

A Blueprint to Recover from an Affair Covenant Counseling

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Affair recovery is difficult but not impossible. If a couple can commit to the process of healing before making a decision to divorce, there is hope for marriage recovery.

Factors for Success: Couples in conflict from an affair often want to know their chances for recovery. The following observed indicators predict success:

1. ***A Spirit of Contrition:*** The unfaithful spouse's engagement in self introspection that leads to contrition and brokenness is substantially important for recovery.¹ This disposition is necessary for a commitment to growth, change and sensitivity to the hurting spouse. It is a spirit of honesty that gives hope to the hurting spouse and a willingness to consider rebuilding. If the offended spouse feels the partner's grief and contrition, he/she has hope for genuine change. If the offender's behavior changes, it becomes a catalyst to healing and trust building.
2. ***A Spirit of Meekness:*** I have observed that the fastest recovery from an affair happens with couples who have a combination of a spirit of contrition on the part of the offender and a spirit of meekness on the part of the offended. Meekness is an attitude of kindness and gentleness toward someone who has been unjust. It is being patient without anger. It is a spirit of deference which is a person's submissive choice to yield personal rights and interests for the sake of the need of another. It is the opposite of self-interest and self-assertive demand.²
3. ***A Philosophy/Theology of Forgiveness:*** The belief that forgiveness is to be practiced contributes to recovery. The more a person has experienced forgiveness and has forgiven others, makes forgiving more probably and true to heart. In addition, great success is found with those who have faith that God has forgiven them.³ Healing and trust building cannot progress when resentment stands in the way. Forgiveness resolves resentment.
4. ***A Mature Sense of Value:*** A sense of value is like an emotional tank. If the tank is full, you feel a sense of self-respect, purpose, meaning and significance giving you vitality for life. If the tank empties, you begin to slide into a depressive state and you lose the emotional energy you need to fight for your marriage. Therefore, you need healthy sources of affirmation to fill the tank and establish acceptance of your imperfect self. If you gained much of this affirmation from your spouse, you have lost your source and the emotional tank drains. If you have other sources creating emotional energy, such as by surrounding yourself with family and friends that love you, the loss is minimized and you have the strength to keep investing in your marriage recovery and rebound from the devastating affair. Your value or inner self definition must be established beyond the opinion or behavior of your spouse.
 - a. An offended spouse's loss of confidence in his/her value is evident in such questions as, "What is wrong with me?" "Why did you do this to me?"

¹ Psalm 34:18; 51:17

² How does a person develop a spirit of meekness? It is through humility, a mindset that I am no better than others (Galatians 6:1-2, Phil. 2:3). It is through giving up the right to be treated right so I have no expectations that would otherwise create resentment when others fail to meet my expectations (Eph. 4:2-3). More importantly, the Scripture teaches that meekness is a quality which God produces in the life of the believer. It is a virtue of God's Spirit, demonstrated in the life of Jesus Christ (Phil. 2:5-8), and a fruit of the Holy Spirit that believers receive by trusting God for eternal life (Galatians 6:22-26).

³ Mark 11:25, Luke 17:3, Col. 3:13, Eph. 4:32, 2 Cor. 2:5-11

- b. The Scripture points to “love” as an empowering and enduring means to sustain a strong sense of value. This includes knowing you are loved by God and loved by special people in your life. Personal value is also derived through your expressed love and actions toward God and others.⁴ (See footnote on hierarchical self-esteem sources.⁵)
 - c. For an offended spouse, a boundary statement to bolster and protect one’s self-esteem is, “*I respect myself apart from my partner’s disloyalty.*” For a person of Spiritual faith, a good boundary statement is, “*I respect myself and believe in God’s purpose for me apart from my partner’s disloyalty.*”
5. **A Decision to be Intentional:** Couples who determine to do all the necessary work for recovery are more successful. In contrast, if one partner refuses to do the extra work to learn and practice new skills, nothing changes. The lack of commitment discourages the effort.
 6. **Marriage Satisfaction:** The couple’s history of marriage satisfaction gives hope for recovery and the reason to fight for recovery. The guilt and pain of unfaithfulness causes a loop of negative thoughts overshadowing the recall of positive experiences. It is therefore helpful for the couple to take time to look back and remember good days of the marriage.

