, and move past it.

Let them set the agenda. Whenever they ask a question, whatever they ask, answer honestly and sufficiently. Refusing to answer gives the appearance that you're still keeping them in the dark, that you still have something to hide. Do not hold anything back. If they discover later that you omitted or hid details, or if the

facts they discover don't match the story you tell, they'll feel betrayed once again. Follow the delivery of each new piece of hurtful information with an apology, and soothe them with another promise that you'll never again be unfaithful.

WHY: They ask, "Why did you do this?" They may or may not expect an answer, but they ask repeatedly. If they do want an answer, provide it – and answer honestly. Even if the question is rhetorical, be aware that the question itself, rhetorical or not, is a cry of pain. And each time they feel pain, it should be answered with another apology. (I can't stress enough how important this is.) Be aware: Even if they are not verbalizing this to you, they are still silently asking the question "Why?" over and over and over again.

INJUSTICE: They feel it's all so unfair. You invited danger, you took the risk, but they suffered injury. They want justice and begin to think like a vigilante. They may harbor a secret desire to do harm to you or your affair partner. They may want to get even by having a "revenge affair."

Understand that the aftermath of your unfaithfulness is an agony you have thrust upon them. Meanwhile, despite your betrayal and deceit, and the shame you feel, you and your affair partner may retain fond or even loving memories of your affair. One of my patients described her feelings of injustice this way: "I feel like a rape victim watching helplessly as the jury returns a 'not guilty' verdict. Then, the assailant looks at me, points his finger at me and laughs all the way out of the courtroom. How can this possibly happen?"

A sad truth of infidelity is: It is unfair. Of course, there is no "justice" that can come from this. Betrayed spouses generally settle into this realization on their own, but they need to know that you understand how this plagues them. (Note: Read "Share your feelings of guilt and shame" in Section 2. It explains the best way to help them through their sense of injustice.)

INADEQUACY: Their self esteem is shattered. They feel belittled, insignificant, and often even unlovable. Just as you would crumple a piece of scrap paper and toss it in the garbage without a second thought, they feel you crushed them, discarded them, and didn't give them a second thought, either. So, they question their own value. They wonder if you truly love them – or if anyone could. They need to know why you now choose them over your affair partner, even if they don't ask. Make your case convincingly. Be generous, but be genuine. They'll know if you

aren't, and false flattery for the purpose of mere appeasement will only hurt them more.

REPEATING: Over and over again, they review the story, thinking the same thoughts. Do not attempt to stop them. Repeating helps them to absorb and process the painful reality. You can help them get through it by answering all their questions truthfully and filling in all the gaps for them. The more they know – the more they can repeat the complete story – the faster they process it, accept it and begin to heal. If the story remains incomplete or significant gaps are filled in later, they may have to start the process all over again.

IDEALIZING: Sometimes they remember only good memories, as if their time with you was perfect. They long to live in the past, before the affair came along and “messed it up.” Assure them that you, too, remember the good times, and want things to be good again. Remind them that you want an even better future, that you are willing to work at it, and, most importantly, that you want your future with them – and not your affair partner.

FRUSTRATION: Their past fulfillments are gone. They haven't found new ones yet and don't seem interested in finding any. They feel they're not coping with grief “right” or they feel they should be healing faster. They don't understand why the pain returns again and again. They wonder if they will ever recover and feel better. You can help them by verbalizing what they need to hear even if you don't or can't fully understand it yourself. Be empathetic and assure them that under the circumstances they're doing okay. Remember that despite how much you have hurt them, you are still the one they chose as their life partner, for better or for worse. You may still be their closest confidante. As incongruous as it may seem, don't be surprised if they choose to confide in you over others.

BITTERNESS: Feelings of resentment and hatred toward you and your paramour are to be expected. Don't be surprised if they redirect much of the anger that's really meant for you toward your paramour. This is natural. It's actually a way of protecting their love for you during the early stages. By restricting their anger toward you, they allow it to be time-released, and only in smaller, more manageable amounts. Expect their anger to surface periodically, and give them plenty of time to work through it so they can eventually let go of it. Understand that until they've worked through and exhausted their anger, they cannot heal.

