

# AFFAIR HEALING

## CHAPTER 3

Release Your Grip  
On A Wayward Spouse

A RECOVERY MANUAL  
FOR BETRAYED SPOUSES

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### 3. Release Your Grip On A Wayward Spouse

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Email from a betrayed wife:

*"I was devastated. This was my high school sweetheart who now, out of nowhere, had feelings for someone else? Was it that easy to fall out of our love? I didn't accept this. I immediately went to work. He wanted to be more adventurous, active, try new things, so I immediately lost 18 pounds, began eating right, working out, we were taking trips up north to hike, the list went on and on. I tried to make things great, but he continued to say he needed time to himself."*

Forum post by PainfulGrace:

*"My husband was never single minded in his pursuit of me or our marriage. No matter the extent of control I thought I had, he was always one step ahead of me... one lie, one omission, one more way to get in contact with her. There is nothing a betrayed spouse can do to control or change the wayward spouse. I wish I would have realized this sooner, but as a betrayed spouse you don't see it. All you see is your partner going in a direction completely opposite from you, and you turn to desperation and try to cling to anything that might fix what has happened."*

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Few life experiences are more complicated and confusing than trying to navigate through a marriage when your spouse has veered off course. Despite past promises of lifelong partnership, they seem to be changing their mind. Once you were a team; now they are heading in a new direction, alone or with someone else.

Do you let them go, or stop them from leaving? Do you wait for their return, or chase after them and convince them to come back? If you are asking questions like these, this chapter will provide clear direction for a healthy response that will have maximum impact on your spouse.

#### Reacting To The Wayward Spouse

The retreat of a wayward spouse is often accompanied by one or more of the following statements:

- "I'm confused. I'm not sure what I want."
- "I love you, but I'm not *in love* with you."
- "I don't think I want this marriage anymore."
- "I don't want to give up on our marriage, but I can't turn off my feelings for [the affair partner]."

- “I feel like I’m caught between two choices: one is what I’m supposed to do; the other is what I really want to do. I need to follow my heart.”

If your spouse is saying similar things, you may feel afraid and frantic. You want to do anything to save your marriage, but if you are not careful, your acts of desperation may actually push your spouse farther away. These acts of desperation include any of the following:

- Telling your spouse that nothing they do matters; you will continue to love them no matter what.
- Assuming responsibility for the affair and promising to change.
- Pleading with your spouse to stay.
- Insisting that your spouse continue in counseling even though they have no interest in it and put no effort into the process.
- Blaming your spouse, trying to guilt them into doing what you want.
- Threatening your spouse.

When panic leads you to either appeasement or control, your efforts to manage your spouse are likely to backfire. Those efforts will push your spouse away from you, not toward you. They will have an even greater urge to escape your "neediness" or desperate attempts to force their choices. They may pity you and wish things were different, but will rarely return to loving again under these circumstances. Instead, they will feel trapped and inwardly struggle against any sense of obligation to fix your marriage.

**When panic leads you to either appeasement or control, your efforts to manage your spouse are likely to backfire.**

We easily recognize this problem in dating situations. If one person tries to force another into a relationship by begging or insisting, we know the result will be disappointing. So why assume this dynamic changes after marriage? It doesn't. The only reasonable outcome to expect in this scenario is one of growing disrespect, not affection.

This is what one husband wrote about his wife's response to his affair:

“After [my wife] found out about my affair, I went through months of confusion about my choices. On one hand, I knew I didn't want to lose my family. But on the other hand, I still had strong feelings for [the other woman]... feelings I didn't have for my wife... so it felt like working on my marriage was something I did out of obligation, not out of love. This was obvious to her. She wanted to argue with me

most of the time, as though she could change my mind by being forceful enough, but I hated her when she was attacking. All I could think of was ‘It sure was easier being with [the other woman]!’

