



RECOVERING FROM AN AFFAIR

NOTE TO THE READER:

Over the years we've counseled hundreds of couples who are grappling with the aftermath of marital infidelity. While the details may vary, the pain is very real in every situation.

This resource includes input from numerous marriage and family therapists who have accumulated years of counseling experience with couples through Focus on the Family's counseling service and Hope Restored marriage intensives.

We hope that after you've read this information you won't hesitate to follow up by visiting Focus on the Family's [Counseling Services and Referrals](#) page or HopeRestored.com. We're here for you and your spouse as you seek answers and pursue healing for your difficult situation.

May God grant you His wisdom and strength for the road ahead.

-Dr. Greg Smalley, Psy.D.

-Erin Smalley BSN, MS

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Erin Smalley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "E".

A DEVASTATING REVELATION

Sarah and Josh never dreamt that infidelity would be a part of their story. Josh was a successful dentist in their small Midwestern town. Sarah had recently begun staying at home with their infant daughter, Mia. Since Mia's birth, both Josh and Sarah noticed that there was more distance in their relationship. Sarah was home alone taking care of their baby. With Josh at work, Sarah often sought out support from girlfriends in her church's moms' group. Meanwhile, Josh had an occasional lunch with his buddies, but he really missed the connection he and Sarah had enjoyed earlier in their relationship.

When the manager of his dental office moved on to another job, Josh interviewed several new applicants. He hired a very qualified and vivacious woman named Sophia. She seemed like a perfect fit, often arriving at the office early in the morning and frequently staying late, as well, to help with anything that needed doing in the busy office. Josh valued her strong work ethic and would often express his appreciation to her verbally. Sophia loved this unsolicited affirmation from her boss.

As the months went by, their conversations began to expand to deeper topics about their families, their favorite things in life, and the challenges they faced. Josh and Sarah discovered they had a lot in common. Often, they would run out to grab lunch or coffee, just to shoot the breeze. However, soon Josh realized that he was enjoying his time with Sophia in much the same way he did with Sarah before their daughter was born.

Josh contemplated telling Sarah about his deepening friendship with his assistant, but he didn't want to burden her with the information.



After all, he believed that he would never act on those feelings. However, it wasn't long before Sophia and Josh began to cross physical lines that he knew were not okay. Eventually, he found himself involved in a full-blown sexual affair with Sophia—something he never thought he was capable of.

One night as he was driving home from the office, he called Sophia and told her that he wanted to end their relationship.

The conversation continued as he pulled his car into the garage at home. Sarah walked into to the garage and could hear the conversation over the car stereo system. She stood motionless, overwhelmed with both nausea and anger as she realized her husband was trying to break up with another woman. Words can hardly express the heart-wrenching shock and pain of discovering infidelity in your marriage.

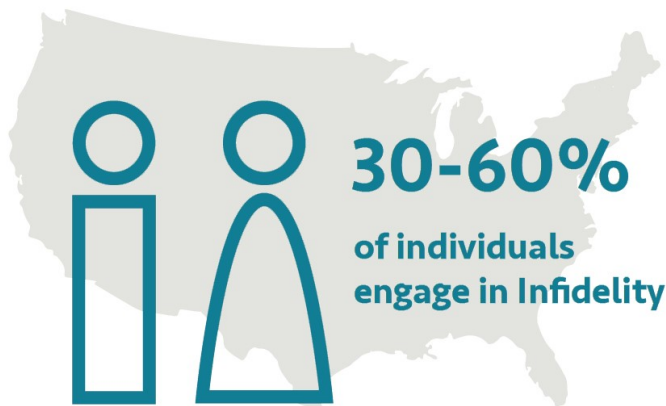
It is an extremely difficult, emotionally traumatizing event. Perhaps your story is very different from Josh and Sarah's.

There are many types of affairs and betrayals, but in almost every case, the pain is very real and the path to recovery can seem daunting.

