

Learning to Love Again After an Affair Terry Gaspard, MSW, LICSW

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LEARNING TO LOVE AGAIN AFTER AN AFFAIR

Is it possible to rebuild trust after your partner has been unfaithful? The loss of the relationship you envisioned can cause intense rage, jealousy, and sadness, and also raises many questions. Should you stay? Will things ever be the same? One thing is certain: learning to love again is a slow process.

Although regaining trust offers extreme challenges for both partners, there is reason to be hopeful.

Over time, the unfaithful partner must be willing to put the relationship first and demonstrate trustworthiness through their words and actions. In *The Science of Trust*, Dr. John Gottman posits that trust is an action rather than a belief – more about what your partner does than what they say.

Below are three questions to help you decide whether to end your relationship after an affair:

1. Would you want to be committed to your partner if you trusted them again?

In other words, do you have enough admiration and respect left to salvage the relationship? Be honest and ask yourself: Do we still have fun together and enjoy each other's company most of the time?

2. Have you let go of your anger and resentment about your partner's betrayal and are you able to move forward?

Can you imagine ever feeling happy in your relationship or wanting to be close or intimate with your partner in spite of their actions?

3. Can you forgive your partner for their actions?

This does not mean condoning their actions but simply not letting them have power over you. Research suggests that a willingness to forgive can help heal marital problems, both big and small. In fact, marital therapists have found that forgiveness is an essential ingredient of healing from infidelity and contributes to a long-lasting, successful marriage.

If your answer to one or more of these questions is "no" and you think it is time to take the next step, you owe it to yourself to tell your partner you want a divorce. At the end of the day, you are the only person who knows if your marriage can survive infidelity.

If you decide to stay with your partner, be optimistic. Not all relationships can be saved after infidelity, but in *What Makes Love Last?* Dr. Gottman forecasts hope for couples determined to heal and willing to follow certain steps.

Shawn and Vanessa: Learning to Trust Wisely

In his late thirties, Shawn contacted me after undergoing six months of individual and couples therapy with his wife, Vanessa, who betrayed him by having an affair with a co-worker. Even though Vanessa initially denied committing adultery, she finally admitted it when Shawn brought copies of emails with graphic details of her sexual activities with her lover to their therapy sessions.

In *Here's What Pushes Someone to Leave a Cheating Spouse*, therapist Amber Madison says that people tend to categorize cheating in two ways: either as a horrible mistake their partner won't repeat

or as a habit they'll have to put up with if they decide to stay in the relationship. She advises people to determine whether cheating was a mistake or part of a pattern and to assess the quality of the relationship outside of infidelity.

In Shawn's case, he believed that Vanessa's unfaithful and disloyal behavior, while extremely hurtful, did not mean that their eight-year marriage had to end. He still cherished her and was willing to extend trust because he believed she would not make the same mistake again. Most importantly, he let go of his anger and resentment and was ready to forgive her.

What Your Partner Must Do

During couples therapy sessions, Shawn was also able to be vulnerable and tell Vanessa that there were certain things she needed to do in order for him to stay married to her and begin the process of healing.

The following steps summarized from the "Gottman Trust Revival Method" can help you recommit to a healthy, trusting relationship after infidelity. The system is founded in Dr. Gottman's lab results which confirm its effectiveness.

Phase 1: Atone

The cheater must first express remorse. Rebuilding a relationship after infidelity is not possible without this action, according to Dr. Gottman. He writes that, "The wounded partner will feel the stirrings of new faith only after multiple proofs of trustworthiness. Atonement cannot occur if the cheater insists that the victim take partial blame for the affair."

Honesty and Full Disclosure

It is critical that the cheater understands their partner's feelings and accepts responsibility without defensiveness. There can't be anymore secrets and the cheater must confess. While full disclosure is painful, it allows for transparency, verification, and vulnerability.

Couples healing from the pain of infidelity need to gain insight into what went wrong without accusing. While it's true that some partners will feel angry, hurt, and betrayed when they learn their love interest has done something unacceptable to them, honestly confronting issues is the best way to regain trust and intimacy.

In order to do this, the cheater must become more aware of their vulnerabilities and explore their reasons for returning to their partner. For instance, Vanessa realized that she had been unhappy in her marriage with Shawn for some time and wanted a more active sex life without blaming him for being distracted or not initiating sex more often.

There Won't Be a Second Chance

The person who is unfaithful must put an end to the affair and end all contact with his or her lover. This no "second chance" rule may seem harsh but it's a huge disincentive to straying. For instance, Shawn felt strongly that he would not be able to forgive Vanessa if she was unfaithful to him again or had any contact with her former lover. She acquiesced and asked for a transfer to another division of her company.

Phase 2: Attune

The second phase, attunement, is only possible when a couple moves ahead with forgiveness and is ready to rebuild their relationship without blaming the victim of infidelity. During this phase, the couple must make a commitment to learning how to handle conflict so that it doesn't overwhelm them.

In *What Makes Love Last?* Dr. Gottman offers a Blueprint and Aftermath Kit with strategies for conflict management.

Further, a critical aspect of Phase 2 is that the former cheater must now decide to make their relationship a priority. As part of this new commitment to cherish each other, the couple goes public with the state of their relationship and alerts the people closest to them (such as children and in-laws) that they are recommitted and are working toward rebuilding trust. This helps establish this new relationship as “real” and garners support.

Phase 3: Attach

Simply put, the final phase of this model is about being willing to reconnect with your partner by risking physical intimacy. If a couple is determined to stay together, the ability to attune must reach the bedroom as well. Dr. Gottman explains that, “Without the presence of sexual intimacy that is pleasurable to both, the relationship can’t begin again.”

Sexual intimacy is founded on emotional connection, which serves as a barrier against future distractions. The key to maintaining a pleasurable and meaningful sex life is intimate conversation.

Recovering from an affair is complex and almost always requires an experienced therapist. Being able to express hurt feelings in a safe environment can facilitate healing. [Click here to find a specialist trained in the Gottman Method near you.](#)