

RECOVERING FROM AFFAIRS

A Handbook for Couples

*How to overcome the
emotional impact when
your partner has an affair*

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James Vaughan, Ph.D.**

This Handbook for

Recovering From Affairs

is based on seminars

conducted by Peggy Vaughan and James Vaughan, Ph.D.

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Plan of the Book

Most people who discover their partner has had an affair go through similar reactions and stages. Recognizing that the intensity of the feelings and the timing of the stages vary a great deal from person to person, the book follows the general course of this experience and addresses each of the stages of the recovery process:

During the period immediately following the discovery of your partner's affair, your biggest challenge may be simply surviving the emotional shock. So the first issue is simply **dealing with the physical and emotional reactions** and **facing the reality that this has happened**.

Regardless of the depths of the initial impact, if you are to move toward recovery, the time comes when you need to focus on getting more *understanding* about this whole issue. It's possible that you cannot fully recover from the emotional devastation of an affair unless you come to understand how and why affairs happen. So the next task is **understanding who has affairs and why**.

Since this is such an emotional experience, it's very difficult to think clearly about what has happened—or what to do about it. But it's essential that you gain this understanding if you are to succeed at **recovering a sense of self-esteem**.

When you feel stronger and more capable of dealing with all aspects of this issue, you're ready to address other factors that are affected by what has happened. This includes **dealing with the feelings of the person who had an affair, the role of the third party, and the impact on your sex life**.

Plan of the Book
(Continued)

There are many pitfalls along the path to recovery, and it's important to deal with them in a straightforward way. Two of the most common are the *blame game* and the *guilt trip*. The key to overcoming these obstacles is **developing honest communication**. This is the critical ingredient that determines whether or not trust can be established in the future.

Only after doing all the previous work is it reasonable to think you're ready to turn to **making decisions about your life and where you go from here**. Only after you're armed with more information, understanding, and perspective about affairs are you prepared to make these crucial decisions.

The final challenge is **learning to live with reality of what has happened** and facing the future as a stronger, wiser person.

1

**Dealing with the Physical
and Emotional Reactions**

The discovery that your partner is having or has had an affair is almost always a shock. In fact, *devastation* is the word most often used to describe that rush of sickening, unreal feelings when you first learn your partner has had an affair.

You may feel overwhelmed by the strength of your emotions when you learn about your partner's affair, and you may be amazed at the variety of emotions you feel. This is a normal reaction to such a significant experience in your life. Some, but surely not all, of the common emotional reactions include:

Denial
Anger
Depression
Grief
Anxiety
Defensiveness

Pain
Loss
Loneliness
Fear
Helplessness

Accepting and Expressing Your Feelings

Many people never fully recover from these powerful feelings. But you *can* fully recover from this seemingly devastating blow. You need not carry the painful feelings for the rest of your life. Fully recovering means overcoming the emotional impact of this experience—regardless of whether or not the relationship survives.

It's our strong belief that *understanding* is the key to recovery. Since the feelings following discovery of an affair are so painful, most people want to get beyond them as quickly as possible. But recovery can't be rushed; it takes time, clear-thinking, and hard work.

Time alone will not heal you. Others cannot heal you. From time to time, you'll find yourself wishing it had never happened, but no one can change what happened. No one can magically make your pain and anger go away as quickly as you might like, *but you can heal yourself*. Much of your pain comes from lack of understanding. You ask yourself over and over, why did this have to happen to me?

To facilitate the healing process, you must do the opposite of what you've been wanting to do, which is to forget the whole thing as quickly as possible. Instead of trying to forget as quickly as possible, you need to actively seek information about affairs. Recovery comes from clear thinking—getting more information, understanding, and perspective about affairs in general. This will help you see your situation in a broader context, which in turn allows you to make the best decision about how to deal with your personal situation.

It's important that you come to grips with your feelings. You can't bury them inside and hope they'll magically disappear. You need to express your feelings—since anything that seems too awful to talk about is likely to seem too awful to get over.

Here's a brief list of some of the keys to dealing with your feelings in a productive way:

- Acknowledge your pain in clear terms to your partner. It will only complicate matters to attempt to maintain a brave front.
- Deal with your real feelings—not what they "ought" to be.
- Be prepared for your feelings to change rather quickly, both in type and in strength.
- Acknowledge the validity of *all* your feelings, whether they're turned inward (self-pity, depression) or turned outward (anger, resentment). All your feelings play a part in your efforts to come to grips with this experience.
- Whatever you feel is OK, but remember—you don't have to act on your feelings.
- Resist the urge to lash out and punish your partner. Any satisfaction you might gain will be short-lived.
- Express your feelings in ways that lighten the load of carrying them around—that help you feel better, not worse.

- Lick your wounds. Pay attention to your own instincts as any good animal would. Suspend your regular schedule; take some time alone or go to see a good friend whom you know to be a good listener. Be gentle with yourself.
- Don't underestimate the physical impact of this experience. It's common to experience weight loss, loss of sleep, and general weakness. Try to eat properly and get some exercise.

2

**Facing the Reality
That This has Happened**

Dealing with extramarital affairs is a life-altering experience. It's more than just dealing with the affairs themselves (as if that weren't enough). It's dealing with the fact that nothing is the way you thought it was. Your dreams of the "perfect marriage," however unrealistic, have been shattered. In essence, your world has been turned upside down and you must begin to make sense of this new world. Your innocence is gone and you need to face this new reality and learn how to cope with it.

Stages of dealing with affairs:

There are stages that most people go through when experiencing the loss of something that is very important to a their sense of themselves and their place in the world. The stages used to describe the process of dealing with death and dying apply to these "little deaths" as well, involving any significant loss.