IN THE WAKE OF THE AFFAIR COMING TO LIGHT,
YOU MAY BE EXPERIENCING FEELINGS OF DOUBT AND DISMAY OR ASKING
QUESTIONS YOU'VE NEVER ASKED BEFORE:

- “Why did this happen?”
- “Is our marriage over?”
- “Can I ever trust my spouse again?”
- “Do I know everything—or are more revelations coming?”
- “Who is this person I am married to?”
- “Will she cheat again?”
- “How can I ever forgive him?”
- “How do I begin to heal?”
- “How long will it take before we can feel normal again?”

Whether you recently confessed to having an extramarital affair, or you were on the other end of the confession and are currently reeling from shock and devastation—we want to meet you with understanding and help amid this overwhelming pain.



Approximately 30-60% of all married individuals in the United States will engage in infidelity at some point during their marriage.¹

According to current statistics, approximately 30-60% of all married individuals in the United States will engage in infidelity at some point during their marriage.¹ Of course, these are not just numbers on a spreadsheet; they are real husbands and wives facing unspeakable pain and confusion. You never dreamed you would find yourself in their shoes, and you certainly don't want to be just another statistic.

Although you may feel hopeless in this moment, you need to know that there *is* hope—and a way through this. While it will take willingness, repentance, and intentionality, your marriage can be set on an entirely new and better path by responding decisively and well to this unwanted trial.

WHAT IS THE DEFINITION OF INFIDELITY?

AFFAIR

An affair is a betrayal of trust involving another person, which violates the promise of marriage to be faithful in your affections and actions.

We realize that pornography, neglect, abuse, and other damaging circumstances are also betrayals of trust in marriage.

But for the purpose of this article, we are limiting our definition of infidelity to *a sexual or emotional encounter or relationship that happens between a married person and someone who is not that person's spouse.*

WITH THIS DEFINITION IN MIND:

- The unfaithfulness might be romantic or sexual—involving physical contact that expresses romance, physical attraction, or sexual desire (e.g. holding hands, hugging, kissing, intercourse).
- The betrayal might be emotional—an intense bond “between two people that mimics the closeness and emotional intimacy” of a marriage relationship.²
- The infidelity might be online—a cyber affair with sexual or emotional undertones carried out “via chat, webcam, email, text, social media, or other forms of communication.”³

In the wake of discovering or revealing an extramarital affair, you're likely feeling uncertain about how to proceed and what you should do next. We want to encourage you by providing the important information you need in order to care for yourself, your spouse, and ultimately, your marriage. Every person and relationship is unique. Even so, there are several practical guidelines to consider for

common struggles that occur in the aftermath of infidelity.

The good news is this: marriage counselors have found that couples who choose to recover from and rebuild after infidelity often end up with stronger, more loving, and mutually understanding relationships than what they had experienced previously.⁴

WHEN THE AFFAIR COMES TO LIGHT

Whether you are the betrayer or the betrayed, there are several important things to try and bear in mind immediately after the affair comes to light:

1 Do not make any quick decisions about ending your marriage.

Begin the process of healing your heart—identifying your emotions and grieving the impact of the affair.

2 Take your time.

If you are the offending spouse, admitting the exact nature of what happened without concealing critical facts is important. However, a fuller picture of the essential details will take some time and guidance to prepare. Tell the truth, but don't rush into the intimate details immediately. Minimizations, omissions, and unnecessarily graphic information can do additional harm. Be truthful, be patient, and seek guidance on how to appropriately engage in full disclosure.

3 Give each other individual space.
The revelation of an affair can be very traumatic and intense. You might find yourself acting in unfamiliar ways due to the heightened sensitivities involved. This can include wide-ranging emotions (fear, anger, insecurity, etc.) as well as physical symptoms and loss of sleep. So, make every effort not to neglect your physical health. Take a time-out when you need to de-escalate emotions.

