

Saving Marriage After an Affair Part 1

Both husbands and wives have affairs. When I first started doing marriage counseling, the majority of cheating spouses were men. Now, this is not the case. Although I still believe more men cheat than women, the gap is closing.

There are lots of reasons why people say they have affairs: ‘Midlife crisis, afraid of growing older, my spouse would never have sex with me, I couldn’t help myself, I was seduced, it just happened, he (she) would listen, really listen to me, I had to know for sure if I was with the right person, it didn’t mean anything, it was just sex’.

The truth is, none of these reasons are valid. They are excuses. The real reason married men and women have affairs is not because of the feelings for their lovers but because of the lack of regard for their marriage. The real reason people have affairs would sound like this: “Because I chose to ignore your feelings and block them out entirely from my mind...this enabled me to do whatever I wished without being burdened by guilt.”

Just once, I would love to hear a husband or wife actually say that in a marriage counseling session. But in over twenty-five years, I haven’t heard it yet. Instead, I hear the litany of excuses and rationalizations.

I can understand being profoundly unhappy in a marriage. I believe that some people really are better off divorced. If a person is truly unhappy in their marriage, they have a responsibility to deal with the marriage first, before going on to another person. You have to finish up one relationship before you can realistically enter another. Affairs are a person’s way of avoiding the problems in their marriage.

Individuals who are happily married do not have affairs. They are tempted, they wonder, but their regard for their mate always stops them from instilling such hurt and betrayal. When people tell me they truly love their mate and their affair has nothing to do with a lack of affection for their spouse, I don’t believe them. If you love someone you do not betray their trust, turn their world upside down and then say, “Oops, sorry, I guess I goofed.”

But it happens. Affairs happen so often that some experts say it occurs, at least once, in the majority of marriages. So, if a man or woman has an affair and then realizes it was a mistake, is it possible to put Humpty Dumpty back together again? The answer is, it depends. (How’s that for an elusive, therapist type answer?) It depends on whether or not there is genuine remorse, a willingness to abide by specific rules of behavior and an understanding that both the husband and wife must look at the problems in the marriage. Although the decision to have the affair is 100% the responsibility of the cheater, the actual marital problems are always shared by both the husband and wife. Next week I will explain the ground rules that must be adhered to while trying to see if a marriage can be saved after an affair.

Saving Marriage After an Affair Part 2

Healing a marriage after an affair is a dicey proposition. In my experience, about half of the marriages can actually make the repair but it is never, completely, the same. Most married people, at some point in their marriage, tell their mates, “If you ever cheated on me, I would be gone. You wouldn’t get another chance.” They are letting it be known that their self-respect and need for trust in an integral part of who they are. But then the unspeakable happens and it is a whole different ballgame. I do not stand in judgment of individuals who try to heal their marriage after an affair.

Sometimes there are children, often there are children. Kids are a pretty compelling reason for seeing if there is anyway to rebuild the trust and not destroy the foundation of the children’s lives. Sometimes a couple has been together a long, long time. The thought of growing older alone is not very appealing. If the marriage can be salvaged that sounds like a better alternative than being suddenly single in midlife.

I understand the bravado of declaring that, “Anyone who cheats on me shouldn’t let the door hit ‘em in the rear on the way out...” but real life and kids and economics and loneliness all have ways of taking the bluster out of a person. It’s not wrong to want to see if your marriage can be healed after an affair but it does require being in reality. Reality demands acknowledging that you have been hurt, betrayed, deceived and doing everything in your power to not be in that position again.

The first challenge after an affair is to rebuild trust and understand what went wrong with the marriage. This takes time, sometimes a lot of time. To rebuild the foundation of trust there are certain ground rules that, I believe, are essential:

1. No contact at all, for any reason, with the other man or woman. If you need to say, “good bye” it can be done over the phone, in front of your spouse and should take under thirty seconds.
2. The betrayed spouse is allowed to bring up the affair for discussion but it is done in a time limited and productive manner. It doesn’t work to say, “It’s over now let’s never talk about it nor is it healthy to talk and talk and talk and talk.
3. The need for reassurance is acknowledged. It makes sense that a person who has been deceived will feel insecure and suspicious. These feelings must be recognized as normal and respected.
4. Both people must understand that they contribute equally to the marital problems (not the affair, just the distance) and need to enter counseling to understand what they each need to do differently.

There is no guarantee a marriage can be healed after an affair but I can guarantee it won’t have integrity if it is pieced together without discussion.

