14 Steps for the Betrayed Spouse

Quick Guide from AffairHealing.com

**Step 1** Consider your options, then schedule your decision.

Regarding your marriage, you have 3 options: (1) leave now, (2) give it some time, or (3) stay no matter what. Most betrayed spouses I talk to never expected this to happen to them or, if it ever did, never believed they would consider staying. They are surprised by their own indecision.

To even consider remaining with a cheating spouse may seem like weakness, but it’s not. Whether you stay or go, your decision can be motivated by a confident strength, not fear. In the middle of the emotional upheaval you’re experiencing right now, however, it’s difficult to have a clear, healthy perspective.

Put off permanent choices for a while. Attend to the more immediate choices (setting boundaries, getting help) and wait before you make long-lasting ones. 

Use manual Worksheet 1: Staying, Leaving, or Waiting?

**Step 2** Make careful choices regarding the affair partner.

You are going to have to make some decisions regarding your spouse’s affair partner. (And, yes, you should insist on knowing who it was/is.) There are some exceptions to each of the following principles, but they are rare. Here is my general advice:

**Should you contact the affair partner (AP)?** Never for retribution. Sometimes for information, if you suspect your spouse is lying or that the AP may not know about your marriage. Usually not after your spouse has confessed and disconnected. If in doubt, don’t.

**Should your spouse contact the AP?** If there has been no closure to the affair, you may want to give opportunity for this to happen, but in a way that allows you to feel safe. Move to quick closure and then NO CONTACT from that point on.

**Should you tell the AP’s spouse/partner?** Maybe, but think about it for a while. This act will change someone else’s life, so don’t make it out of your need for justice. Ask yourself: If I was in their situation, would I want someone to tell me? 

Use manual Worksheet 2: Consider Your AP Choices.
STEP 3 Release your grip on a wayward spouse.

When we think we’re losing something valuable, our instinct is to grab hold of it and maintain a tight grip. While that may work to keep objects from slipping away, it usually produces an opposite effect in relationships.

People resist control. We recognize this in dating (the person who “needs” a relationship can seldom keep one) but fail to acknowledge it when the stakes are higher. The principle doesn’t change, however, just because a vow was once uttered.

If your unfaithful spouse is not expressing sincere commitment to you and your marriage, if they are still in contact with the affair partner, if they are confused by what they want, if they say they love you but are not “in love” with you anymore... you need to release them. I know this is a scary choice, but if you attempt to keep your spouse by trapping them back into your marriage, you are likely prolonging a season of misery. ■ Use manual Worksheet 3: Recognize Your Limits of Control.

STEP 4 Establish your boundaries.

I am going to give you some strong advice. You can take it or leave it, but I wish I could show you the almost-certain disappointing results when it is ignored.

**Sexual Boundaries:** For some betrayed spouses, the discovery of an affair shuts down any interest in sexual intimacy. For others, the desire for sexual connection becomes nearly irresistible. Unless you are certain that your spouse is no longer sexually involved with the affair partner, you need to create physical distance. *Don’t share your spouse with anyone else.*

**Relationship Boundaries:** You will likely spend some time trying to work through relationship issues with your spouse, but you should eventually stop ALL relationship conversations or connections if he/she fails to express two things: (1) I am single-minded in my choice for you and our marriage; no confusion remains. (2) I will do the work necessary to repair and strengthen our relationship. If your spouse cannot commit to both, then keep your interactions limited to business-of-life issues (care of children, paying bills, home care, etc.). ■ Use manual Worksheet 4: Training Your 2 Guards.

STEP 5 Help your spouse understand your pain.

Your spouse may be so focussed on their own issues that they give little attention to your pain. They will likely struggle with exposure to your hurt because it triggers feelings of shame. They may withdraw or get angry rather than be that vulnerable.

But your spouse needs to have some insight into your pain. It’s important for your healing, but it’s important for theirs as well. At first, you may have little control over the way pain flows out of you (as rage or as brokenness). Eventually, you can be more intentional in inviting him/her to look at your wound. Look for opportunities to write, say, and do those things that will help your partner view your hurt in a different way. ■ Use manual Worksheet 5: Sharing Your Story.
**STEP 6** Decide who else to tell & what to tell them.

The questions of who to talk to about the affair and how much to reveal about it can be complicated to answer. The manual provides more detail input regarding the various issues to consider, but let me simply point out that as you consider your conversations with various people (trusted confidants, family, friends, children, spouse’s coworkers, or the affair partner’s spouse), realize that the current phase of the affair should have some bearing on what you decide. Consider the following affair phases:

- Discovery: first 2 weeks of knowing about the affair.
- Active: the spouse remains involved in the affair relationship.
- Transition: period of change from having contact with the affair partner to ending the affair.
- Termination: the affair ends.

Generally, show more caution in talking about the affair if it is in the Discovery or Termination phase. But if an affair remains active (or the transition is long), you may need to consider more options. There are many issues to consider, but you should not be left to carry a burden of secrecy. **Use manual Worksheet 6: To Tell or Not To Tell.**

**STEP 7** Recognize truth-shifting.

Most betrayed spouses, at the moment of affair discovery, experience a desperate longing for the truth. Sound familiar? In an instant, well-established perspectives of your partner and marriage were called into question. You have been left to wonder what you can believe.

You need to make sense of all this, but the manner in which you seek understanding is important. Your pursuit of the facts should be done in a way that leads toward clarity rather than confusion, conflict, or obsession. **Use manual Worksheet 7: The True Marriage Story.**

**STEP 8** Get to the truth carefully but certainly.

If I could rush into every affair discovery and immediately control one part of it, it would likely be this: make sure necessary questions are asked and answered, while unnecessary questions are ignored. The problem is every question you have seems **important and necessary right now.** But believe me, some answers will end up hurting you more than they help.

