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## MOST COMMON MISTAKES OF THE UNFAITHFUL SPOUSE

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BY RICK REYNOLDS

After the revelation of an affair or other sexually inappropriate behavior, it is easy for the unfaithful spouse to make a series of mistakes. Listed below are some of the most common ones we see in our practice.

We hope that this information will help guide your actions. Navigating your relationship in the wake of infidelity, whether your spouse already knows or not, is difficult. But you're not the first to be in this situation. We've seen these actions in couples time and again. If you can avoid them, your road to recovery may be smoother, but if you've already committed them, it doesn't mean you should give up hope. Do what you can do to avoid these actions in the future.

## The 20 Most Common Mistakes

### **1. Believing that if you and your affair partner decide to do the right thing and return to your marriages then the affair is indeed over.**

In reality, this relationship probably meant more to one party than the other. For that reason, just because you decide to end the affair doesn't mean the other party will honor your decision, or even that you will. The "Break-up, Make-up" cycle is a natural part of an affair. But you cannot begin to heal your marriage until you take a stand and absolutely refuse contact. However, don't be naïve; the next attempt or temptation to contact is bound to come. Denial of an

impending reality will only leave you vulnerable to relapse. So, prepare yourself for having to firmly and definitively refuse contact.

## **2. Leaking out information over time.**

The revelation of an affair or sexual addiction is a frightening process, but one of the worst mistakes is trying to hold back the whole truth. Similarly, spinning the truth so your mate won't be so upset is just as damaging.

The problem with leaking information is that it delays your mate's ability to learn to trust you again. If your mate believes that you've laid out the whole truth and nothing but the truth, that there are no more surprises or painful revelations yet to come and then your mate encounters multiple "oh by the ways" or other discoveries as time goes on, then it will eventually destroy your mate's ability to believe a single word you say.

For that reason, it is best to lay it all out on the front end. It is not a good idea to try to control your mate by the flow of information. Either your mate will be able to handle the truth or not. Getting the truth out, all of it and unvarnished, to your mate is a great opportunity to display real integrity. Something you may feel you've been lacking if you've had to hide your actions or lie. Don't miss your chance. Tell the whole truth as soon as you can.

## **3. Being defensive.**

The antidote to defensiveness is taking personal responsibility. Defensiveness is the number one thing to avoid when talking with your hurt spouse. If you become defensive, then your mate will only assume you don't understand and he or she will begin to turn up the volume.

During this period in our lives, one of my wife's favorite questions was, "How loud am I going to have to get before you hear me?" I always knew when I heard that line that it was time to listen. It is extremely painful for the unfaithful spouse to examine what has happened, but minimizing, blaming one's mate, or even blaming another party, is not a solution.

Since the revelation of a betrayal is so traumatic, there is no room for defensiveness. You're better off using two phrases: 1) "You're right" (when they are right) and 2) "I deserve that" (when they are wrong). Answering the "why" questions is tricky at best. Any explanation you give will be perceived as an excuse. The best answer for the why questions is to tell your mate you will do everything possible to search for the answer, but admit you don't want to sound

defensive while trying to answer a question you don't necessarily know the answer to. Whatever you do, don't be defensive.

At this point, you might be saying, "I don't want to take all the blame; my wife (or husband) made her (or his) own contributions to what has happened. We had issues in this relationship long before I had an affair." And while that may be true, your first order of business needs to be the *stabilization* of the marriage. Give your mate time to recover, and then begin to address the other issues in the marriage. One of your first steps will be avoiding defensiveness when talking with your mate.

#### **4. Believing everything your mate says.**

When people are emotional and hurt they may say things they don't mean. If your mate says "I want a divorce," don't assume that you are going to be divorced. If your mate resorts to name calling or trying to hurt you by threatening to take your kids, don't overreact. After all is said and done, there will always be a lot more said than done. If your mate asks you to get out, then accommodate, but don't assume it's for the long run. A new day will most likely bring different feelings. If anything, you can be assured that feelings will shift over time.

*Warning:* While you are taking your mate's words with a grain of salt **do not** minimize what your mate is telling you. Listen, and let your mate know you heard what was said. Just don't structure the remainder of your life on what a hurt spouse says, especially in the first three months after the revelation of the affair. Balance your thoughts about your mate's word between sincerely hearing and understanding that every word may not stick.

#### **5. Living life as normal.**

You can't go on living life as normal if you want to bring healing to your marriage after a betrayal. Normal is what got you into this. Changes need to be made to give your mate assurance that you're taking responsibility for your problem and being proactive to prevent it from happening again.