Phases to Affair Recovery:

1. Trauma Recovery Phase:

- a. **The Goal:** To stabilize further emotional volatility from the crisis.
- b. **Reaction Management:**
 - i. For the offender, if the spouse says, “I want a divorce,” it often means “I’m hurting” rather than “I’m filing for divorce.”
 - ii. The couple will benefit from journaling their feelings. The offended spouse can write down the questions he/she would like answered from the offender. (See footnote for the type of questions that are helpful toward recovery.)⁶ Ask your partner to write out the answers and share them with you. The written answers help the hurting spouse begin to settle the relational reality between them and establish a bottom line of trust to build from. This also can help the offended spouse out of the obsessive trap where he/she finds oneself asking the same question over and over. The reason for this is because trust is destroyed, no answer satisfies and the same question is asked over and over hoping that eventually he/she will be convinced of the truth. This must be avoided. It discourages the offender’s effort to continue to be transparent and vulnerable.

⁴ Many virtues of character are included in meaningful love, such as being responsible for the care of your neighbor and being obedient to God. Therefore your character and potential maturity of character is foundational to your sense of value. You have value in what you are becoming. (See I Corinthians 13:1-13, John 15:12-17 and Luke 10:25-37)

⁵ If you derive your self-esteem based on the self judgment of your behavior, seeing yourself as either good or successful versus bad or a failure, your sense of value fluctuates. This also happens if you base your self-esteem on how you perceive others as seeing you as good or bad, successful or a failure. If you view yourself as loved and as an investment of God, and you diligently pursue what you are capable of becoming, your self-esteem will be strong and enduring. A hierarchy of healthy self-esteem sources ranked from poor to better is as follows: 1. the self evaluation of one’s behavior and accomplishment, 2. the perceived evaluation of oneself by others and how well we please them, 3. one’s character, 4. pursuing one’s potential or God’s purpose, 5. loving and being loved and 6. by understanding who I am in Christ, an investment of God.

⁶ The following questions are productive examples for recovery: “How do you understand that what you did affected my life?” “What do you feel about what you did?” “Do you want to be with me?” “What have you learned about yourself that will help me know you will be loyal to me?” and “What are you willing to do to help me heal?”

- c. **Enlist Support:** Each partner needs individual support from others to fight loneliness and depression. The mental distress and self reproach make it difficult to give emotional energy to the partner.
- d. **Talk about the Affair:** Listening to each other and affirming understanding is critical. Avoid arguing and defensiveness, it brings communication to a halt. A marriage therapist can be most helpful to give guidance in this process.
- i. **Avoid “The Fix it Blunder”:** The offender may find it difficult to listen without trying to shortcut the process and move to fixing the problem. This happens because the discussion brings the pain of guilt and shame to consciousness; accordingly, the offender wants to fix it and move on. However, the “fix it Blunder” communicates a lack of concern to the offended spouse’s pain.” Two boundary statements that can help keep the offender from this trap are, “*I will listen and allow my spouse to stay in the pain*” and “*I will not be responsible to heal the pain; however, I will be responsible to love by listening and acknowledging the pain with understanding.*”
 - ii. **Avoid “The Safeguarding Blunder”:** Safeguarding is an attempt to hold back certain information to protect the spouse from further hurt when he/she has questions. It is often interpreted as lying, hedging or hiding the truth.
- e. **Anger Management:**
- i. *To decide what is best to say, learn how to manage reaction and use wisdom to respond.*⁷ Reacting is automatic and subconscious. Responding takes time to think. Anger is reactive, causing out of control communication and further damage to the relationship.
 - ii. *For the offended spouse, write out instead of act out.* The betrayal one feels is soothed by anger. Anger numbs pain, yet; the goal is to heal your hurt. Therefore, you must manage the anger enough to communicate the hurt, not cover it up with the anger. Writing your feelings gives you time to pause, contemplate and decide how to respond in a constructive way, expressing hurt rather than anger.
 - iii. *Respond to your spouse’s anger with compassion.* When a partner is angry, the anger is a secondary response triggered by such feelings as hurt, fear, helplessness, frustration, embarrassment, pain, betrayal and shame. When your partner expresses anger at you out of his/her pain, your natural reaction is hurt, rejection or pain causing an angry response. You can turn your anger into compassion by using a “counter statement” that directs you to discern and respond to the hurt behind the anger rather than react to the anger. The following is a counter statement you can memorize: “*I feel anger coming at me. I’m OK, it is not about me. This is God’s or my reminder that there is a hurt or feeling behind the anger I need to understand in order to respond with love, care and grace.*”⁸
- f. **Regret Management:** Regret is a feeling and a pattern of thinking that causes mental distress and self reproach. It is a cause of depression.
- i. The goal for the offender is to find new hope and emotional energy by converting non-productive regret into productive regret. This is about changing one’s behavior and learning wisdom for the future. It is self forgiving; owning up and moving on.
 - ii. *Counter Statement:* A counter statement is memorized to trigger a healthy thought when you are aware of an unhealthy feeling. For example, the following is a counter statement