Here's what you should know immediately: Who was it? How far did it go? Is it completely over? Has this affair produced anything I will have to deal with in the future (pregnancy, financial obligations, business arrangements, etc.)? What do you want now? Have you been tested for STDs? All those other details (the ones that focus on specific places, times, events, sexual details) should wait and, ideally, be addressed when you have the help of a qualified counselor.

The answers to these detailed questions will give you knowledge you can never unlearn, and none of them are necessary for recovery. **Use manual Worksheet 8: Asking for the Truth, and Worksheet 9: Ongoing Affair Conversations.**
STEP 9

Determine who you will become, with or without your marriage.

Focus on your personal growth. If all your attention and effort is directed toward saving your marriage, then your level of satisfaction is going to be determined by circumstances that you do not ultimately control. It is important for you to know what you want for your marriage, but it is even more important for you to know what kind of person you want to be, whether or not your spouse joins you in a common goal.

Take time to consider who you are becoming, or who you want to become. Choices made out of this motivation, rather than from obligation, shame, or a desire for certain circumstantial outcomes, are more likely to move you toward change that can last for a lifetime. Make use of resources (books, counseling, groups, courses) that help you focus on this. Your strongest decisions regarding your marriage will come out of a clear vision of what a whole and healthy you looks like. ■ Use manual Worksheet 10: Apart or Together?

STEP 10

Move intentionally toward forgiveness, cautiously toward trust.

For your own sake, I hope you’ll eventually forgive your spouse, whether they deserve it or not. Letting go of the past will be better for you, as well as healing for them. Forgiveness is a choice you will make, but it may take you a while to get there. Don’t jump into it before you’re ready to release your grip on the unjust thing that was done to you.

Trust is a different matter. Even if your spouse was 100% committed to truthfulness, it will take time for you to feel settled in your trust. Rebuilding trust requires two things: (1) enough time (2) filled with the right stuff. You need both, so don’t be manipulated by a spouse who expects you to “just get over it” or assumes no responsibility for earning it back. ■ Use manual Worksheet 11: The Other Side of Forgiveness, and Worksheet 12: 14-Days of Trust Building.

STEP 11

Regain control of thoughts and feelings.

Most betrayed partners will experience PTSD-like symptoms during the days or weeks immediately following the trauma of affair discovery: recurring thoughts that cause distress, sleep problems, irritability, feeling threatened, or impairment in personal or social functioning. These are normal responses to a traumatic event and should diminish in intensity and frequency as time passes. For some people, however, these conditions linger, resulting in a sense of being stuck.

There are a number of strategies that can help, but let me suggest one to start with. Even though it feels like you are stuck, understand that you are not trapped in these moments. They are real, but they are temporary. They are clouds, not cages. You can move through them. Eventually, they will thin out and go away for good.

The next time you begin to experience the familiar anxiety, don’t try to suppress it. Meet it head-on but say (out loud, if you want!), “You are not a cage; you are a cloud I will walk through.” For a moment, give attention to whatever is necessary (pain, grief, fear). Write down your thoughts and feelings if you want, but then visualize
yourself moving out of the cloud and refocus your thoughts on what is ahead. ▪ Use manual Worksheet 13: Create a Sleep Story, and Worksheet 14: Making a Flip Journal.

STEP 12 Find the support you need.

If there is ever a time when a couple needs a good counselor, it is after an affair. If you and your spouse are committed to rebuilding the marriage, I encourage you to start couple’s counseling as soon as possible. Individual counseling should be an addition to your joint work.

Make sure you find a counselor who is experienced in the work of affair recovery. There are many good marriage counselors who are honestly uncomfortable focussing on the trauma work required for infidelity issues. These counselors will minimize the trauma and push you toward marriage building too soon. Don’t waste time or money with someone who does not fully understand this problem.

What if your spouse refuses to go to counseling? Give them the responsibility for coming up with a plan for healing your relationship. Participate in their plan wholeheartedly, but be honest if it isn’t doing enough for you or your marriage. ▪ Use manual Worksheet 15: Counseling Prep Worksheet.

STEP 13 Know which direction to move.

Many valuable books and courses have been written to help couples learn the necessary skills of marriage building, but I believe there is a single principle that underlies them all. In any encounter, healthy relationship is experienced when each partner moves toward the other with love and truth.

When you feel disappointed, hurt, and defensive, you probably to move in other directions. If you’re like most people, you either move away (physically leave or emotionally shut down) or against (anger, criticism, demands, abuse, etc.). Relationships begin to change when each partner turns their focus away from the faults of their partner and give attention instead to the ways they fail to move toward each other. Change starts with you. ▪ Use manual Worksheet 16: Move-Toward Journal.

STEP 14 Commit to conversations that connect.

Communication is a primary means by which partners “move toward” one another in a marriage or relationship. I suggest three actions to help assure a satisfying conclusion to conversations.

● Action 1: Seek connection more than being right. Before you engage in a conversation, be honest about your end goal. Is it primarily to convince your spouse? To get your way? Or is it more important for you to be connected even if you cannot come to a mutual agreement right now?

● Action 2: Start the conversation in a way that is inviting rather than confrontational. If your first words or actions are ones that evoke defensiveness, you’re probably better of backing off and trying again later.

● Action 3: Focus on being curious about your partner’s point of view (even if you disagree) rather than convincing them that you are right.

You’ll fail at this. You’ll disappoint each other. Every couple does. But when that happens you can go back, admit your part, make the corrections, and affirm that healthy connection is more valuable than getting your way. ▪ Use manual Worksheet 17: Disagree & Connect, and Worksheet 18: The Triple-A Conversation.