“I know that sounds bad. Part of me knew I should be doing more to fix my marriage, but I wasn't in love with her anymore. She was insisting that I love her again but I just wanted to run the other way. Sometimes she would get desperate and start crying, begging me to love her like I used to. I felt bad because I really didn't want to hurt her, but it made me pity her, not want her.”

So what should you do if your wayward spouse remains distant and uncommitted? What actions are most likely to alter your spouse's retreat? Start by refusing to play the role of a desperate spouse any longer. Instead, take control of your part of the relationship.

## Taking Control By Letting Go

Your spouse is not in a healthy place right now. There is a real possibility that they may continue doing things that hurt you. Even so, you have to accept the fact that you cannot control their behavior. Instead, you must start focusing on what you can control: your own choices.

Let me explain the one choice you can make that is most likely to get your spouse's attention; the one thing they don't expect you to do. LET THEM GO.

Tell your spouse you want your marriage, but you cannot work on building a strong relationship until they are committed to doing the same. If you have been trying to control them, admit it. Apologize for attempting to do something that was not your job to do. Let your spouse know that from this point on they are free to make their own choices.

The result will be a radical shift in your relationship. You will feel vulnerable knowing there is a chance your spouse will exercise their freedom by moving farther away from you, but you have to be willing to let that happen. Before you take this step, make sure you are prepared in these two ways:

1. **Be honestly committed to letting your spouse go.** You have to understand that your spouse may actually take you up on the offer and be out of your reach, at least for a while. If you give a "letting go speech" as a manipulative ploy to get them back quickly, they will see right through your insincerity. You must be willing to stop all of your investigative patterns at this point (no more checking up on where they are, checking emails, demanding accountability, etc.). You have to be willing to risk their bad choices for a period of time.

The book *You, Him, and the Other Woman* refers to this as “detaching from the outcome.” The author writes:

“Decades of research that examined why it was that some people coped well during adversity and some didn’t concluded the following: people who cope well generally believe that matters will work out as well as can be expected. In other words, they have hope—not that matters will work out the way they desire, but that matters will work out for the best regardless. Such people are not merely optimistic; they have emotionally detached from needing a specific outcome. They believe that forces are often at work to bring about certain ends—ends that can only be perceived when one is at enough of a distance to gain perspective.”

“Detaching from outcome happens when you realize that you had very little control over your situation to begin with... you move from insisting that you know what’s best to a more humble attitude that says, ‘I must trust when things aren’t going my way that I am still being served in some fashion.’”

**2. Be ready to give this some time**, even if your spouse immediately tells you they don't want you to do it. Most spouses resist this kind of change because they realize they are losing power in the relationship. In an attempt to reset the balance, you may experience one of the following responses:

*Accusing Response: “You’re making things worse! I never said I wanted to lose my marriage, but you’re pushing me away. If things don’t work out, it’s going to be your fault, not mine!”*

Their claim of being pushed away is an attempt to play on your fears, but it is not a true statement. Your marriage is stuck because your spouse, not you, has been indecisive. You don't have to be a slave to their indecision.

You have the right to make healthy choices. Make it very clear that you are not the one who questions what you want; you are not the one who has been uncertain.

*Giving-In Response: “I don’t want to lose you. I’m sorry. Stop doing this and I promise things will be different.”*

**If you give in too quickly, you will likely experience a moment of blissful hope followed by your spouse's swift return to the old pattern of non-commitment.**

Be cautious. If you give in too quickly, you will likely experience a moment of blissful hope followed by your spouse's swift return to the old pattern of non-commitment. If your spouse says they truly are committed to your marriage, let them know you need time to feel confident about their decision. Make sure they back up their commitment with a plan of action (counseling, for example) and stick to it.

*Threatening Response: "You want to play this game? I can play it, too. If you push me away, I'm never coming back again."*

Angry threats are not always as final as they seem to be. Sometimes they are simply manipulative attempts to regain control. Maybe they have worked in the past, but do not let them work now. Stay firm in your choice.