4 Seek Support.
Surround yourself with those who make you feel the safest, such as a same-sex friend or a trusted family member. You can also seek the support of a counselor or a pastor. Be aware that deep pain and anger commonly experienced by the offended spouse can create the risk of a “rebound” affair of his or her own. Likewise, the intensity of the disclosure may motivate the offending spouse to return to the affair partner for escape or comfort. Be careful of these pitfalls, and guard against them. The key is to find people who can walk with you through the healing process and remain unbiased, supporting you with whatever you need.



Photo credit: Shelbe Deeter

TO THE OFFENDED SPOUSE: STEPS FORWARD

If you find yourself in Sarah’s shoes and have recently learned that your spouse has been unfaithful, we want to offer you some guidance on how to proceed:

Practice self-care. Learning about your spouse’s infidelity has undoubtedly resulted in great emotional trauma.

As a result of this you may be experiencing:

- DIFFICULTY SLEEPING
- DIFFICULTY EATING
- MAJOR WEIGHT LOSS
- AN INABILITY TO FUNCTION AND CARRY OUT YOUR DAILY TASKS
- LACK OF HOPE
- DEPRESSION
- ANGER
- ANXIETY OR PANIC
- SHAME
- RESENTMENT

Therefore, it is essential to pace and take care of yourself in the following areas:

PHYSICAL:

- Make sure you are eating nutritious food several times per day.
- Sleep whenever you can—see your physician if you are having great difficulty sleeping.
- Exercise whenever possible as a form of healthy stress relief.
- Stop several times per day to concentrate on taking deep, soothing breaths to calm your heart rate or clear your racing mind.

SPIRITUAL:

- Spend time with the Lord expressing your pain and emotion.
- Immerse yourself in God’s Word—seeking His guidance, leading, and truth.
- Connect with nature and the beauty of God’s creation (art, music, hiking, walking, etc.) to meditate upon and breathe in His presence during troubled times.

EMOTIONAL:

- Identify your painful emotions—put words to how you are feeling.
- Seek the support of a counselor, pastor, or mentor—someone who is advocating for you and who can help you process your emotions.
- Journal or write out your emotions.

INTELLECTUAL:

- Seek to learn about affair recovery.
- Take periodic breaks from marriage-maintenance issues.
- Continue to seek life-giving hobbies and activities.

Embrace managing your own emotions even when they are overwhelming.

You may be shocked when your deep pain emerges. However, let your painful emotions matter to you—like feeling betrayed, rejected, worthless, unloved, disrespected, failed, etc. Attempt to make healthy choices around managing those emotions. You may experience disillusionment, rage, anger, grief, devastation, and depression. A professional counselor can help you with healthy coping mechanisms and tools.

Seek God’s truth about who you are.

Go to the source of Truth and ask Him what is true about you as a person, as a spouse, and as His child. You may be experiencing feelings of inadequacy and not being good enough—especially sexually. The offended spouse’s self-worth can take a hit in the wake of an affair—so make sure you’re turning toward God for your answers.

Ask questions that you desire to know the answer to.

Often the offended spouse has many questions about the affair. However, be very honest with yourself—are you someone who does well with lots of information, or will it only cause you further hurt? Before asking your spouse for details, you might prayerfully consider whether knowing specific information would be helpful or hurtful. It's up to you. If you do desire to know the answer to anything specific, go ahead and ask your spouse. Often, hearing the true details may help with the process of beginning to rebuild your marriage. However, make sure that you don't dwell on negative images of what went on in the relationship, because those images may be seared in your mind and cause further harm. Seek outside, objective guidance about your list of questions before asking them to your spouse. This can be a helpful and protective safeguard against unnecessary graphic details.

Request total transparency and honesty.

You cannot control how your spouse conducts himself or herself; however, you certainly can request total transparency and honesty. You may want to seek permission to have access to his or her call history, email, text messages, and social media accounts. You might also ask to make a plan for handling potential and unexpected contacts from the other person. Seek guidance in ensuring that the initial recovery plan and accountability check-in points for your spouse are healthy for your own recovery and mindset.

Be honest about how you feel.

