

# Surviving an affair

Relationship therapist James Earl looks at how to mend a relationship that has been rocked by infidelity.



Affairs are like hand grenades under relationships. When you discover your partner has been unfaithful, the empty-stomach feeling can completely disorientate you. Someone once described it as like being a five-year-old in a supermarket with Mum and Dad: you look up, and – they're gone! You feel an overwhelming sense of panic and disbelief. Safety and security vanish in a dreadful instant. There's a sickening sense the world will never be the same again.

Despite the power of these first reactions, it is vital to know two things. Firstly, infidelity is common. Many experts estimate, shockingly, that one or other, or both, partners cheat at some point in well over half of all long-term relationships. This means the crisis you are experiencing is part-and-parcel of 'normal' relationships – not just so-called 'failed' ones. It also means many of your friends will likely have gone through a similar experience.

Secondly, there is a path you can follow, from infidelity towards healing and recovery, however unlikely it seems in the moment of discovery. While saying 'affairs can make

a relationship stronger' is a silly platitude, there's nonetheless a truth here: after an affair, things will be different. And if we work at it, we can put things on a much more honest and open basis than before.

Before we look at the steps you should take to get through the crisis, it is worth reflecting on why affairs happen.

The person that strays rarely does it just for sex. Nor do they do it in the hope of a new love-relationship. It is usually down to a lost sense of self that can happen even in loving relationships: a sense of self that often another person – even a relative stranger – can accidentally reawaken in you.



## Break up or make up

So, bearing this in mind: when you discover an affair, what should you do? Here are four suggestions.

**1 TALK** to your partner, particularly if you have children. Even if you eventually decide to separate, you will still need a channel of communication. Talk calmly and find out the facts. Ask what you need to know. Tell your partner they should answer you honestly, even where they might think truthfulness would hurt, because knowing the facts will help you process. It also establishes honesty for the future, which is vital if you want to try and stay together.

**2 REMEMBER**, when your partner says 'But I still love you,' that may well be true. The affair wasn't about love, nor primarily about sex, more a romantic connection unweighed down by the weight and routine of the everyday. They broke the agreement between you; and they didn't bear your feelings in mind. But they almost certainly didn't set out to hurt you. They can still love you, despite the betrayal.

**3 DECIDE** that you will use this as a time for renegotiation. What do you want from the relationship? Does it offer a warm, safe companionship? Does the romantic side offer you intimate conversation, playfulness and – at least occasionally – good sex? Are you envious of your partner going off and having fun? Tit-for-tat affairs are quite common: but, more fruitfully, ask yourself what needs to change in your relationship so it's fun for you.

**4 TRUST** that you can rebuild trust. Not blind trust, but a conditional trust based on the knowledge of each other's weakness, and the difficulty of long-term relationships. You can offer active trust. Make it your partner's business whether they want to accept, and stick to, a new contract.

We can get there if we try. Hundreds of thousands of couples have trodden this rocky path before, and have made it. So can you.

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