Does letting go guarantee your spouse's return? No. In fact, it's possible that they leave. For good. But if your spouse is that set on leaving, it is better to move toward a quick resolution than to endure the long, agonizing death of your marriage.

This period of letting go has some parallels to an Amish tradition. Some Amish communities view a stage of life called *Rumspringa* (a Pennsylvania German word that means "running around") as a period of time in which adolescents are given space to rebel against the customs and norms of their culture. Community standards do not change, but there is a recognition that some teenagers will test the standards in which they were raised. Some will even leave the community for a time.

This behavior is tolerated in order to allow each adolescent to make a personal choice: either leave their community permanently or recommit to it by being baptized. According to a PBS report released in 2012, as many as 90% of these teens end up returning to their previously held norms.

Your spouse has no right to their own *Rumspringa*, but you may choose to release them to it anyway. If infidelity has not been a pattern of behavior in their past, this affair may be a rebellious outburst against long-established values in his or her life. Trying to squash the rebellion will likely increase its strength, but giving it some time may allow it to diminish and die.

## **How far do you let them go?**

Letting go always requires emotional separation, but it may necessitate physical separation as well. Consider the following conditions to determine your degree of detachment.

*Emotional Separation: If your spouse's indecision is rooted in emotional confusion without active affair behavior, physical detachment may not be required. In this case, separation simply means letting go of your immediate expectations. Take the pressure off of them and focus on other things.*

Establishing emotional boundaries with a spouse who shares the same home can be a challenge, but there are ways to maintain the “business of life” part of your relationship (paying bills, domestic support, parenting responsibilities, etc.) while avoiding interactions that are directed toward more emotional connections. While your spouse remains uncertain, you can show kindness, respect, and care without engaging in conversations that will have unsatisfying conclusions.

*Physical Separation: If you know your spouse is active in another relationship, you may need to ask for physical separation. I have seen many relationships caught in a "Ping-Pong Pattern" in which the wayward partner moves back and forth between spouse and lover. This can go on for a very long time, but the pattern will lose its momentum if you remove yourself from it. The extent of the separation (whether you move out of the house or move to another room) depends on your situation, but some type of physical distance is recommended in any of these situations:*

- A spouse is not willing or able to end connections with the affair partner.
- A couple is not able to break free from a deep pattern of conflict.
- One person has declared they are done with the marriage.

Most couples have resources to easily facilitate a separation. Either spouse may stay with family or friends or rent short term accommodations. Some couples, due to financial or social limitations, find these options less available and so establish an in-home separation with each spouse staying in a different area of the house.

Of course, if there is risk of physical abuse, separation is mandatory no matter the cost.

### How do you let them go?

This is not a move you can make repeatedly; you only do it once. It is an ultimate statement of release, so if you expect your spouse to take this seriously

you have to be prepared to follow through the first time. If you are not committed to it, you will likely abandon the strategy at the first thought of uncertainty.

**This is not a move you can make repeatedly; you only do it once.**



When you are ready, start by writing a letter telling your spouse you are letting go. Put it away overnight and read it again the next day. Ask these questions about the message: Do you avoid sounding harsh or judgmental? Is your hope for your marriage clearly communicated? Will your spouse understand that you are taking a hands-off approach? Does it sound like a threat? (It shouldn't.) Is it clear that you are making a significant shift? Rewrite it until you are satisfied.

Here's an example of the kind of letter you might write:

*I love you; I am certain about that. I want our marriage to last and grow; I am certain about that, too. However, I know you are not as certain about those things. I am afraid that you will leave and our marriage will end. So afraid, in fact, that I have probably tried too hard to convince you to stay. I'm sorry if I have overreacted at times.*

*Our marriage needs to change. I know that. I want to be a part of that change, but I can't do it alone and I can't make up your mind for you. What I CAN do is let you make up your own mind. You need to be sure about what you want.*

*I am going to quit trying to change you and I am going to focus on getting myself to a healthier place. There is a lot I need to learn through all this. I want to be a better person, whether or not our marriage survives.*