We have had clients who continue to go to the bar or stay out late without informing their spouses where they are or who they are with. To some, it may seem elementary to make sure and build safety in a concrete way, but it cannot be stressed enough. Taking responsibility for your betrayal by avoiding high risk situations and getting the necessary help to get your life (as well as that of your mate) back into safety is part of taking responsibility for your infidelity. If you

want to rebuild your marriage, this is not optional. Make them aware of the ways that you have altered your life in order to create a culture of safety. These are the things that will assure her that it's not "life as normal."

**6. Trying to defend your affair partner.**

It may seem to go without saying, but don't defend the other woman (or man). Most likely your mate will trash the affair partner (or if you've been using porn she may just try to trash you). Don't try to defend your affair partner. It's easier for your spouse to be angry with the affair partner than it is for her (or him) to be angry with you, and if you defend the affair partner, your mate is likely to feel that you are more loyal to the affair partner than you are to your mate and your marriage.

**7. Trying to avoid talking with your wife about her feelings.**

The way women deal with trauma is by talking about their feelings. In fact, they may need to restate the same thing, or ask the same question multiple times. Men tend to feel that our wives are bringing it up just to make us feel bad. That's not the case; it's just how women heal. Answer your wife's questions, 20 times if need be. In the long run, she will appreciate your openness and you will have helped her heal.

**8. Pointing out your mate's faults and failures.**

Deficiencies certainly exist in every marriage, but now is not the time to deal with them. First, you have to re-establish the fidelity and stability of the relationship. Then, after the breach in the relationship is repaired, you can address other issues.

**9. Taking your spouse to the same places you frequented with your affair partner.**

One of the most difficult battles the hurt spouse fights is the one of reminders. On any given day your spouse might have as many as 50 to 60 reminders. Each time, your spouse has to calm themselves down and get back in control of the emotions. Taking your mate to a place where your mate knows you were with your affair partner will cause your mate serious pain. For your spouse's sake, be sensitive to places that will serve as a reminder and bring pain.

**10. Telling a lie (of any sort).**

Giving your mate good reason to feel safe is one of your goals. Telling a lie only reinforces the belief that your mate cannot trust you. As difficult as it may seem,

tell the truth. In the long run, your mate will at least know that you're being real with them even if your mate doesn't like what you're telling them.

### **11. Not supporting your mate's recovery.**

The pain of the revelation of a betrayal is disorienting to both partners. Both the husband and wife will struggle with how to cope with the pain resulting from the event. Sometimes it can be frustrating since frequently the hurt spouse takes longer to move past the initial trauma than the unfaithful spouse.

In these situations, the hurt spouse wants to continue to understand what has happened and wants to continue to talk about it; the unfaithful spouse will often interpret that as an attempt at punishment. This may cause the unfaithful spouse to quit trying to support the other's recovery. At some point, it may be very tempting to tell your mate to "just get over it."

In fact, it may seem like a good idea in terms so that you can move on, but if the initial period of recovery doesn't run its course, it can result in future problems. If your mate represses her/his feelings and doesn't finish processing what has happened, then the feelings will begin to surface again in about 5 years.

In reality, you are far better off to support your mate's recovery at the time of the betrayal rather than living five years with a mate who is hurting and who will eventually blow up.

### **12. Not being consistent in your recovery plan.**

After a betrayal, there is an obvious problem with trust. To re-establish trust, an unfaithful spouse has to be consistent in what he or she says and does. It may seem easy for you to think an inconsistency is no big deal because you know your heart's condition and your intent, but your mate does not.

The only thing a hurt spouse can rebuild on are your behaviors. If you are consistent and do what you say, then over time your mate can begin to trust again. But if you fail to follow through with what you say, it will only serve to reinforce your mate's distrust. It is imperative that you say what you mean and mean what you say. Don't make the mistake of telling your mate what you think she/he wants to hear only to fail to follow through. You will be far better off if you're realistic, and then do what you say even if what you say (and then do) is not as grand as you or your mate had hoped.

### **13. Not keeping agreements you make with your mate.**

This is much the same as the above item. If you tell your mate you will not eat lunch with another woman, then don't go out to eat with another woman (or man if that's where your temptations lie). If you tell your spouse that you'll go to counseling together, then go to counseling together. If you agree to be home at 6:00, then make sure you're home by 6:00. If you agree to go to an accountability group, then go to the group. Failure to keep these types of agreements will cast doubt on your integrity and make it difficult for your mate to trust.

#### **14. Telling your mate to forgive you.**

As a general rule, never tell someone to forgive you. You can ask, but don't tell. Forgiveness is a process your mate will have to work through. In many ways, it has little to do with you; it's a gift your mate has to give herself/himself. Failure to forgive would result in your mate remaining a victim. It's far better to tell your mate that you want her/him to be able to forgive you and ask if there is anything you can do to help your mate heal and forgive.