These phases (that apply to dealing with affairs) are:

1. Shock — the disruption of the world as you know it.
Whether or not you *suspected* the affair before finding out about it, there's the shock of actually knowing "for sure."
2. Holding on — the attempt to maintain the old situation, the not letting go.
This can take the form of denial or simply an unwillingness to deal with this significant change in your life. You may feel in limbo—unable to go back but unwilling to move forward.
3. Acknowledgment — giving up, yielding to what is.
Only when you reach this point can you even begin to deal with the situation. At this point your thinking becomes possible, allowing you to get out from under being totally ruled by your emotions.
4. Adaptation and change — establishing a new world and a sense of worth.
This is the true "recovery" period. So you can see that recovery does not begin right away. The first steps must be gotten through before recovery can be undertaken. The key is to get to this point of beginning the recovery as soon as possible.

Personal Issues While Working Through These Stages

- Dealing with regrets and a sense of loss
- Dealing with guilt and the fear of failure
- Dealing with feelings of hurt or anger
- Coming to grips with who you are and what you want
- Finding the time and energy to deal with these issues while continuing to deal with regular life issues (jobs, kids, etc.).

As you can see, even if you're willing to deal with what has happened and eager to take steps to recover from it, there's a long-term legacy to an event of this significance in your life. And it calls for a long-term effort.

Long-term Efforts Necessary to Recovery

- Accept the fact that it happened. This doesn't mean "*liking*" it; it just means giving up focusing on "*if only*" and dealing with "*what is.*"
- Work to understand what happened in terms of the societal factors that contributed to it—in order to overcome the idea that it's *only* due to personal failure.
- Talk about what happened—not just for the sake of talking, but in order to move the process along—since hiding it reinforces the feelings of shame.

- Deliberately focus on dealing with it.
- Believe it's possible to recover.
- Allow time to heal. Time alone won't bring recovery, but it does require time and patience to work through this experience.

The importance of this last point—time and patience—can't be overstated. There are no shortcuts; the only way through this situation is to face it head on and deal with it. Even then, it will be difficult for everyone. Certainly, no one (either the one who had an affair or their partner) wants to drag this out; it's so painful and uncomfortable that everybody wants it to be over quickly, but it just doesn't work that way.

The way through the emotional turmoil of affairs is *through*— not over or around. The process of healing and growth is not the steady, smooth progression we would like it to be. It's more often a series of ups and downs, dramatic improvements and depressing backslides, progressions and regressions—a moving back and forth between periods of clear thinking and emotional confusion—with an occasional plateau thrown in.

By knowing in advance that this is the normal progression of recovery, you can avoid being so depressed or devastated when these inevitable setbacks take place. The moral is, persistence will pay off. Allow for down periods, and view each one as a fork in the road. One path leads to further decline, the other to continued change for the better.

3

**Understanding Who
Has Affairs and Why**

Perspective on Affairs

- We tend to think that only *bad* people have affairs or only people in *bad* relationships. But no one is immune from an affair. It happens to all kinds of people in all walks of life. Most people don't *intend* to have an affair and most people don't think it will happen to them—but it does.
- The current consensus of sex researchers is that 60% of married men and 40% of married women have an affair at some point during marriage. (The percentage of married women having affairs is continuing to increase; under age 35 both men and women are in the 60% range.) This means that affairs happen in a lot of marriages—probably upwards of 80%.
- Most of us are conditioned to expect an idealized image of love and marriage. When we get married and find this fairy-tale version of marriage is untrue, we can become disenchanted and look for this kind of romantic love in an affair.

- You can't understand why an affair happens by looking *only* at each individual marriage. It's more than strictly personal failure. It's also due to factors in society as a whole.

Why People Have Affairs

There are many reasons why people have affairs. It's never just one simple reason. Usually it's a combination of three different kinds of forces that are working together: forces within the individual that *pull* them toward affairs, forces within the individual that *push* them toward affairs, and societal factors.

Forces within the individual that *pull* them toward affairs:

- Attraction: sex, companionship, admiration, power
- Novelty
- Excitement, risk, or challenge
- Curiosity
- Enhanced self-image
- Falling in love

Forces within the individual that *push* them toward affairs:

- Desire to escape or find relief from a painful relationship
- Boredom
- Desire to fill gaps in an existing relationship
- Desire to punish one's partner
- Need to prove one's attractiveness or worth
- Desire for attention

Societal influences:

- Affairs are glamorized in movies, soap operas, romance novels, and TV shows of all kinds. Public disclosure of public figures having affairs is headline news because we are fascinated and titillated by hearing of others' affairs.
- People are bombarded with images of women as sex objects in advertising and marketing campaigns. Over and over, the message to men is that the good life includes a parade of sexy women in their lives. Women inadvertently buy into this image and strive to achieve it.
- The lack of good sex education and the existence of sexual taboos combine to make it difficult for most partners to talk honestly about sex.
- As teenagers we get conditioned in deception when it comes to sex—engaging in sexual activity while hiding it from our parents.
- The code of secrecy is a major factor in affairs because it provides protection for the person having affairs and leads them to believe they won't get caught.

Affairs have typically been viewed as personal failures, and the powerful influence of social factors has been largely ignored. In calling attention to these social factors, we're not excusing anyone for being responsible for their actions. We're trying to bring some balance to our understanding of why affairs happen and how to avoid them. As long as affairs are seen *only* in terms of personal failure and personal blame, it's difficult to overcome the feelings of pain, anger, resentment, bitterness, or guilt.

Some differences in conditioned predispositions to have affairs:

- Men are conditioned to score—to pursue their prey, while women are taught to put out the bait—to make themselves attractive. For young males, scoring—not love—is the goal. The words men learn to describe sexual acts and bodily parts contribute to seeing women as sex objects. Recreational sex is a concept embraced by a very large percentage of men.
- Women have been positioned by society as the keepers of relationships, and consequently have been trained to be more attuned to feelings and emotions in themselves and others. They do not separate sex from love as readily as men, are more likely to seriously consider the possible consequences of having an affair, and are therefore less likely to initiate an affair than men—at least until recently.
- Men are more likely to experience peer pressure to have an affair than women. Making it with another woman is a form of winning in the male world and adds to one's stature—as long as you do it with class.
- Over the past 3 decades, women have changed their attitudes about themselves as sexual beings, increasing the likelihood of their being involved in affairs.