After a period of caring for and attending to your own heart, be willing to express to your spouse how much you are hurting. Be as honest as you can about the feelings of abandonment, worthlessness, betrayal, fear, and doubt you are experiencing. By sharing openly and honestly, you will help keep the lines of communication open between you and your spouse. However, remember that unchecked venting and rage directed toward your spouse will only cause further harm. Speaking the truth *in love* (Ephesians 4:15) is critical, even if love is the last thing you're feeling toward your spouse in the moment. Seek help from a licensed Christian counselor in this process, as it is important to have someone to validate your pain and advocate for you.

Own how your behavior may have led to difficulties in your marriage.

Although you are in no way responsible for your spouse's choice to have an affair, it is important to look at how you may have influenced the marital system. In fact, it can be empowering for you to consider how you may have played a role in the previous emotional climate or challenges that existed in your marriage. For example, an offended spouse may recognize that he or she had withdrawn his or her affections or was extremely critical of his or her partner, thereby gaining insight into how he or she may have influenced the overall relationship. Again, engaging in this form of healthy self-reflection is not the same as owning your spouse's choice to act out.

Find others that you feel safe with who can support you and encourage you.

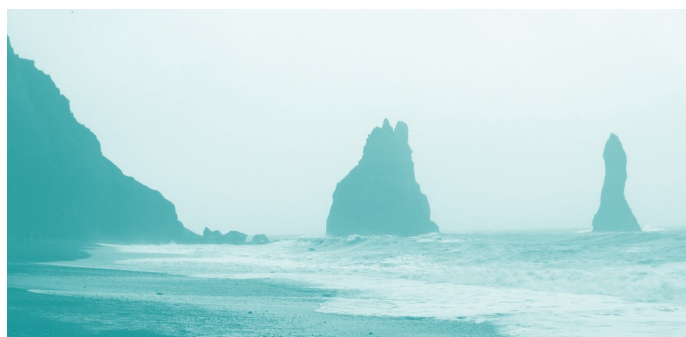
Surround yourself with friends who can walk with you through this challenging time. Join a support group or meet with a mentor who can provide a safe space for you to process your feelings. Be vigilant against your own vulnerability to a subsequent “rebound” affair in response or reaction to the pain and vulnerability you’re feeling.

Listen to your spouse’s heart and emotions.

Try to be as compassionate as possible and attempt to understand how he or she arrived where he or she did. Be there to support when you can; however, your job is not to own your spouse’s emotions or actions. Allow him or her to own his or her own behavior and the impact and pain his or her choices have caused while being as caring as you can. Be vigilant not to “return evil for evil” with your words or actions, or to allow stress to escalate into physical violence or unproductive shouting matches.

Seek to forgive your spouse.

Forgiveness will be a process and a journey. It likely will not come quickly or easily. Study what forgiveness is and what it is not. Choosing to extend forgiveness to your spouse does not mean that you will immediately forget the pain and devastation brought on by their unfaithfulness. However, it is more about the state of your own heart. At some point, you will want to communicate your forgiveness to your spouse. This could be done in a variety of ways, such as writing a letter, recording a video, or having a face-to-face conversation. Understand that God calls us to forgive, but also know that forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration are three distinct and long-term processes on the road to recovery.



TO THE UNFAITHFUL SPOUSE: WHERE DO YOU BEGIN?

If you recently revealed that you have engaged in an extramarital affair, whether voluntarily or, like Josh, by being “caught,” here are some important guidelines on how to proceed:

End the affair completely and permanently.

Cease all private meetings, phone calls, texts, or social media contacts with the other person. Cut all ties—period. Be transparent with your spouse about any chance meetings or any attempts on the part of the other person to contact you—before your spouse finds out about it on his or her own.

Own your choices and accept responsibility for your unfaithfulness.

No excuses—you chose to be unfaithful. Regardless of the state of your marriage when you cheated, there is no room for excusing the behavior. Do not blame the influence of others, a negative environment at home, or other factors that drove your temptations. Just own your choices.

Take good care of your heart and practice good self-care.

