

After An Affair: What To Expect In The Early Phase of Couples Therapy

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Your partner has had an affair. You're devastated and trying to figure out how to move forward, whether to stay or leave, how to breathe again. Perhaps you never saw it coming, or perhaps you have suspected for a long time. You're swinging back and forth from hating your partner to desperately wanting him/her to hold and comfort you. It's a crazy-making spectrum of emotion.

If you've decided to enter therapy with your partner or spouse, what can you realistically expect? Therapists differ in their opinions. Based on my training and experience in working with couples, here's what I believe is necessary in the early phase of therapy after an affair.



REALITY-CHECK #1: In most cases, recovery from an affair, and the breach of trust and safety, takes a long time. The relationship has suffered a significant emotional trauma. It will take commitment and patience – and a certain level of faith in the process.

It is normal for the person who had the affair to want to quickly return to a state of “being okay again.” You will want your partner to see how you're changing, how sorry you are, and how much you regret what has happened. But this process is likely to take *a lot longer* than you want it to. It's exhausting work. Your therapist will help you find a way to shoulder this burden.

REALITY-CHECK #2: The betrayed partner may need to ask the same questions over and over again. You will wonder when it's going to end. Repetition of the questions, and your partner hearing your answers again and again, is often a necessary, and healing, step.

REALITY-CHECK #3: If you had an affair, but want to save the marriage, you will need to relinquish some of the freedom and independence you had before. In the past, it was reasonable for you to expect a level of trust that meant you didn't need to explain your every move, your whereabouts, your emails. But now you will need to consider being completely transparent. Your relationship will benefit from frequent checks-ins, open access to your cell phone, Facebook page, emails, and credit card bills. **Be an open book, so that your partner can learn to trust you again – become your partner's safety net.**

REALITY-CHECK #4: The betrayer is 100% responsible for his/her acts. Yet, at the same time, very few affairs happen in a vacuum. In some way, both partners have created space in the relationship for this

to occur. Both of you will need to explore what was happening, where the partnership was failing, that led to this outcome. Is it realistic to expect that this can be done in the first few weeks of therapy? Absolutely not. At some point, the person who was betrayed will need to examine his/her role. For the partner who had the affair, it will be extremely frustrating not being able to get to this part sooner. You



may want very much to talk about the things that weren't working for you, and what your partner did (or didn't do) that led you astray. But again, patience. **Your partner is trying to decide whether to stay with you or not.** He/she is having to cope with one of the most painful breaches of attachment imaginable. This is not the time to pull out your complaint list!

REALITY-CHECK #5: It's normal to experience highs and lows when working through an affair. You think things are getting better and then "wham!" the pain starts all over again...expect this, shore up your resources to handle the difficult times. Go to the gym, listen to music, get plenty of rest, eat well. Remember, at the end of the roller-coaster ride is often forgiveness and love. And there is so much to learn on the ride itself. So hold tight, and stay present along the journey.

REALITY-CHECK #6: It's not always a great idea to tell friends and family about the affair! Sure, when you're this angry, it may be exactly what you want to do – tell everyone in town what a terrible thing your partner did to you. But think twice: friends and family could fuel your fire and cause you to walk away from your relationship unnecessarily. Also, long after the two of you have worked things out, the affair may be all that your families remember. Imagine the implications of everyone in your life still holding on to this, and holding it against your partner.

REALITY-CHECK #7: You should not feel any judgment coming from your therapist. A good therapist understands the shame and guilt that the betrayer is feeling, the hopelessness that both of you may be experiencing, the desperation of wanting to feel "normal" again. The therapist will do everything possible to ensure that neither partner is further traumatized.

REALITY-CHECK #8: It's going to be hard work. But the relationship is worth fighting for. **If you have a history together, take your time before throwing in the towel.** Many couples have made it through, and come out the other side closer and more connected than ever, even after the most devastating of affairs.

Want more information about recovering from affairs?

Linda Engelman, MFT, has a private practice with offices in Lafayette and San Ramon, California. She works with individuals, couples, and families, using Emotionally Focused Therapy, based in Attachment Theory, to help her clients deepen and enrich their relationships.

Confidential appointments may be made by calling: 925-295-1036.