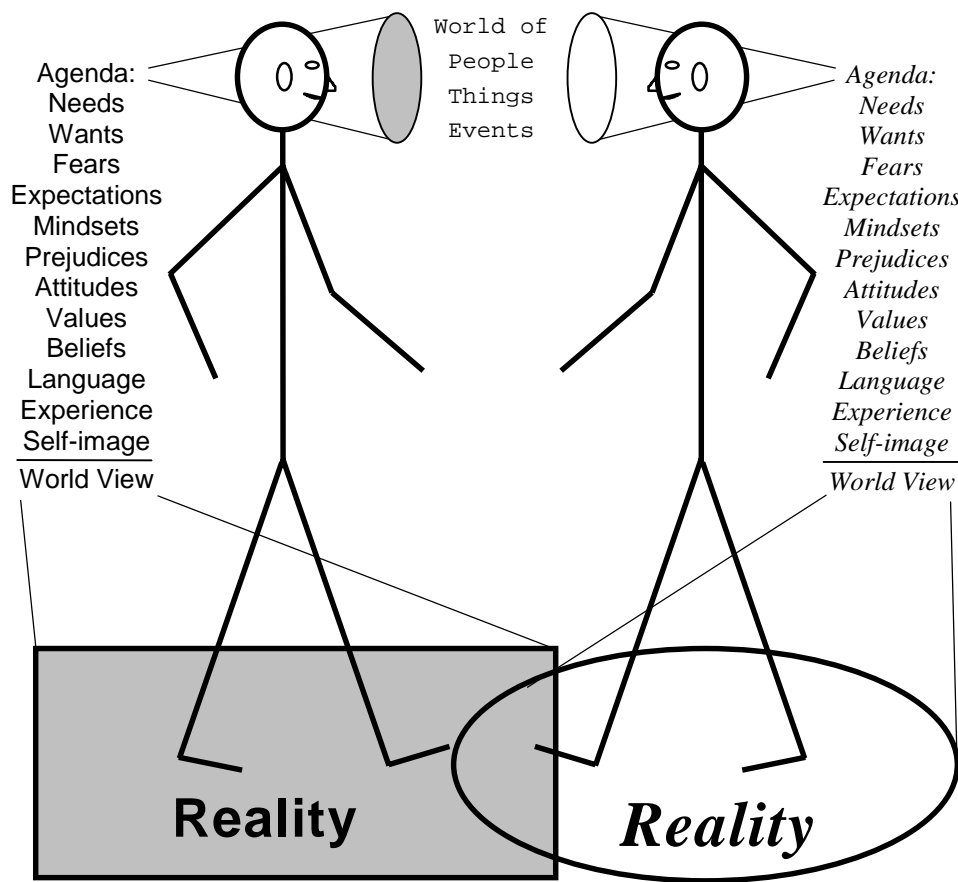
Some Enablers for Having Affairs:

- Men are excused in advance by such statements as: "Boys will be boys." "All men are animals." "If you ever have an affair, I don't want to know it."
- Women are more likely to justify affairs by citing any one of the commonly accepted complaints about husbands, such as: "He never listens." "He won't communicate." "He's preoccupied with his job (or sports)." "All he does is come home and plunk down in front of the TV."
- Work environments have always provided men with ample opportunities to engage in affairs. In recent years, exposure to this same environment has led to an increase in the number of women having affairs.
- Rationalization and denial are two mechanisms that are common to most affairs. Rationalization helps us excuse what we know to be inappropriate behavior and denial helps us avoid thinking about the consequences of being discovered. Some common rationalizations are:
 - "I can't help myself."
 - "It must not be so terrible to have an affair; otherwise you wouldn't see so many people doing it."
 - "What my partner doesn't know can't hurt them."
 - "As long as I'm *responsible* in the way I have an affair, it's ok." Being "*responsible*" in this rationalization means not leading the third party on with false expectations, and being sure your spouse doesn't find out about the affair.

(See the Perception model on the following page for a view of how we form our "reality.")

Perception Is More Complicated Than You Think

No two people view the world in exactly the same way. Each of us creates our own "reality" by assigning unique meaning to the people, things, and events in our lives. We filter everything through a lens composed of a complex interaction of learned, but ever-changing, needs, wants, fears, expectations, mindsets, etc. that make up our world view.



4

Recovering a Sense of Self-Esteem

To regain a sense of balance and strength to face the future, it's essential that you focus *specifically* on bolstering your battered self-esteem. Tell yourself, over and over, that it's not your fault. You didn't have the power to prevent this. Your partner might have been married to someone else and done the same thing. Or you might have been married to a different person, and your partner might have done the same thing. It's just not as personal as we understandably feel it is.

This kind of thinking won't come quickly or easily, but it *will* come if you continually remind yourself that there are many other factors involved in this experience that have nothing to do with you personally. Nevertheless, you, of course, must deal with the impact it has had on your sense of yourself. That starts by realizing that you are *more* than *just* a person whose partner had an affair. You are the sum total of *all* the aspects of your life that go into making you the unique person you are.

Remind yourself of your fundamental self-worth. Allowing your self-esteem to take an unnecessary beating will only prolong the healing process.

Talking To Yourself

- Manage your self-talk more carefully than you ever have before. Try not to trigger the overwhelming emotions that come from exaggerating or over-personalizing what has happened.

It's tempting to feel like a "failure" and to talk to yourself in those terms. You may think you failed to prevent the affair, or failed to know it was happening, or failed by marrying your partner in the first place.

The reality is that it's not your fault. You can't control another person. And you certainly don't have control over the many factors in society that mitigate toward "supporting" affairs in many subtle ways.

The other common negative way of talking to yourself is to think in terms of being a "victim"—the feeling of "Why Me? I don't deserve this." Well, nobody *deserves* it. But the world is not fair. Bad things *do* happen to good people. Considering the high percentage of marriages in which an affair takes place, a more reasonable question is "Why Not Me? Why should I not be vulnerable to whatever ills affect other members of society in large numbers?" Just like car accidents or cancer, things simply happen. You're only a victim if you respond to this challenge like a victim instead of like a survivor. And that means not "going into hiding."