Separate your hurtful actions from who you are as a person. Your feelings matter, so articulate them. Your spouse may or may not be available to care about your pain due to the overwhelming nature of his or her own pain. Often the unfaithful spouse reports experiencing shame, guilt, embarrassment, depression, anxiety, or grief. Spend time caring for your heart and checking in with trusted advisors. Enlist wise, confidential people (specifically, safe relationships of the same sex) to walk with you as you recover. Make a plan to care well for yourself in every arena—physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.



Photo credit: Nomadsoul1

Demonstrate compassion and empathy toward your spouse.

Your spouse was likely devastated upon hearing this news. Show up in a compassionate and empathic manner. Make every effort to deeply understand how your actions have impacted your spouse. Imagine what it would be like for you to be on the receiving end of this news and allow your heart to be touched.

In her research, Dr. Shirley Glass reported that the single best indicator of whether a relationship can survive infidelity is how much empathy the unfaithful partner shows when the betrayed spouse gets emotional about the pain caused by the affair.⁵

Make choices to rebuild trust with your spouse, recognizing that you must allow your spouse as much time as he or she needs to process the pain of trust being broken.

Listen, listen, listen and keep talking with your spouse—no matter how long your spouse needs to process. Everyone is different in how they need to travel through the healing process—so even months and years later, be willing to listen and share about the affair without anger and blame. Willingly pursue couples counseling to aid in this unfolding journey.

Commit to being faithful and trustworthy and line your behavior up with this commitment.

Trust has clearly been broken within your marriage due to the affair; therefore, do all you can to rebuild it. Being consistent in both what you say and what you do is essential. Your spouse will be watching for inconsistency. Choose to show him or her in a way that's not defensive that you are working at becoming trustworthy—moment-to-moment and choice-by-choice. Trust is never earned once and for all. This is an opportunity to show your spouse that you are serious in this commitment through continued choices every day. You are not trying to convince your spouse to trust you; you are trying to be trustworthy. When you try too hard to convince, sometimes you become *untrustworthy*. For example, you might be tempted to hide certain information because you want your spouse to trust you. But the very act of concealing information is *untrustworthy*.

Understand what led to the affair.

Were you searching to meet a need through the affair? Was there infidelity in your family of origin? Do you have an addiction (sex, drugs, or alcohol) that resulted in making other poor choices? Was there something your marriage was lacking that you desired to see improved upon? (Of course, none of these situations excuse the affair or allow you to escape accepting responsibility.) If you need help with this, you might invite a pastor, counselor, mentor, or good friend to help you explore.



Photo credit: Asaf R.

Seek wholehearted forgiveness.

One important key to seeking forgiveness is to understand how the affair affected your spouse. Through empathizing with your spouse, allow the Lord to move your heart to seek forgiveness *wholeheartedly*. Also remember that asking for forgiveness doesn't mean your spouse needs to be ready or willing to forgive you. Humbly ask, and then let your spouse decide when, if, and how they will forgive. Be willing to fully accept his or her decision and position. Remember, forgiveness is never deserved and should not be demanded. It is not a simple, one-time event. And forgiveness doesn't always mean reconciliation. The multifaceted relational categories of forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration unfold over time and through counseling.

Answer your spouse's questions as openly and honestly as possible.

Although this may seem counterintuitive, being open and honest about what happened is essential. This will influence the rebuilding of trust. If unspoken details emerge later, it can lead to further damage. Although fear and shame might cause you to hold back, answer your spouse as directly as you can. In one study of 1,083 betrayed husbands and wives, those offending spouses who were the most honest and forthright felt better emotionally and reconciled more completely.⁶ Don't miss your chance to be completely honest from the beginning.