Saving Marriage After an Affair Part 3

It is normal, after you discover your mate has had an affair, to be overwhelmed with feelings of insecurity, anger and suspicion.

“How will I know, really know, if my partner is still cheating on me?”

The answer is, you won't. Not always, not entirely but you will know eventually if your mate continues to cheat. You may not know the day it happens but you'll know. You'll know because he or she no longer makes the effort to be reassuring, to be accountable. They treat your questions as annoyances and depict you as a paranoid crazy person instead of understanding that after a betrayal there is a healing period that is normal.

There may be temptation to tap the phones, read the mail, hire a detective but no good really comes of these measures. By the time a person is hiring someone to follow their spouse around; the marriage is pretty much over.

“But won't I be just the biggest fool if they keep cheating on me and it takes months to catch on?”

No, that doesn't make you a fool. I realize no one wants to be played for a fool but even if you try to patch up your marriage only to discover your mate never changed their ways, it doesn't make you stupid. All marriages are a risk. All marriages must involve vulnerability if they are to have depth. Without vulnerability there can't be any security or confidence. Believing and wanting to trust your mate after a betrayal is not a crime. It is hurtful, however, to deny or pretend if your mate continues to discount you or lie to you.

I have known men and women who stay with their mates after an affair even though their mates won't give up their girlfriends or boyfriends. These individuals are so worried about losing their marriage that they allow their husbands or wives to continue the affair rather than force an ultimatum. They say things like, “If I force him (or her) to come back, before they are ready, they won't stay anyway”. This is faulty logic; it never works. The message to the straying partner is, “I am not worthy of fidelity so you do what you need to do. When you make up your mind, I'll still be here”. What usually happens is that the straying partner stays undecided and lives a polygamous lifestyle.

It is not an easy path back when trying to rebuild trust and faith but no good comes from efforts that bend one's basic morality. It's the same when, after an affair, the husband or wife who was betrayed tries to 'win' their mate back by being so loving and so affectionate and so generous as to be in genuine. These behaviors are rooted in desperation and never lead to a lasting solution.

Saving Marriage After an Affair Part 4

Entering marriage counseling after an affair is an unnerving experience. You are baring your most intimate and humiliating feelings to a stranger and trusting they will have the insight and wisdom to help you heal, not further your pain. I wish I could tell you that all marriage counselors have the same training; the same values, the same beliefs but that would be a lie. It is important to know that there is nothing mystical or hard to understand about marriage counseling. Assuming the counselor is experienced and credentialed, your common sense should be enough to determine if you are getting competent help.

Some couples wonder if they should go in for counseling together the first time. If both are certain they want to work on the marriage, to see if it can be healed, then the answer is, "Yes!" Absolutely, go in together the first time. If one person thinks the marriage counselor is wonderful and the other person believes they are a quack, it probably won't work. Go in together and then have a long talk afterwards. Discuss if the counselor gave practical suggestions, seemed to listen well and understood the issues.

I will recommend that couples do not come in together if one of them is uncertain that they want to work on the marriage. The ambivalent individual should go in alone so he or she can sift through their mixed feelings. I know it's a scary thought that your mate is talking to a total stranger about whether or not to end the marriage but no experienced counselor is going to tell them what to do. If you want to save your marriage but your mate is uncertain, they probably need to talk about their confusion without having you right there by their side, hanging and reacting to their every word.

Be wary of a marriage counselor who gives you percentages of success. Any counselor who boasts, "I save 80% of the marriages that come into my office." is a liar and a lunatic. Very honestly, most marriages that seek counseling after an affair do not make it. But there are enough that do to give a person hope. It is a long process, a painful process and it is riddled with ups and downs.

I tell couples it can take anywhere from six months to two years to get a marriage back on track after an affair. That means there will be good and bad days. Days when it feels like the whole marriage is hopeless and days where the two of you laugh together, talk about the future and hold one another tight. Healing a marriage after an affair does not mean you feel better and better and better as each day passes. Instead, it means you develop better ways to communicate, respect each others feelings and become more adept at reassuring and listening.

Marriage counseling should not be just putting the cheating spouse on the hot seat and roasting them week after week. Nothing productive comes from losing one's dignity. I cannot state strongly enough that the responsibility for the affair lay solely with the person who cheated but the responsibility for the marriage is shared equally.

Mitchell Rosen, M.A. is a licensed marriage, family and child counselor with practices in Corona and Temecula.