Talking With Others

- Don't cut yourself off from other people because of your "secret." Carefully select and talk to those who can serve to help you put this experience in perspective. It's important to share it with those you can trust.

One reason it has taken so long for society to recognize the seriousness of this problem is because of the way most people keep their pain hidden, if at all possible. Some people become obsessed with the idea of keeping their experience secret from others. One man said this was his most pressing concern, that, in fact, he had become almost paranoid about other people "knowing."

Impact of So Much Secrecy

The process of keeping this information from others increases the feelings of shame and embarrassment (because if it weren't seen as shameful, it wouldn't need to be kept secret). And the longer it's kept secret, the stronger the feelings of shame. So the secrecy and the problem with self-esteem serve to reinforce each other. It's hard to talk openly when you take it personally, and it's hard not to take it personally if you are closed off from outside sources that could help in getting beyond the strictly personal interpretation. An important factor in rebuilding self-esteem is breaking this cycle of secrecy and isolation. The first step is to honestly discuss this situation with just one other person and talk to them about your feelings.

Traditionally, men have been conditioned to hide their feelings, so when a man faces the fact that his partner has had an affair, it's not surprising that he doesn't talk about it. And even though women have typically been able to talk about their feelings, in this case most women try to keep them hidden as well. For both men and women, much of the pain and frustration of dealing with affairs is directly linked to this effort to deal with their fears while hiding their feelings from the outside world.

Of course, it's easier to talk to someone who has had personal experience in dealing with affairs, but this is not essential. On the other hand, it's not reasonable to talk to just *anybody*, because there's likely to be a wide range of reactions from various friends or family members. It's important to find someone who can suspend judgment and participate in a discussion of affairs beyond the strictly personal view. It's also important to *avoid* talking to a person who will reinforce the feelings of embarrassment or shame. Receiving outward encouragement from a person who secretly feels pity or criticism is likely to be detected by the person who is already struggling with feelings of personal blame or inadequacy. And this kind of patronizing attitude will cause even more damage to their self-esteem.

The reason it's so important for people struggling with affairs to talk to a person who can be truly supportive is because the point is not simply to *talk*, but to process the feelings in such a way as to make the situation feel a little bit different, a little more manageable. Since this is a very complex problem, the process of talking about it has to be done over and over. It takes many sessions of talking with different people in order to move the process along.

5

Dealing with Other Issues

Dealing with the impact on the person whose partner had an affair is the major factor to be considered, but this can not be fully addressed without dealing with other related issues. These include the feelings of the person who had an affair, the role of the third party, and the impact on your sex life.

The Feelings of the Person Who Had an Affair

The awareness of the pain felt by the spouse is so significant that it tends to block out our ability (or willingness) to acknowledge the pain of the person who had an affair. While we recognize that they may be struggling with feelings of guilt, we seldom appreciate that they may also be experiencing feelings of loss and ambivalence. They're usually alone with these feelings because there's little understanding or compassion for the loss they may feel at the end of the affair (or the ambivalence they may feel about ending it). But the recovery of the marital relationship is very much tied to the degree to which *both* people are able to recover from this experience.

Dealing With the Third Party

The third party is an unavoidable focus, especially during the early period of dealing with affairs. For the person who has been having an affair, the third party is a source of "unfinished business." They must tell the third party of the mate's knowledge of the affair and decide whether to end it. As for the person who discovers their mate's affair, the third party often becomes the focus of a great deal of anger and curiosity.

It's understandable that the third party becomes the target for a lot of the anger and rage people feel at this time. This is in keeping with the general attitude in society that sees the third party as responsible for much of the misery brought about by an affair. While we have been quick to condemn and criticize the third party, we've also tended to have an exaggerated image of them as a femme fatale or a Don Juan.

Something Special

One reaction that many people have upon discovering their mate's affair is to wonder how they compare with the third party, hoping to find ways to feel superior (or at least not inferior). A person's assessment of the third party is often exaggerated, causing them to think the third party has some exceptional qualities that they are lacking. In most instances, there is nothing particularly special about the third party.

Playing the Part

The third party is seldom superior to the spouse; they're simply different—and the primary difference is simply that they have the role of *lover* instead of the role of *husband* or *wife*. The overall circumstances of the situation are much more important than the particular person involved. One factor in the role played by the third party is that they are freer to enjoy certain aspects of the relationship that are more difficult when a couple share joint responsibilities and a joint financial base.

When people are in affairs, they present a side of themselves that's not representative of the whole person. It's a special version of their best aspects, free from the normal responsibilities involved in sharing a total life situation; whereas the roles and structure of family life create many restrictions and responsibilities. A person's affair is not so much a rejection of the mate as a rejection of these role restrictions. This awareness can be especially helpful in dealing with our feelings of comparison with the third party.

Who Becomes a Third Party?

Because of our critical attitude toward the third party, we tend to see them in stereotypical terms; we envision them as looking a certain way and acting a certain way. But if we give up the Monogamy Myth and look realistically at the prevalence of affairs, we see that it's impossible to pigeonhole certain "types" of people who will be third parties. No matter how much we'd like to think otherwise, anyone is susceptible.

The Impact of the Changed Sexual History

It's important to face and discuss how the inclusion of other sex partners affects the marital relationship—both physically and psychologically.

If you are the one who had an affair, it's essential to be tested for sexually transmitted diseases and to be honest about the results. It's also necessary to be patient and understanding about your partner's potential awkwardness or discomfort with sexual expression during the early stages of dealing with this issue.

If your partner had an affair, it's important to be clear about your concerns about STD's and to insist on being well-informed and fully protected. Avoid using this issue as a way to "punish" your partner by denying any form of sexual contact.