⁷ See Proverbs 15:1, 2; Galatians 6:1; See I Peter 3:1-5 to understand God’s principle to bring healing to a marriage when one spouse is disobedient.

⁸ See Ephesians 4:29

for regret: *“I feel regret. That’s God’s reminder I’ve owned up and moved on. The wisdom I’ve gained from my failure is presently being used by God to move me toward success and blessing. He is resurrecting good things from my past regret.”*

- iii. *Boundary Statement:* A boundary statement is a present tense command statement that protects and redirects negative feeling. A boundary statement starts with either “I will” or “I will not.” For example, *“I will not allow regret to drag me down or hold me back from the good things God has for me.”* Or, *“I will not allow regret to drag me down or hold me back from feeling good about myself and my future, God has a plan for me.”*

g. Trust Reset:

- i. The offender must be willing to answer the spouse’s questions to help build emotional equilibrium.
- ii. The offender must listen, summarize, affirm and be forthright. Avoid the “Safeguarding Blunder.” Do not try to protect your spouse from information you feel may hurt. The wounded spouse must decide what details they want to know.⁹ Hedging the truth is an enemy to trust building.
- iii. Commit to a recovery process: A written agreement is helpful for a couple to afford them confidence and a safe structure for an attempt toward recovery.
- iv. Commit to Trust Building Components:
 1. *Establish Structure:* The couple agree upon boundaries and rules that protect further erosion and begins rebuilding trust.
 2. *Safety:* The couple establishes communication rules that promote a safe interaction. An example would be, “I am committed to allow you the freedom to share your feelings without retaliation, evaluation, judgment, and minimization or with a reaction of defensiveness, meanness, stonewalling or withdrawing.¹⁰
 3. *Speech:* When we feel our right to be treated respectfully is violated, we tend to get hostile and harsh with our words.¹¹ One way to avoid this is by each partner making a commitment to themselves to suspend the right to be treated well. This action is based on the reality you can’t control how others treat you. When this is done, it is easier to show meekness in place of harshness. A meek disposition is one of kindness, gentleness and humility showing patience and longsuffering love from the heart.¹² The goal is for our words to encourage, avoiding discouragement.¹³ Couples need to be wise in attitude and skilled in speech to grow close to each other.¹⁴ A therapist can help couples learn new skills that advance positive conversation.
 4. *Trust is a journey, not a destination.* It is important that trust is understood as dynamic, not static. Trust fluctuates between couples with changing circumstances. When the trust level increases, safety and vulnerability increases.

2. Repairing Phase:

⁹ The wounded spouse needs to pray and contemplate about how much detail about the affair he/she should pursue. Too much detail can be visually haunting and delay recovery.

¹⁰ See James 1:19-20, 3:5-8; Ephesians 4:29-32

¹¹ See Proverbs 15:1

¹² Jesus Christ had this meekness as He gave up the right to be treated as God and became a man to die for man’s sin as if He was a sinner, rather than who He actually was, a righteous holy God (See Philippians 2:3-8). The sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit makes it more possible to have a heart of meekness (Ephesians 4:22-24, Galatians 5:16-26, James 4:1-6).

