

Affair Recovery: Top Pitfalls Unfaithful Partners Need to Avoid

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Recovering from an extramarital affair is one of the most challenging experiences a couple can face. The way you, as the unfaithful partner, approach healing after the discovery of an affair can significantly influence whether you can rebuild your relationship and stay married. In the aftermath, your behavior plays a crucial role in the recovery process. Your actions, or lack thereof, can either support or severely undermine efforts to repair the relationship. Appropriate handling of disclosure, feelings, remorse, and reminders from your spouse of lost trust are critical factors in the recovery journey.

With work, marriages can recover and thrive after an affair. However, relationship killers are a lack of transparency, observable commitment to the marriage, and unwillingness to communicate and work through feelings with your spouse. Marital recovery from an affair is not simply an acknowledgment of "I did it. Its history. Let's get over it and move on." However, there are common mistakes that can hinder the healing process. Here are behaviors to avoid:

Hanging On to the Affair

Consequences of the affair coming to light may feel like a conclusion, but it isn't necessarily the end of the affair--at least not the emotional component. Lingering thoughts and feelings may persist, and you may even experience grief over the loss of the relationship. The ending of an affair can feel like withdrawal from a mood-altering drug, with triggers, cravings, and uncomfortable physical symptoms.

Despite any compulsions you may feel to make contact with your former affair partner—treat these urges like detox cravings. Each time you resist, you get closer to restoring your marriage. Monitor your thoughts and avoid rationalizing your desire to break the "no contact" boundary. Combat your cravings with the truth: You are probably still idealizing something that is not real. Fantasy is always more exciting than people living an authentic life. If you stay away from your affair partner, guide your thoughts away from fantasizing about them, and make no contact, the cravings will subside.

Don't defend your affair partner. Your spouse is trying to make sense of all that has happened. When they speak ill of your affair partner, stay silent. Defending them will make matters worse. Let them think and feel whatever they think and feel.

Report Any Contact Attempts

If your affair partner tries to contact you, despite your best efforts to cut off communication pathways, tell your spouse—even if you don't want to.

Avoid Defensiveness

Talk when your spouse wants to talk about it. Don't divert attention, use dirty fighting tactics, or throw accusations back at your partner. Post-affair discovery is not the time to point out what was wrong with your partner or the marriage. Take responsibility for your actions. Working on the marriage is part of the recovery. You can only work on your marriage if you talk about it.

Stay Calm During Your Spouse's Big Feelings

Triggered responses of emotional flooding can feel threatening and overwhelming. If your spouse says they want a divorce while emotionally flooded, they may not mean it—or they may feel differently tomorrow. Please don't give up on restoring your marriage until it's truly over.

Actively Work to Create the Relationship You Both Want

Change up your marital interactions for good. Identify and work to become the spouse you have wanted to be. Maintain the positive changes you make. Don't make short-term changes to get them off your back. Don't slip back into old habits. Stay vigilant and accountable to your partner, not just in the immediate aftermath. Avoid situations, pro-affair thinking, and people that create an environment of vulnerability to the affair. Establish a new normal that supports recovery and reconnection with your spouse and yourself. Don't go back to "sleepwalking" through your marriage. Wake up and fully commit. Don't become a recipient of "too little, too late."

Discuss Your Feelings

Don't avoid discussing your feelings or your partner's. Not sharing your inner world contributes to the spot you are in. Take risks to share your tender, vulnerable feelings. Talk about remorse and other uncomfortable feelings. Ask for forgiveness.

Go the Extra Mile

Make an effort to make it up to your spouse. You won't really be able to make it up to them, but working on "righting a wrong" goes a long way in helping your partner believe that you are genuinely remorseful. They will probably want evidence that you still want and love them. When they tell you what makes them feel loved, important, and cherished, go beyond their requests. If they want a dozen roses, give them two dozen. If they want a movie date, go the extra mile and get opera tickets if they like opera. Work to reinvest in your relationship like your life depends on it. Suggest activities that reflect your interests as a couple. Don't introduce activities that you did with your affair partner.

Hypervigilant Honesty

Don't lie—about anything. Avoid all forms of deception, even when you think it will hurt them to hear the truth. Let your spouse decide what they can handle. Transparency is crucial in rebuilding trust. Don't lie or withhold information about the affair. Come clean completely—dribbling out disclosures in small pieces only undermines trust and can sabotage the rebuilding process.

Support Your Spouse's Recovery

Please don't stop your active support of your spouse's recovery--whatever they believe it takes. If they think they need time away from you, graciously grant that request, or if they don't consult you, accept it.

Renew Your Commitment to Recovery

Your spouse is not the only one affected by this. Each party needs a recovery plan. Talking about it and processing feelings are essential, but developing a recognition and understanding of the factors that created the vulnerability in the face of opportunity is also crucial for prevention. Put sincere and sustained effort into it. Take your recovery activities seriously. Consult your plan or list daily, and keep your promise and commitment to your spouse.

Work together to understand how this happened. Continue to answer questions every time they come up. Refrain from distracting or refusing to answer your spouse's questions. Answer them every time with patience. Don't roll your eyes or act like you've run out of patience. Find more patience and keep answering. Remember that the theory of why it happened is not the same one that the two of you together will ultimately develop.

Be Patient with Fluctuating Emotions

Don't point out that your spouse responded differently yesterday. They are aware of their mood shifts and feelings changes. Whatever they feel is valid at that moment. Please don't downplay their emotions or minimize the seriousness of the betrayal.

Keep Communicating

Don't stop communicating with your spouse. You probably ended up in this situation because of a failure to communicate. Share what you feel, need, want, and will do. Apologizing won't fix your partner's feelings. Apologize anyway. Talk about your own feelings. Talk about how it feels when you act outside your own value system. Talk about fear and shame. Take risks to be emotionally vulnerable with your spouse.

Be Accountable and Reliable

Be on time and present when you've committed to something. If you say you'll be home at 6:00, be there at 6:00. Your tardiness or absence can trigger a trust-related emotional response that could take time to resolve, and a pile-up of trust injuries erodes the progress you may be making. Tell your spouse your plans. If you anticipate that something you plan to do might trigger your spouse, talk to them about it before you do it. A proactive approach can trigger fewer emotions than avoiding the discussion and later being perceived as betraying them again.

Acknowledge the Long Recovery Process

Refrain from treating this as a short-term problem that will go away quickly. It won't—recovery takes time. Again, practice patience and never punish your spouse for not recovering quickly enough for your preferences. Don't ever threaten your spouse or exploit their fears. Don't tell them to get over it. By avoiding these common pitfalls, you can help facilitate the healing.

Healing From Infidelity:
Important Ingredients for Rebuilding
Trust and Love"

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Recognizing the common mistakes that can hinder the healing process is essential for rebuilding trust and love in your relationship. However, understanding what to avoid is only part of the process. To truly heal and move forward, a roadmap of recovery tasks can guide you through the necessary steps to restore your bond.

"Healing From Infidelity: Important Ingredients for Rebuilding Trust and Love" serves as that roadmap. This Brief Lesson is a concise recovery framework outlining the tasks appropriate for surviving the emotional upheaval, rebuilding trust, and rekindling love. This lesson provides specific recovery tasks for unfaithful and offended partners, emphasizing the collaborative efforts needed to mend the wounds of betrayal. This lesson can help you overcome the immediate turmoil and build a stronger, more resilient partnership.



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