Rethinking Your Erroneous Beliefs About Sex

This is a good time to rethink some stereotypical beliefs about sex that are erroneous—and damaging to a satisfying sex life. The following page contains a list of some of the common sexual beliefs that can interfere with reestablishing a good sex life with your mate.

Some Myths about Sex:

- I must be "in the mood" to enjoy sex.
- My sex life is "ruined" if my partner has sex with someone else.
- The seat of sexual desire in the body is the genitals.
- Headaches interfere with being able to enjoy sex.
- Sex should be "spontaneous;" it shouldn't be scheduled.
- (Women): I shouldn't be too aggressive or demanding, but should subtly guide my husband in meeting my sexual needs.
- (Men): I should be the initiator and I should want to have sex as often as possible.
- Sex is serious business.
- Only sexy-looking people are really sexy.
- "Good sex" is determined by performance.

6

Developing Honest Communication

Why Honest Communication is Important

Honest communication is a rare thing in interpersonal relationships. It's not that we tell a lot of outright lies. We more often withhold the truth or at least some significant piece of the truth. We don't do it out of malice. There are powerful forces influencing us to withhold. We do it to protect the feelings of others and ourselves. We do it to avoid hassles. We do it to be nice—to avoid causing waves.

After a few years of marriage, the typical couple has accumulated a long list of small hurts, resentments, aggravations, etc. that weren't significant at the time each occurred, but rolled up together, they seriously hamper current communication.

Learning to communicate honestly when we've already established a clear pattern of covering up and when the trust has been ruptured is probably equivalent to learning a foreign language in difficulty.

Getting started can be particularly difficult because of strong feelings of tenderness and vulnerability. Exposing your real feelings may seem like the last thing you want to do, but it's the only path to rebuilding trust.

Building Trust

There are plenty of people who will tell you with certainty that you'll never be able to trust your partner again. Don't believe them. It's possible to build a trust that's stronger than what you had before the affair. It all depends on how you and your partner handle what's happened and how you define the way your relationship will be in the future.

Establishing trust involves some key behaviors on the part of your partner, including:

- being willing to answer your questions.
- hanging in while you deal with the understandable emotions.
- demonstrating a commitment to the relationship by severing contact with the other person.

Trust also depends on:

- facing the fact that monogamy never gets settled "once and for all."
- sharing feelings and concerns on an ongoing basis.
- committing to honest communication—based on fairness and equality.

We'll show you in the pages that follow how to use honest communication to establish a level of trust that's based on knowing each other at a new and deeper level.

A Definition of Honesty

You may consider yourself honest so long as you don't tell an outright lie. You may feel you're still being honest when you simply withhold information you aren't asked about directly. But honest communication goes beyond being truthful in what you say; it also means *volunteering* all thoughts and feelings that are relevant to the relationship.

You may be tempted to think it's OK to tell little white lies or to withhold information out of fear of hurting your partner. But this is usually a way of rationalizing your unwillingness to devote the time and energy necessary to deal with the complexity of honest communication.

A quote from Carl Rogers on the importance of honest communication:

"One rule of thumb which I have found helpful for myself is that, in any continuing relationship, any persistent feeling had better be expressed. Suppressing it can only damage the relationship. The first sentence is not stated casually. Only if it is a significant, continuing relationship, and only if it is a recurring or persistent feeling is it necessary to bring the feeling into the open in the relationship. If this is not done, what is unexpressed gradually poisons the relationship."

Some Benefits of Honesty

Honesty is the most important ingredient in sustaining a solid, loving relationship. Unless both people are willing to commit to honesty and to investing the time and energy necessary to deal with all this, they're unlikely to make it together; or if they do, the emotional distance from the lack of commitment to doing what's necessary leads to a deadened, meaningless marriage.

- It allows you to know one another at a level of intimacy that leads to a deeper, more lasting trust than exists in most relationships.
- It allows your relationship to change and keep pace with the changes that inevitably occur in each of you separately.
- It keeps the channels of communication clear and the relationship vital by continuously providing challenges that can be used for growth.
- It allows each of you to know yourself at ever deeper levels as you commit to using all your resources to build the best relationship possible.

Communicating Effectively—"Adult" to "Adult"
(Especially When Giving Feedback)

Effective Communication
(that reaches the "Adult")
focuses on:

observations

behavior

description

"more" or "less"

sharing ideas & information

usefulness to receiver

receiver's readiness to hear

"what" was said

Ineffective Communication
(that 'hooks' the "Parent"
or "Child") focuses on:

assumptions

the person

judgment

"either/or"

giving advice

"release" for sender

sender's eagerness to speak

"why" it was said

From an old Galician saying:

"When someone is honestly 55 percent right, that's very good and there's no use wrangling.

And if someone is 60 percent right, it's wonderful, it's great luck and let him thank God.

But what's to be said about 75 percent right? Wise people say this is suspicious.

Well, and what about 100 percent right? Whoever says he's 100 percent right is a fanatic, a thug, and the worst kind of rascal."

When Communication Involves Conflict

Decide whether you'd rather be right or be in a loving relationship. If you insist on being "right" at the expense of your partner, you're paying a heavy price—one you probably wouldn't choose to pay if you considered the consequences. Always being made to be the loser or to be wrong in a disagreement will slowly kill your partner's love. A sense of fairness is essential for loving feelings to survive.

Your Words Make a Difference

Be considerate in your choice of words. Part of being a responsible adult involves 1) understanding that words do hurt and 2) making a conscious effort to be accurate and considerate in your communications. (Don't let your anger cause you to say things you'll later regret.)

How You Hear Your Partner's Words Makes a Difference

Be generous; interpret your partner's words in the best possible way. Everyone needs at least one other person with whom they can share their innermost thoughts without fear of being judged or rejected. Be that person for your partner.

This is especially important when you know they're struggling to express themselves around a difficult issue—and one or both of you are upset.

When your partner is upset, they may overstate or misstate their feelings. It's up to you to recognize this tendency and not get "hooked" into responding in such a way as to escalate those feelings.