¹³ See Proverbs 15:4, Ephesians 4:29

¹⁴ See James 1:19-20

- a. **Motivation:** Write out your reasons to pursue the recovery of the marriage. Ask yourself, “Why do I want to stay in this marriage?”
 - b. **Assessment:** Ask questions such as, “What dynamics of our marriage led to this affair? What role did I play in this? How has my past and family background contributed to this behavior? What needs to change in this marriage?”
 - c. **Forgiveness Procedure:**
 - i. List your offenses you have committed toward your partner.
 - ii. Ask for forgiveness for each offense: “I was wrong when I _____. I know this must have made you feel _____. I don’t deserve your forgiveness but will you forgive me?”
 - iii. The goal is to give the offended spouse freedom to be honest with the answer. The response doesn’t need to be a yes, it can be a no. If it is a no, thank your partner for the honesty. The yes or no response allows the offender to feel a termination of guilt that drains emotional energy.
 - iv. In addition, the offended partner’s communication emphasis changes from “I’m trying to get you to understand why I hurt,” to “This is what I need from you.”
 - v. Recognize that there is a difference between apologizing, “I’m sorry,” and that of asking for forgiveness. An apology is an ambiguous statement leaving the offended spouse unsure if you really understand how deeply he/she was hurt. Asking for forgiveness is a question, leaving no doubt of understanding and your purpose to take responsibility for the offense.
 - d. **Practice Trust Building Behavior:**
 - i. Keep your word.
 - ii. Keep your spouse informed. Avoid catching your spouse off guard with an unexpected surprise.
 - iii. Keep no secrets and avoid guardedness.
 - iv. Spend time together.
 - v. Learn how to emotionally connect by using feeling words: “I heard you say you’re feeling...”
 - vi. Practice being attentive.
3. **Reconnecting Phase:** This phase is the rebuilding phase. The following are ways to rebuild oneness:
- a. **Enjoy Life Together:** Take time to have fun and enjoy life together.
 - b. **Enjoy each Other:** Learn skills to communicate and connect. Become one in mind and heart with one another’s needs and desires, being best friends.
 - c. **Learn to Love:** It takes dedication and commitment to care for each other. Guard the atmosphere of your home to be a “haven of rest,” a loving place so each of you can unwind and recharge from the battles of life. Learn to be there for each other.
 - d. **Grow Spiritually Together:** Make Jesus Christ the foundation of your marriage, drawing on His Spirit to love each other in a greater way as you also serve God together.
 - e. **Plan a Survival and Dream Plan:** A married couple has more relaxed freedom to enjoy each other when there is a plan to meet needs, improve security and fulfill dreams.
 - f. **Revitalize Sexual Desire:** Couples may need to revitalize sexual desire for each other. They also may need to retrain their sexual response to each other by emotional connection rather than by visual seduction. Love makes eroticism a sexual expression of love. Seduction by itself can be impersonal and thus “turn off” an offended spouse who is trying to feel safe again with sex. A way to do this is by starting out enjoying the comfort of touch as a primary goal with no intercourse for a period of days until enjoying each other’s body’s resonates with feelings of love for each other.

4. Celebration Phase:

a. Celebrate Growth:

- i. Share things you have learned about yourself and your spouse.
 - ii. Share with your spouse your new attitude, commitments and behavioral changes you have made concerning yourself, toward your spouse, lifestyle and marriage.
- b. **Re-commit by Renewing Vows:** Betrayal creates insecurity of trust so emotionally deep, the offended spouse may feel it for years. When a couple renews their vows, inner feelings gain strength by corresponding physical expressed behavior. The written and verbalized commitment gives potency to trust and security.
- c. **Grow in Wisdom:** Continue to seek wisdom, invest in understanding and put into practice the principles of life you've learned for success. Spending too much time with amusement or lustful endeavors robs you of opportunities for growth in your marriage. Wisdom is the "path of life" for marriage success resulting in joy and partner celebration.¹⁵

¹⁵ See warning in Proverbs 5:1-6