*If you decide you want me — if you want us — I am still willing to join you in making our marriage better. I'm leaving that door open for now, until you decide to recommit to our marriage, or until I decide it is better for me to move on without you.*

**“I'm leaving that door open for now, until you decide to recommit to our marriage, or until I decide it is better for me to move on without you.”**

*Until you have decided one way or another, my interaction with you will be limited to issues that require our cooperation. These include caring for our children, paying bills, and managing the things we own together. Please respect my desire to refrain from conversations about our relationship while you remain confused about what you want.*

*I hope there is a good ending to our story. I love you.*

Now you have a choice. If you want, you can give the letter to your spouse, ask them to read it, and then invite them to ask any questions. But I recommend that you ask your spouse to listen without interrupting while you read the letter, answer any questions they have, and then give them a copy to read again later.

### **For how long should you let them go?**

That's up to you. You will probably want to seek help from a counselor or someone you trust as you try to figure out how long you will wait, but one thing I do encourage you to do is have an end date in mind. You can always adjust your deadline, but you should have some sense of how much time you are willing to give your spouse. Then, **maintain your separation until one of you makes a permanent choice.**

***When you make a permanent choice:*** If your spouse remains confused or uncommitted for an extended period of time, the damage to your marriage will be even more severe. If consistent attempts to repair and rebuild are not made, trust will continue to disintegrate. At some point, you may decide you are no longer willing to invest more time or effort in your marriage.

Have an end date in mind. You can always adjust your deadline, but you should have some sense of how much time you are willing to give your spouse. In most cases, I encourage betrayed spouses to allow up to 6 months for their spouse to declare clear intentions. Some wait less than that. Some wait more. You can seek the counsel of others, but in the end you will need to decide for yourself.

***When your spouse makes a permanent choice:*** The "backing off" approach recommended in this article is meant to create a space in which your spouse makes a choice. If your spouse is struggling with an emotional connection to someone else, they may go back-and-forth in their decision as they try to figure out what (or who) they want. Once you refuse to be part of that pattern any longer, your spouse will have to make different choices and may eventually express a desire to come back to the marriage.

If they do return, be cautious about ending the separation too quickly. Allow time for your spouse to demonstrate the sincerity of their commitment. Look for evidence of genuine change: a clear commitment to ending all contact with the affair partner, pursuing you, assuming responsibility for repairing the damage done, committing to openness and honesty, and expressing a willingness to take time in the healing process.

In the next chapter, we will consider the kinds of boundaries that will help you maintain a healthy separation from your wayward spouse. ■

## Chapter 3 Exercises

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1. Consider everything your spouse has said or done that communicated “I do not want you” and write each one down. After you have listed as many as you can think of, go through the list and consider the response to each one. Did you shut down? Did you argue? Did you beg? Bargain? Demand? Were you able to acknowledge the pain but remain self-confident? Whatever your response, consider the outcome of each. Which responses were most effective, if any? Which were least effective?
2. Even if you are not ready to let go of your spouse, consider what you want to communicate to them if you get to that point. Use the sample letter in this chapter as a model to write one in your own words. Save it. You can always edit it later, but the more time you give to thoughtful preparation, the more likely you are to present a clear message that accurately expresses your point of view.
3. Complete *Worksheet 3: Recognizing Your Limits of Control*.



# Worksheet 3: Recognizing Your Limits of Control

This worksheet includes 3 pages. Please read chapter 3 before completing this exercise.

## Step One: Identify Troubling Issues

Chapter 3 stressed the importance of focussing on the things that *you* control in your life and relationship. On the lines below, identify up to 15 things that trouble you most right now in relation to your spouse's affair and its consequences. Think in terms of troubling circumstances (family turmoil, conditions that permit the affair spouse to be around, financial consequences, places/things that remind you of the affair, etc.), troubling behaviors (actions made by you, your spouse, or others), communication (past or present words spoken or written), beliefs, choices, or anything else that causes you distress.