WAITING: The initial struggle is waning, but their zest for life has not returned. They are in limbo, they are exhausted and uncertain. Indeed, life seems flat and uninteresting. They are unenthusiastic about socializing, perhaps reluctant, and they are unable to plan activities for themselves. Help them by finding ways to stimulate them. Plan activities for them around things that hold their interest and bring joy back into their life.

EMOTIONS IN CONFLICT: This is one of the most difficult manifestations because there is so much going on at the same time and their feelings do not always synchronize with reality. The most succinct description was provided by the late Shirley Glass, PhD: "One of the ironies of healing from infidelity is that the perpetrator must become the healer. This means that betrayed partners are vulnerable because the person they are most likely to turn to in times of trouble is precisely the source of their danger." The inherent conflict for a betrayed spouse is obvious, but Dr. Glass also recognized how difficult this balancing act can be for a repentant adulterer: "On the other hand, [unfaithful] partners sometimes find it hard to stay engaged with their spouses when they know they are the source of such intense pain." The key, of course, is to stay engaged nonetheless. Be supportive and remorseful, and above all... keep talking.

TRIGGERS: Particular dates, places, items and activities can bring back their pain as intensely as ever. It feels like they're caught in a loop as they relive the trauma. It is emotionally debilitating.

Triggers can cause days and nights of depression, renew anger, and can spark and reignite nightmares, which may make them fear sleeping. Triggers can cause them to question if they will ever again experience life without the anguish. Get rid of all the reminders immediately: Gifts, letters, pictures, cards, emails, clothing... whatever your spouse associates with your affair. Do this with your spouse so they are not left wondering when those triggers may recur. Never cling to anything that bothers your partner. It leaves the impression that your keepsakes and mementos, or any reminders of your affair, are more important to you than they are.

Attend to your partner. Learn what dates, songs, places, etc., are triggers for your partner. Pay attention to your environment: If you hear or see something that you think might be a trigger, assume it is. Each occasion a trigger arises is an appropriate moment for you to communicate a clear and heartfelt message that

you're sorry you acted so selfishly and caused this recurring pain. So again, apologize and let them know how much you love them. The occurrence of a trigger is also a good opportunity to express that you choose them and not your affair partner, which is important for them to hear. If a trigger occurs in public, you can still wrap your arm around your spouse's waist or shoulder, or simply squeeze their hand, but verbalize your apology as soon as you are alone again.

It is very important for you to understand and remember this... Triggers can remain active for their entire life. Don't ever think or insist that enough time has passed that they should be "over it" because another sad truth of infidelity is: Your affair will remain a permanent memory for them, subject to involuntary recall at any time – even decades later. They will NEVER be "over it." They simply learn to deal with it better as they heal, as you earn back their trust, and as you rebuild your relationship – over time.

SECTION 2 - WHAT ELSE CAN YOU DO TO EASE THEIR PAIN & RELIEVE THEIR STRESS?

Make certain you've killed the beast: Your affair must be over, in all respects, completely and forever. You cannot put your marriage in jeopardy ever again. Your spouse has given you a second chance that you probably don't deserve. That may sound harsh, but think about it this way: Despite any marital problems the two of you experienced, you would certainly understand if they divorced you solely because of your adultery. So assume there will not be a third chance and behave accordingly.

This opportunity you have been bestowed is a monumental gift, particularly considering the anguish you caused them. Treat this gift, and your spouse, with care and due respect: No contact means NO CONTACT OF ANY KIND – EVER.

GET INTO THERAPY: Most attempts to heal and rebuild after infidelity will fail without the assistance of a qualified therapist. Make certain you both feel comfortable with the therapist. You must trust them and have faith in their methodology. Talk about it: If of you are uncomfortable with your therapist at any time, don't delay – find another. And if need be, yet another. Then stick with it. Save particularly volatile topics for counseling sessions. Your therapist will provide a neutral place and safe means to discuss these subjects constructively. Every so

often, think back to where you were two or three months earlier. Compare that to where you are now and determine if you're making progress. Progress will be made slowly, not daily or even weekly, so do not perform daily or weekly evaluations. Make the comparative periods long enough to allow a "moderate-term" review rather than "short-term." Expect setbacks or even restarts, and again... stick with it.