When you're the one who's upset, you're likely to exaggerate a tendency everyone has to some degree—that is, to overpersonalize what your partner says.

Each of you is likely to have times when you don't say exactly what you mean, so it's important to give each other the benefit of the doubt until you both are less emotional.

Listening is an Important Part of Honest Communication

We all know how good it feels to be truly heard and accepted, and how bad it feels to be ignored or rejected. None of us is born a good listener, but we can all learn to become one. Some key skills in good listening include:

- Making yourself available when the other person needs to talk, not just when it's convenient for you.
- Setting aside your personal agenda so that you can be fully present for what the other wants to communicate.
- Withholding judgement. (You don't have to agree with what's being said, but you need to accept it in order to support full communication.)
- Consciously avoiding the knee-jerk reaction to give advice or offer solutions to problems the other may be describing.
- Responding non-verbally and with short verbal affirmations and/or paraphrases to show you're hearing and understanding.
- Maintaining eye-contact and touching when appropriate to show support and attention.
- Listening to the feelings behind the words and accepting them. (Sometimes they're more important than the words themselves.)
- Listening to what is *not* said. An omission can be a telling clue to the total communication.

Trust

Recognize that trust is the foundation for the things you value most in your relationship. It produces a sense of ease—a feeling that you're accepted by the other person and therefore you can be yourself—all of yourself. A high trust relationship frees you to think and act with spontaneity and energy.

In the absence of trust, you tend to be guarded in what you say and do. You're unwilling to let them know you at a deep level because you're afraid of what they might do with the information. Distrust produces feelings of constraint and discomfort in its mildest forms, and anxiety and fear in its most severe forms.

Broken trust can be repaired, but it can't be done quickly. Rebuilding trust calls for gradually establishing a pattern of trustworthy actions. Actively demonstrate your trustworthiness; don't just say "trust me." Actions really do speak louder than words—especially when the two are in conflict. Be judicious in keeping your commitments to your partner.

When you break a commitment, whether consciously or unconsciously, don't offer glib excuses or try to gloss over it. Face it honestly and directly. If it's a commitment you no longer intend to keep, own up to it and negotiate a new agreement. If it was an oversight on your part, offer a sincere apology, make amends where possible, and state your intention to do better next time.

Trust is not a simple aspect of a relationship that is either present or absent. There are many degrees or levels of trust; you and your partner may hold very different views of the trust that exists between you. As your *mutual* trust increases, so does the potential for satisfaction for both of you.

Intimacy

Intimacy is one of the most paradoxical of life's experiences. It's appealing, intoxicating—and frightening. It's both a highly charged and a deeply peaceful experience. In moments of true intimacy, you drop the normal boundaries and allow yourself to be known more completely than in any other circumstance.

Never confuse intimacy with liking everything your partner says and does. You may be aggravated by differences of opinion or ways of doing things; that's inevitable in dealing honestly with another person.

Honesty, trust, and intimacy are inextricably intertwined. Generally speaking, as one increases, so do the other two. When one is strong, so are the other two.

Fairness and Equality

You can't sustain deep trust and intimacy without having a sense of fairness and equality in the relationship.

If there's an imbalance of power and influence—regardless of whether you are in the one-up or one-down position—the bond of trust will be weakened. And without that bond, you're unlikely to be able to maintain the kind of intimacy you want.

On the other hand, when you are genuinely committed to fairness and equality and are willing to demonstrate that commitment in all areas of your lives together, your trust and intimacy will continue to grow.

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Making Decisions

Some Guidelines for Deciding to Stay or Leave

(Excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

1. Make your *own* decision (regardless of what others think).
2. Do not rush the decision.
3. Get as much information as possible about your own situation and about affairs in general.
4. Consider the emotional piece of this, but realize it's only one part, not the sole basis for a good decision.
5. Consider the practical factors involved (including money, kids, and other relevant issues), but realize the importance of balancing these concerns with the more personal, emotional needs.
6. Base the decision not just on the past, but on the future. No one has a crystal ball to see just what the future holds, but there are indications that can serve as a guide.
 - Is there a willingness to talk about what happened to try to learn from it?
 - Is there a willingness to use the information in a constructive way instead of using it as a way to punish past behavior?

- Is there a willingness to acknowledge attractions as normal and likely in the future, and a plan for ongoing discussions of these temptations?
- Is there a commitment to honesty as the basis of the relationship (rather than just a promise of monogamy)?
- Is there evidence of a willingness to be honest by ongoing sharing of thoughts and feelings about subjects *other* than affairs? (If there is not honest communication about other issues, there's little likelihood there will be honesty in talking about affairs.)

Even if there's no evidence of the things listed above *at this time*, does it seem reasonable to think of moving *toward* this way of relating? Changes of this kind don't happen overnight, but unless there's an indication of movement in this direction, there's little hope for developing a good marriage.

Deciding whether to stay or leave is a complicated decision, but carefully considering all these factors can help you sort through your personal values and priorities to make the decision that best fits your individual situation. And by making a carefully considered decision in a rational way, you should reap the benefits of being more confident and at peace with whatever decision you make.

In making this decision, be alert to the need to make your own decision, regardless of the opinion of others. Advice from well-meaning friends and loved ones can be plentiful and ill-conceived. It runs the gamut from "throw the bum/slut out" to "forgive and forget." *You* must decide for yourself about the future of the relationship, and you should reach that decision only after a careful consideration of the possibilities for the *future*—not just reacting to your emotions about what happened in the past.

Some Couple Issues

- Learning how to spend time together when one partner feels angry and the other feels guilty.
- Satisfying the "need to know"—tell it all or tell as little as possible?
- Learning to communicate
- Listening without judging, criticizing, or punishing
- Discovering new ways of relating
- Establishing real trust
- Developing a relationship that builds on what you've learned

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Learning to Live With What Has Happened

Suggestions for a Healing Contract

- We're going to work this out. It will require time, patience, forgiveness, and persistence on both our parts.
- Neither of us is totally to blame and neither of us is totally innocent for our predicament. We share joint responsibility for creating our problems, and it will take plenty of effort on both our parts to clean them up.
- We are bound to have some ups and downs as we get rid of some issues, only to find some more beneath them, and as we try new behaviors that won't always feel as comfortable as our old habits. There may be some days, in fact, when we create more issues than we resolve, but we will persevere.
- We will celebrate the highs and *work through* the lows as quickly as we can, with the sure knowledge that we can and will create more and more highs and fewer and fewer lows.