Also, don't beat your mate over the head with the Bible, telling your mate that now that you've asked forgiveness, forgiveness must be granted. If you tell your mate to forgive, it will only lead to resentment and make it more difficult to forgive you. Be a part of the solution, not a part of the problem.

#### **15. Not answering all of your mate's questions.**

This is a tricky one. How much information a person needs to heal is best determined by personality type. Some individuals need little information before they come to the point where they have enough to understand what has happened and can move on. Others need massive amounts of data before they feel they understand what has happened. For these individuals, what they don't know truly does hurt them. Usually, what they can imagine is far worse than the reality.

One of the greatest gifts you can give is the gift of answered questions. Tell your mate you'll answer all of the questions, but if you feel your mate is asking questions out of anger and in an attempt to hurt you, then call a time out. Use the 24-hour rule. Tell your mate that you'll give whatever information is needed, but you'd first like for your mate to take 24 hours and pray about whether she/he really wants that information. Then at the end of 24 hours, if your mate still wants the answer then give it, truthfully and completely with no spinning. Giving your mate the information she or he feels is needed is important because your mate must rewrite the history of your relationship. Moving on will be



difficult if not impossible until this task is complete. Don't withhold the information that your spouse will need to move on.

**16. Not talking to your mate.**

There is more than one way to hurt your mate and being passive aggressive is certainly one of them. It's not uncommon for the unfaithful spouse to be angry about what has happened and how the hurt spouse has responded as a result of the pain. Since it may feel inappropriate for the unfaithful spouse to be upset, and clearly they have no right to be verbally aggressive, some unfaithful spouses choose to hurt their mate by not talking. Both aggression and passive aggression are intended to hurt your mate. Both reveal an absence of love. Give your mate the gift of speech in order to help your mate to heal.

**17. Trying to get all of your mate's friends and family on your side.**

You might be hoping they will help your mate to "wake up and see reality." Some of your friends may come on board. But that does not mean that your mate will listen. Other friends may believe your spouse is correct in leaving someone so controlling if you try this approach.

**18. Believing there is a simple formula or a set course to fix the problem.**

It would be nice if there were, but each type of affair has its own set of challenges with a different set of solutions that are not linear or stepwise, and are unique to each situation and couple.

**19. Threatening your mate.**

In the moment, it may seem that your threats will make your spouse "see the light" and that will convince her/him to "fly right." But it's important to avoid making threats because it generates the false motivations for complying with your wishes.

Threats result in fear, guilt, and shame. While these motivators may serve in the short term to get your mate to follow your desired course of action, they will only be effective as long as these feelings continue to produce pain. Once the fear, guilt and shame wear off, then your mate will lose motivation.

You are far better off being supportive and telling your mate "I hope you choose to stay with me, but I want you to do what God is telling you to do." Coercion from a mate can actually keep the hurt spouse from hearing God.

**20. Using your children or grandchildren as pawns.**

Frequently, this happens in an attempt to manipulate one's mate into staying. But this will only hurt your children. If your mate is determined to leave, *forcing* or manipulating your mate into staying is neither good nor healthy for your relationship.

### **Conclusion**

Having read about these common mistakes, don't feel doomed if you've already committed half or even all of them. That's the point – these are common mistakes. But if you can avoid them in the future, you'll begin to stabilize your relationship and find that you can move forward. Don't give up hope at healing your relationship. There is nothing the nearness of God cannot heal. To begin the healing process, a great next step is joining **911 Marriage**.

**911 Marriage** is 12-week online course designed to help you and your spouse heal from the wounds caused by infidelity. 911 Marriage is unique in that I designed it (yes, I survived infidelity too) and it anonymously joins you with other couples in a small group through a weekly conference call. To my knowledge it's the best resource available for those who want freedom and hope. We encourage you to take action- begin the healing process today.

### **Next Step**

To begin to learn how to forgive and start the healing process, go to [www.AffairRecovery.com/911-marriage](http://www.AffairRecovery.com/911-marriage).

**Rick Reynolds, LCSW**, is a marriage and family therapist who specializes in the treatment of affairs. His interest in affairs came as the result of his betrayal of his wife over twenty years ago. Since that time, he has worked with over a thousand couples who have successfully kept their marriages intact after the devastating impact of betrayal. He wholeheartedly believes that saving marriages after betrayal is absolutely possible and works toward that end with the vast majority of the couples that he sees. In Rick's own words "I've now been married almost 30 years and am grateful I made the decision to stop my affair and thankful that my wife made the decision to stay with me." Believing that the majority of growth comes from failure and hardship, this book is a result of both his own and his clients' experiences. His great desire is that his experiences will provide hope for your recovery.