APOLOGIZE: Actually, that should read: "Apologize, apologize, apologize." You cannot apologize too often, but you can apologize improperly. Apologize genuinely and fully. Betrayed spouses develop a finely calibrated "insincerity radar." A partial or disingenuous apology will feel meaningless, condescending or even insulting, particularly during the months following discovery. Your spouse will feel better if you don't merely say, "I'm sorry." To a betrayed spouse that sounds and feels empty. Try to continue and complete the apology by saying everything that's now salient to your partner: "I'm ashamed I cheated on you and I'm so very sorry. I know that my lying and deceiving you has hurt you enormously. I deeply want to earn back your trust – and I want so much for you to be able, some day, to forgive me." As noted earlier, right now genuine, complete and repeated apologies are the best "general use" tool you have in your repair kit.

REALIZE YOUR PARTNER WANTS TO FEEL BETTER: There is so much they have to deal with – pain, anger, disappointment, confusion and despair. Their being, their world, is swirling in a black hole of negative feelings. It's agonizing. They wish it would stop, but they feel powerless to make it go away, which worries them even more. Remember that they can't help it: Just as they didn't choose for this to happen, they don't choose to feel this way. Beyond all the possible feelings described in the section above (and that list may be incomplete in your spouse's case), even if they don't understand them, they do recognize that changes are occurring in themselves – and they are frightened by them. As terrible as it is for you to see their ongoing nightmare, it is far worse to live in it. Periodically assure them that you know they will get better, that you are willing to do everything necessary for them to heal and to make your marriage work. Reassure them that you are with them for the duration – no matter how long it takes – and that you intend to spend the rest of your life with them.

HIDE NOTHING, OPEN EVERYTHING: While they're greatly angered and hurt that you were emotionally and/or sexually involved with another person, they are even more devastated by your secret life, your lies and deception. They feel no

trust in you right now – and they're 100% justified. If ever there was someone in the world they felt they could trust, it was you – until now. Now, they have difficulty believing anything you say. They are driven to check up on everything. Let them. Better still, help them. Overload them with access. The era of "covering your tracks" must end and be supplanted by total and voluntary transparency.

You must dismantle and remove every vestige of secrecy. Offer your spouse the passwords to your email accounts – yes, even the secret one they still don't know about. Let them bring in the mail. If you receive a letter, card or email from your paramour, let your spouse open it. If you receive a voice or text message on your cell phone, let them retrieve it and delete it. If your friends provided alibis for you, end those friendships. Do not change your phone bill to a less detailed version or delete your browser history. Provide your spouse with your credit card bills, bank account statements, cell phone bills and anything else you think they might wish to check. Immediately tell them if you hear from or accidentally run into your affair partner. Tell them where you are going, when you'll be home, and be on time. If your plans change, notify them immediately.

The more willing you are to be transparent, the more honesty and openness they see and feel, the more "trust chits" you'll earn. Replacing your previously secret life with complete openness is the fastest and most effective way to promote trust, even if it feels unfair or uncomfortable. Think of this as the "reverse image" of your affair: Your affair was about you selfishly making yourself feel good. Now, rebuilding trust is about selflessly making your partner feel safe with you – and you were certainly unfair to them. Keep in mind that eventually they will trust you again, but you must earn it and it will take time.

SPEND LOTS TIME WITH THEM: Assume that they want your company at all times. The more time you spend in their sight, the more they will feel a sense of safety, if only for that time. There may be times when you feel they're a constant, perhaps even an annoying presence. Just remember that they need to be around you – more than ever. If they need time alone, they'll let you know and you must respect that, too. Knowing where you are and who you are with reduces worry, but expect them to check up on you. Don't take offence when this happens. Instead, welcome the opportunity: Think of each time – and each success – as receiving a check mark in the "Passed the Test" column. The more check marks you earn, the closer you are to being trusted again.

PHYSICAL CONTACT: They may or may not want to be sexual with you. If not, allow sufficient time for them to get comfortable with the idea of renewed intimacy and let them set the pace. But if so, don't be discouraged if the sex is not optimum. They're likely to be low on confidence and may feel self-conscious or inept. They may even act clumsily. This can be offset by lots of simple, soothing physical gestures such as hugging them, stroking them softly and providing kisses. You might try surprising them sexually. Try something new. Choose moments when they don't expect it – it can feel fresh again. On the other hand, don't be surprised if their sexual appetite and arousal is unusually heightened as some partners experience what's called 'Hysterical Bonding.' Also be aware that during lovemaking they may suffer intrusive thoughts or mental images of you and your affair partner, so they may suddenly shut down or even burst into tears. Again, apologize for making them feel this way. Express that you choose them – and not your affair partner. Reassure them by emphasizing that they are the only one you truly want.