Important pieces of information to include are:

- When the affair started
- How long it went on
- How it was kept a secret
- When it ended

One word of caution is due, however. The "whole truth" doesn't mean giving out unnecessarily graphic and detailed descriptions. It's possible to shield your spouse from unnecessary detail while remaining completely honest. Giving too much specificity will only sear images into your spouse's mind. Instead, you might say something like, "I'm willing to give details, but I don't want to hurt you more. How much do you want to know?" This question is better than trying to manage what is best for your spouse to know—which could lead to inappropriate withholding. In general, give categorical truths about emotional and physical boundaries that were crossed, no matter how painful the truth.

Commit to being fully transparent and open with your spouse.

Offer your spouse *full* access to your call history, texts, emails, and social media accounts. Some previous texts or emails may be graphic and worth guarding against. But from this point forward, commit to no more hiding and no more deceit. Your life must be an open book for your spouse. *You* have broken your partner's trust; therefore, go to great lengths to let him or her know where you are, who you are with, when your plans change, and if you will be late.

Express gratitude toward your spouse.

Recognize what your spouse is grappling with. He or she must choose whether to work with you through this devastating betrayal and break in trust. Hopefully, he or she will recognize your true repentance and choose to seek reconciliation. This is certainly what we encourage—we believe this reflects God's heart toward the truly repentant. If this path is chosen, you are being shown one of the greatest acts of love—and it does not come easily. Show your husband or wife great gratitude both in word and deed. Thank him or her for choosing to engage in the hard work of trusting you again and restoring your marriage.

TO THE COUPLE: WORKING AS A TEAM TO CARE FOR YOUR MARRIAGE

In the wake of an affair, the goal initially is to heal and recover from the shock and trauma. But ultimately, your desire may be to build a “new” marriage—one that you both feel great about.

HERE ARE SOME HELPFUL TIPS TO BEGIN THIS PROCESS:

1 Set boundaries around how much time each day or week you are focusing on “affair talk.”

After the initial revelation of the affair and the resultant aftershocks, make sure you are also spending agreed-upon, proactive time building your friendship and relationship. Set daily limits on the amount of time you invest discussing the affair.

You certainly need to talk about it, but you must also be intentional in creating opportunities to connect and build into your “new” relationship.

2 See a marriage counselor.

Pursue marriage counseling from a licensed Christian counselor who specializes in marital therapy and is experienced in dealing with recovering from infidelity (call 1-800-A-FAMILY for a local referral or visit

[FocusOnTheFamily.com/counseling](https://www.FocusOnTheFamily.com/counseling) for information online).

Counseling will help you communicate through overwhelming emotions, assess contributing factors to the affair, and determine what you both desire to do to strengthen and build a “new” marriage relationship. A marriage intensive could also be helpful in your recovery process.

Visit the [Hope Restored website](https://www.HopeRestored.com) or call toll-free at 1-866-875-2915 for more information.

3 Recognize the amount of time it takes to recover from infidelity.

It is essential that you both recognize that there will be ups and downs throughout the healing journey. Depending on many factors, 18 months to two years is realistic; however, it can take longer for some couples and less time for others. The important thing is to recognize that it will more than likely be a “roller coaster” journey at times—with highs and lows and steps both forward and backward. Commit to walking the journey out with your spouse and the Lord, and one day, you may realize that the obsessive thoughts, intense grief, and anger over the affair have become more distant.

From where you’re standing now as a couple, the road ahead might look impossibly long. You certainly have your work cut out for you as you seek to rebuild the foundations of your marriage. But through prayer, commitment, and the support of trusted friends and counselors, we hope you can see a glimmer of light in the darkness. Eventually, you may discover that as a result of this devastating pain, a stronger and more intimate marriage was built—one that you both can be deeply proud of and happier with on the other side.

<https://www.truthaboutdeception.com/cheating-and-infidelity/stats-about-infidelity.html>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emotional_affair

<https://www.verywellmind.com/marriage-affair-2303083>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/22/well/marriage-cheating-infidelity.html>

Dr. Shirley Glass, *Not Just Friends*

The late Peggy Vaughan, a pioneer in the research surrounding affairs, documented some staggering numbers in “Help for Therapists (and their clients) in Dealing with Affairs” (research).

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