- This is not a trivial undertaking. On the contrary, it ranks right up there with raising a child and preparing for the Olympics in terms of difficulty and significance. We choose to do it because we want to have the most satisfying relationship possible, not just muddle through.
- We will make it by consciously using our love for each other to sustain us, by thinking clearly and communicating honestly, and by learning from our mistakes.
- We will approach every conversation with the assumption that "the facts are friendly" and it's in our mutual best interest to deal with the realities of our life together. We will not use information to punish each other nor will we withhold information in an effort to protect ourselves or the other.
- We will commit quality time to working on our relationship, but we must get on with the rest of our lives—and we will not involve others in our work inappropriately.
- We will not pretend this never happened. Like trying to avoid "an elephant in the room," it's artificial to try to avoid referring to this experience. Saying "we never talk about it" is *not* a sign of having recovered; recovery means you are able to talk about it just as you talk about any other significant event in your lives. When these reflections can take place without undue rancor or emotionalism, you'll know the satisfaction of recovery.

What to do to help heal a broken or damaged relationship:

- Affirm your love regularly.
- Describe in clear, specific terms the kind of relationship you want to build.
- Listen better than you've ever listened before (without judging).
- Resist the temptation to punish your partner for whatever "transgressions" you think they committed or any they acknowledge. Reinforce them for being forthcoming and try to get a full understanding of the behavior at the time it happened in the context of your relationship. Finally, together, develop better ways of behaving in the future.
- Acknowledge your joint responsibility for creating whatever problems exist in your relationship.
- Share your ideas about how other people have influenced you for better or worse. Forgive those you believe added to your problems and know that you can choose to act differently from the way they "taught" you to act—starting today. ("The way you are may be your parents' fault, but if you stay that way, it's your own fault.")
- Do your fair share of emotional work. When you've been collecting hurts and resentments for quite a while, it's essential to clear enough of them out to make room for the loving, positive regard you want to have for each other.

What to do to help heal a broken or damaged relationship (continued):

- Manage your self-talk. Angry and loving feelings don't grow well together. In fact, angry, resentful feelings are like weeds; they grow like crazy and tend to choke the loving feelings unless you consciously choose to support them.
- Look for ways to give your partner what they need. Ask for what you need. Don't be addicted to getting it.
- Acknowledge and celebrate your progress. Don't wait for major breakthroughs. Notice and enjoy every small step in the right direction.
- Don't be afraid to laugh and cry together.
- Working on a relationship can be extremely draining—probably because you're struggling to understand what the other is saying and to clearly express your own thoughts—and you're intensely emotionally involved. Be sensitive to each other's capacity to do the work. Pace yourselves. Intersperse some time-outs to gather your thoughts and refresh yourselves.
- To the degree you can enjoy having sex together, do it! It can make a significant contribution to the healing process.

An Adult Approach to Commitment

- I love and accept you right now—as you are and as I know you.
- I know you will change in ways neither of us can imagine, because you have virtually unlimited potential, and change is the essence of life. I will strive to support your growth, even though it may include some change that I would not prefer.
- I freely choose to build a life with you that is positive for both of us and for those around us. I know this means improving the relationship skills we now have and learning new ones as needed. Our relationship is not perfect now, and it doesn't have to be. It's up to us to make it the best it can be on a continuing basis.
- I will give our relationship a high place on my agenda by committing time and energy to the work of sustaining and developing our love. I will never take it for granted and assume that it can wait while we tend to the myriad of other things that will constantly be competing for our time and energy.
- I will share with you all my thoughts, feelings, and actions that impact you and our relationship. I want and need the same from you.
- I will keep you informed of other significant changes occurring in the way I view and experience my life and our life together.

An Adult Approach to Commitment (continued):

- I will do my part to build with you a life of learning. Honest, caring communication will be our primary way of sustaining our love and learning to love more effectively.
- I know that neither of us can meet all the needs of the other. I will work with you to find the right balance of time together and time apart so that we can each satisfy some of our important needs with others and in separate activities. I know that this balance will change over time as our life circumstances and the world around us change.
- In committing to build a life together, we are each giving up some of the freedom we had when living alone, and we are gaining the tremendous benefits of facing life's vicissitudes from the vantage point of a solid partnership. I welcome your support and I will be there for you when life throws us the inevitable curves.
- I will consciously seek to add fun to our lives as long as we're together. Life is serious enough without our unduly adding to it by taking ourselves and our circumstances too seriously.

Preventing Future Affairs

By recovering from this experience, you're prepared to face the future without repeating the false ways of thinking about preventing affairs that you may have blindly accepted before. Whether with the same partner or another, you now have a chance to think clearly about what's at stake and what's involved in having a monogamous relationship. Re-reading the following lists can reinforce what you've already learned the hard way.

What doesn't work:

- Repeating the marriage vows doesn't prevent affairs.
- Love doesn't prevent affairs.
- Religious commandments don't prevent affairs.
- Parental injunctions don't prevent them.
- Being the "perfect" partner doesn't prevent them.
- "Spicing" up your sex life doesn't prevent them.
- Having more children doesn't prevent them.
- Threats don't prevent them.
- Simple promises don't prevent them.
- Getting caught doesn't prevent them.

What is most likely to work:

- Awareness that no one is immune to having an affair.
- Discussion and agreement about your commitment to monogamy.
- Regular renewal of your commitment.
- Acknowledgment that the issue of monogamy is never settled once and for all.
- Ongoing, honest communication about everything that impacts your relationship.

