

Boundaries with an Uncertain or Uncooperative Partner

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Few things are more confusing than a relationship in which you thought there was a mutual commitment, only to eventually discover that your partner is uncertain or maybe even 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? I hope the following insights will offer some perspective on making healthy choices. This article is intended for people who still hope for their relationship when their partner seems to be giving up.

This article is an overview of a section of the online course *Affair Healing for Betrayed Partners* which addresses the many needs of injured partners with over 100 lessons, exercises, and additional resources. Preview it for free at: www.mychange.courses.

Ineffective Focus: Managing Your Partner

If your partner is telling you they're not sure they want to be with you anymore, you may feel fearful and frantic. You may want to do anything to save the relationship but if you are not careful your acts of desperation may actually push your partner further away. The harder you try, the more you hear, "I'm not sure I want to be in this relationship anymore."

These acts of desperation include any of the following:

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

When panic leads you to either appeasement or control, your attempts to manage your partner are likely to have the opposite effect of what you desire. Your efforts will push your partner away from you, not toward you, as they attempt to escape from your "neediness" or control. They may pity you and wish things were different, but can rarely return to loving again under those circumstances. They will likely feel trapped and inwardly struggle against any sense of obligation to fix the relationship.

So what should you do if your partner remains distant and uncommitted? What actions are more likely to alter their retreat? Start by refusing to play the role of desperation any longer. Instead, **take control of what you can manage: yourself.**

Effective Focus: Managing Yourself

Here are the 3 steps you should start making right now. These are healthy choices. If there is any chance that your partner is going to return to a committed relationship, these steps will encourage a quicker return, even though they may seem counter-intuitive.

Step #1: Let Go

Tell your partner you still want to be in a relationship with them, but you know you cannot work on it until they are 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 them know that from this point on you will no longer attempt to control. 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 that your partner 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 them go.** Your partner 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. If you have been checking up on them to see if they are getting involved with someone else, 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 answers, etc.). This isn't something you can control, so stop trying.
2. **Be ready to give this some time, even if your partner immediately tells you they don't want you to do it.** Some people 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 partner's swift return to the old pattern of non-commitment. If your partner 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, for example).

How far do you let them go?

If you know your partner is in another relationship, you need to separate from them. I've watched many relationships caught in the "Ping-Pong Effect" of bouncing back and forth between partner and lover. This can go on for a very long time, but the pattern will lose its momentum if you remove yourself from the equation.

The extent of relationship separation depends on your situation, but some type of physical separation is recommended. If you've been living together, you should insist on a change that allows you to stay in separate places. If there is no affair, you may first focus on emotional separation (see Step 2 below).

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 encourage is this: 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 partner.

Step #2: Limit Your Availability

This choice is a very important one. Your partner 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 partner, not out of anger or revenge or manipulation, but out of a need to focus more on yourself and less on them. You need to limit your availability in these ways: give less tenderness, less talk, and less time.

Less Tenderness

If you think your partner is starting another relationship, you need to stop all affectionate behavior. This is not a competition between you and the other person; it's something your partner has to figure out for him/herself. As long as affection is being given to someone else, respect yourself enough to stop all romantic or sexual behaviors. (Your partner may argue about this, but stop contributing to their bad behavior.)

If your partner is not another relationship, 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 partner 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 too much. You need to limit the amount of communication (talking, texting, emailing, phone calls, etc.) you have with your partner. Keep away from emotional conversations. If your partner invites you to talk about how you feel, give an honest answer, but keep it brief. You should focus on business-of-life communication (if you have any joint responsibilities) 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 partner. I don't mean that you should selfishly refuse to do anything with them, but you need to be more attentive to what you can do without them. You are capable of finding meaning and enjoyment in life apart from your partner; they need to experience that.

Step #3: Focus on Growth

You've been focused on changing your partner, now it's time to focus on changing YOU. Your contentment in life should not be bound to the whims of your partner or the circumstances of your relationship. 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 partner to a better place. You can't control them. 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 partner-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 partner, telling them that you are "letting go." Once you've written it, put it away overnight and read it again tomorrow. Do you avoid sounding harsh or judgmental? Is your hope for your relationship clearly communicated? Will your partner understand that you are 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 partner, ask them to read it, and then invite them to ask any questions. But I recommend that you ask your partner 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.

Sample Letter:

I love you; I am certain about that. I want our relationship to last and grow; I am certain about that, too. But this relationship needs to change in order to be

something that is satisfying and trustworthy to both of us.

I want to be part of that change, but I can't do it alone and I can't make up your mind for you. What I can do is let you make up your own mind. You need to be sure about what you want.

I am going to quit trying to change you and I am going to focus on getting myself to a better place. There is a lot I need to learn through all this. If you decide you want me... want us, I'm ready to join you in making our relationship better. But until I know that's true and can commit to it, I will be more attentive to things that keep me moving in a healthy direction. Through all this, I want to be a better person, whether or not we survive.