SHARE YOUR FEELINGS OF GUILT AND SHAME: If you exhibit no shame or guilt for hurting them, they'll wonder if you're truly capable of being sensitive, caring or even feeling. They may see you as callous and self-absorbed, and question if it's really worth another try with you. But if you're like most people who have badly hurt someone you truly love, then you certainly feel shame and guilt, though verbalizing it may be hard for you. Of course, some people do find it difficult to express these feelings, but try. You'll find it provides a great sense of relief to share this with your partner. Moreover, do not fail to realize how vitally important it is for your partner to hear it, to feel it, to see it in your eyes. It's a building block in the reconstruction of trust and the repair of your marriage. Do not underestimate the power of satisfying their need to know that you are disappointed in yourself. Your opening up about this will help them feel secure again, help them to heal, and help you heal, too.

LET THEM KNOW YOU ARE HAPPY WITH YOUR CHOICE TO RECOMMIT: You probably think this is obvious, but to your betrayed partner, precious little is obvious anymore. They will wonder about this. Do not make them guess, and do not make them ask. Just tell them. If it doesn't seem to come naturally at first, it may help if every now and then, you ask yourself, "If they had betrayed me this way, would I still be here?" (Most of us would answer, "No," even if we can't imagine being in that position.) When people give second chances to others, they really want to know that it's meaningful to, and appreciated by, the recipient. So,

express your thanks. Tell them how grateful you are for the opportunity to repair the damage you've done and rebuild your marriage. You'll be surprised how much this simple, heartfelt act of gratitude will mean to them, and how it helps to re-establish the bond between you.

HERE'S A GREAT TIP: You will find it's particularly meaningful to them when they're obviously feeling low, but they're locked in silence and aren't expressing it to you. Just imagine... In their moments of unspoken loneliness or despair, you walk up to them, hug them and say, "I just want you to know how grateful I am that you're giving me a second chance. Thank you so much. I love you more than ever for this. I've been feeling so ashamed of what I did and how much pain I caused you. I want you to know that I'll never do anything to hurt you like this – ever again. I know I broke your heart and it torments me. I want you to know your heart is safe with me again."

These are beautifully comforting words, particularly when they're delivered at such a perfect moment. You can memorize the quote, modify it, or use your own words, whatever is most comfortable for you. The key is to include, in no particular order, all six of these components:

- A statement of gratitude.
- An expression of your love.
- An acknowledgment of your spouse's pain.
- An admission that you caused their pain.
- An expression of your sense of shame.
- A promise that it will never happen again

Unfaithful spouses I've counseled often report that this most welcome surprise is the best thing they did to lift their partner's spirits – as well as their own.

SECTION 3 - SO WHAT ARE THE NEXT STAGES, AFTER THEY WORK THROUGH ALL THEIR GRIEF, PAIN AND STRESS?

HOPE: They believe they will get better. They still have good days and bad days, but the good days out balance the bad. Sometimes they can work effectively, enjoy activities and really care for others.

COMMITMENT: They know they have a choice. Life won't be the same, but they decide to actively begin building a new life.

SEEKING: They take initiative, renewing their involvement with former friends and activities. They begin exploring new involvements.

PEACE: They feel able to accept the affair and its repercussions, and face their own future.

LIFE OPENS UP: Life has value and meaning again. They can enjoy, appreciate, and anticipate events. They are willing to let the rest of their life be all it can be. They can more easily seek and find joy.

FORGIVENESS: While the memory will never leave them, the burden they've been carrying from your betrayal is lifted. Given what you have done, the pain it caused them and the anguish they lived through, this is the ultimate gift they can bestow. They give it not only to you, but to themselves. Be grateful for this gift – and cherish it always.

Rejoice in your renewed commitment to spend your lives together in happiness. Celebrate it together regularly!