<b>Troubling Issues</b>	<b>C N S</b>
1. _____	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
2. _____	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
3. _____	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
4. _____	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
5. _____	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
6. _____	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
7. _____	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
8. _____	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
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11. _____	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
12. _____	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
13. _____	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
14. _____	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
15. _____	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>

## Step Two: Evaluate Control

Review each of the troubling issues you listed above and select the box next to each one to indicate whether or not YOU are in control of that situation or its outcome by checking “C” (if it is something you can control) or “N” (if you have no control of that item or its outcome). Try to designate one or the other and ignore only minor exceptions that come to mind. If you are unsure, or if you think you might have some significant control without being totally in control, check the “S” box (for some control).

## Step Three: Identify & Prioritize Your Responses

The most significant affair related issues have now been separated into at least two categories: ones you can control and ones you cannot control. You should prioritize the attention you will give to these issues in the following manner:

1. **C Items:** These are the things you control. These should be the ones you give time and attention to first of all. Some issues might be quickly resolved simply by making a choice; others will require more effort over a longer period of time. For each C item, use the “Take-Control Plan” on the following page to write 1-3 things you know you can do now or in the future in an effort to change things in a positive (or healthy) direction.
2. **S Items:** These are the things you partially control (or are uncertain about). These may be important, but they demand a lower priority because you have limited control of the outcome. Try to focus your time/attention on C Items first and leave these for later.
3. **N Items:** These are things you do not control. You cannot ignore them because they are affecting you. But your response should be limited to honest expressions of how you are impacted (feeling hurt, fearful, angry, powerless, guilty, etc.). Journal about these feeling or talk to someone who can provide insight or comfort, but *decide to stop wasting energy in attempts to control these things*. Focus on C Items instead.

## Step Four: Take-Control Plan

Write the issues you designated with a “C” (things you control) in Step Two. Use additional pages, if necessary. Under each item, list 1 to 3 actions you can take (or changes you can make) toward positive change. Focus on these actions steps while you give up on efforts to change what you do not control.

**Issue:** \_\_\_\_\_

Action Steps: a. \_\_\_\_\_

b. \_\_\_\_\_

c. \_\_\_\_\_

**Issue:** \_\_\_\_\_

Action Steps: a. \_\_\_\_\_

b. \_\_\_\_\_

c. \_\_\_\_\_

**Issue:** \_\_\_\_\_

Action Steps: a. \_\_\_\_\_

b. \_\_\_\_\_

c. \_\_\_\_\_

**Issue:** \_\_\_\_\_

Action Steps: a. \_\_\_\_\_

b. \_\_\_\_\_

c. \_\_\_\_\_

**Issue:** \_\_\_\_\_

Action Steps: a. \_\_\_\_\_

b. \_\_\_\_\_

c. \_\_\_\_\_

## About the Author

Tim Tedder is a licensed counselor who specializes in helping individuals and couples heal from the wounds of infidelity. He and his wife, Sharon (also a counselor), are the owners of Currents Counseling Services in Winter Park, Florida. When they're not counseling, you may find them in a co-op game on Xbox, saving the world from zombie hordes or raging dragons. If you knew them, this would make perfect sense.

Tim has created several websites, each focussing on a different aspect of his recovery work:

### [AffairHealing.com](http://AffairHealing.com)

Created in 2009, this site has become a popular resource for affair recovery stories and articles. In 2015, the AH Community was added ([community.affairhealing.com](http://community.affairhealing.com)), an online, interactive forum for sharing experiences, ideas, and resources.

### [CurrentsCounseling.com](http://CurrentsCounseling.com)

Promotes the counseling services offered by Tim and Sharon Tedder from their offices in Winter Park, Florida (just north of downtown Orlando).

### [MarriageICU.com](http://MarriageICU.com)

Information and application for retreats offered to couples who need help in their affair recovery.