What to Expect

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

1. Conflict diminishes.

You and your partner will no longer be locked in a control struggle and so you will likely experience a calming in your relationship. You will not experience the connection 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 can 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 partner felt trapped, they likely struggled with the question, "Do I really want to stay in this relationship?" but now that you have stopped grasping and have started moving independently the question may become, "Do I really want to lose this relationship?" 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

Q1: How much time should I give my partner before I take the 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 partner.

Depending on your circumstances, you may continue to stay plugged into the relationship and focussed on caring for your partner for a while. This period of grace should only be granted if your partner is not actively involved in another relationship and should only last for a period of time (weeks or a few months). If your partner'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 & 3.

Q2: How long should I do this for?

A: You do this until one of you makes a permanent choice.

You Change

If your partner remains confused or uncommitted for an extended time, the damage to your relationship will be even more severe. If consistent attempts to repair and rebuild are not made, trust will continue to disintegrate. At some point, you may decide that you are no longer willing to invest more time or effort into your relationship.

Your Partner Changes

The "backing off" approach recommended in this article is meant to create a space in which your partner makes a choice. If your partner is struggling with an emotional connection to someone else, they may go back-and-forth in their decision as they try to figure out what (or who) they want. Once you refuse to be part of that pattern any longer, your partner will have to make different choices and may eventually express a desire to come back to the relationship. If so, you need to be very careful when considering whether or not to re-establish a partnership with your partner.

You should not re-enter a relationship with your partner until they can say "yes" to two important questions. These two questions should stand as guards at the doorway of your relationship, not allowing your partner to re-enter until they can pass the test.

Think of it this way: Your relationship is like a house that you and your partner built. You promised each other that you would stay together and keep improving your house. But things didn't go as planned. At some point, your partner started visiting someone else's place. Maybe the visits started with chats on the front lawn but eventually moved inside, turning into more intimate connections during afternoons or weekends. When you found out, you may have tried to force your partner's return. Each time they wandered out again, you tried to coax them back.

Stop trying to get your partner back into the house (your relationship). You can leave the door open, but let them make the choice. But if they do come back, you need to be sure that it is not just a momentary visit. That's where the two guards come in. Picture them standing outside the door of your house. Before you welcome your partner back into your relationship, they need to satisfy the question that each guard asks. If they are not able to give a confident "yes" to both guards, they should not be allowed in.

- **The first guard's question to your partner: Are you single-minded in your desire for this relationship?** There should be no more confusion or uncertainty. This doesn't mean that all emotional issues are resolved; that may take some time. But your partner should have their mind made up. If they are still not sure they want to commit to the relationship, then leave them outside the door. You may benefit from individual counseling, but couples therapy will be ineffective.
- **The second guard's question to your partner: Are you willing to work on change?** If you get the sense that your partner wants assurance that YOU will change before they come back, then don't let them in. The truth is, you might need to change for the sake of a stronger relationship, but if your partner is focusing on your flaws, they are failing to accept responsibility for what they've done.

There will be a time for both of you to be honest about past hurts or disappointments, but that comes later. Neither should you accept the return of a partner who simply wants to "put the past behind" and move on with the relationship as though nothing happened. You will never be able to return to trust and intimacy if your partner does not actively participate in the hard work required to help you recover from this trauma.

Q3: Are you encouraging physical separation?

A: I am encouraging emotional separation. Generally, I discourage couples from physically separating unless one of the following factors is present:

- Someone is at risk because of abusive behavior.
- A couple is not able to break free from a deep pattern of conflict.
- One person has declared that they are done with the relationship.
- A partner is not willing or able to end connections with another person (suspected affair).

Establishing emotional/relational boundaries with a partner who shares the same living space can be a challenge. You may even find it necessary to move into a different room for a while. But there are ways to maintain the "business of life" part of your relationship (paying bills, domestic support, parenting responsibilities, etc.) while avoiding interactions that are directed toward more emotional connections.

Q4: My partner 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: If your partner doesn't like the steps you're taking, it's probably because they don't like this sense of losing control. This claim of "You're pushing me away" is just an attempt to play on your fears; it's not a true statement. Your relationship is stuck because your partner, not you, has been indecisive.

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

Q5: Isn't this just being manipulative?

A: That depends on your core motive. If you do these things simply to get your partner 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 partner 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 partner. Even if your partner never turns back toward you, you'll be heading in a healthier direction.

The additional benefit of these choices is realized if/when your partner 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.

Q6: Don't these steps contradict forgiveness? Isn't it more virtuous to forgive my partner unconditionally?

A: These steps have everything to do with trust, but nothing to do with forgiveness. I hope you will forgive your partner even if they never give you what you long for. But you cannot experience an intimate relationship with someone whom you do not trust.

Let me go a bit further and say that I believe these 3 steps will be even more powerful if your partner 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.