Starting Over

Whether with your partner or on your own, you're in essence starting over on a whole new phase of your life. There are many ways in which you will be affected by this transformation, but it requires your clear thinking to gain the most possible. (Remember: "that which doesn't kill you makes you stronger.")

- You need to redefine the way you see yourself and your place in the world.
- You need to accept that you are now different because of this experience—but recognize that you're OK.
- You need to see that while no one would *choose* this experience as a way of achieving personal growth; nevertheless, that can be the result.

Appendix: Other Resources

Three Types of Communication Issues

Excerpted from *Straight Talk*:

A New way to get closer to others by saying what you really mean

By Sherod Miller, Ph.D., Daniel Wackman, Ph.D.,

Elam Nunnally, Ph.D., and Carol Saline

Topic Issues:	Personal Issues:	Relationship Issues:
housing	self-esteem	sex
friends	identity	trust
career	values	jealousy
money	energy	affection
children	responsibility	commitment
leisure	success	decision-making
contraception	appearance	control
drugs	goals	communication
work	habits	boundaries
clothes	health	closeness/distance
time	recognition	cooperation

**Excerpts from the book *Relationships in Recovery*
by Emily Marlin**

"Just as 'rigorous honesty' cannot be used as an excuse to hurt someone, however, the fact that the truth may hurt your partner should not *in itself* be used as an excuse to *avoid* telling the truth. Naturally, the truth sometimes hurts; but lying or continuing a pattern of dishonesty sometimes hurts even more.

Before you tell the whole truth, ask yourself:

1. What do I hope to accomplish by revealing this truth?
2. What are the possible consequences of my disclosure?
3. Will revealing this truth hurt the person I tell?
4. Will revealing this truth hurt a third person?
5. Do I have the right to involve a third person?
6. If I know that some of the details are unnecessary and may be harmful, is it possible to tell this truth without revealing every little detail about it?

Before you decide to remain silent, ask yourself:

1. Will keeping this truth secret harm the other person?
2. If that person inadvertently learned my "secret," would he or she be most hurt by my failure to be open and honest?
3. Will this particular secret make it impossible for us to make honesty the cornerstone of a Mutual Partnership in this relationship?
4. Is this secret an isolated incident or part of a pattern of dishonesty on my part?
5. How would I feel if the other person had this secret and didn't tell me?
6. How is my ego tied up with my secret? Am I worried about how the other person will see me if I expose myself in this way?
7. Have I decided to avoid doing the honest thing, simply to escape the personal consequences of my actions?

MALE/FEMALE STYLES

Ideas from Joe Tanenbaum's Book:
Male & Female Realities

Communication differences:

- Men mull it over, stuff it inside, finally talk (to resolve).
- Women talk to process (to express their thoughts).

Different ways of dealing with life:

- Men want control of it.
- Women want to process it.

Differences noted as babies:

- Boys respond to objects.
- Girls respond to people.

Differences in ways of relating:

- Men relate primarily intellectually or physically.
- Women add to that by relating emotionally and spiritually.

Example of differences in use of words:

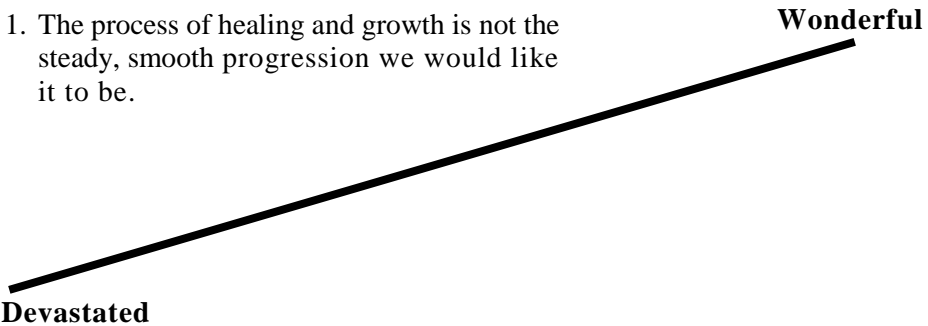
- When men say, "I want..." they definitely want it.
- When women say, "I want..." they just mean they like it.

Differences in focus:

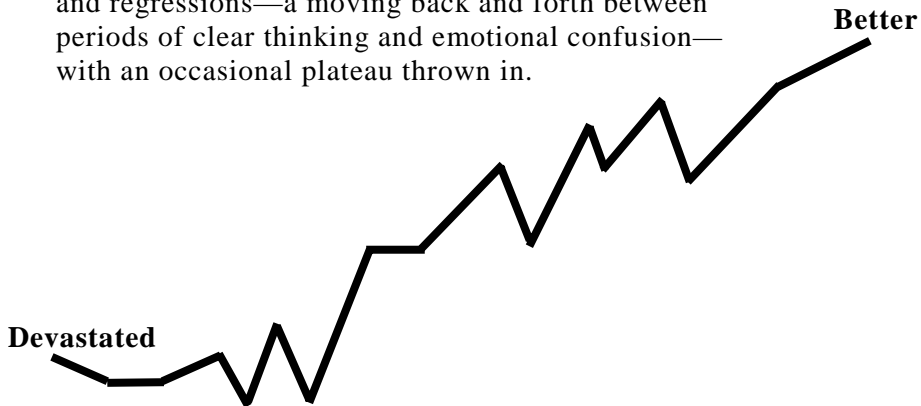
- Men concentrate almost exclusively on one thing at a time.
- Women tend to move back and forth among a variety of stimuli.

The Way Through the Emotional Turmoil of Affairs Is Through—NOT Over or Around

1. The process of healing and growth is not the steady, smooth progression we would like it to be.



2. It's more often a series of ups and downs, dramatic improvements and depressing backslides, progressions and regressions—a moving back and forth between periods of clear thinking and emotional confusion—with an occasional plateau thrown in.



3. The moral is, persistence will pay off. Allow for down periods, and view each one as a fork in the road. One path leads to further decline, the other to continued change for the better.