



Dangerous Connections: Ongoing Contact With the Affair Partner

By Tim Tedder | AffairHealing.com

THE PROBLEM

If any contact remains between a spouse/partner and their affair partner, even if it is due to career expectations or long-established social interactions, the betrayed partner will experience ongoing stress. I have never seen an exception to this. That is why nearly every affair recovery specialist suggests a swift and complete cut-off of all contact with the affair partner.

In the book, *Surviving an Affair*, Willard Harley states it this way:

"...there is no good reason for the unfaithful spouse to ever see or talk to the former lover. There should be absolutely no contact. In spite of career sacrifices, friendships, and issues related to children's schooling, I recommend with all seriousness that there be a sudden and complete end to an affair. And I recommend extreme measures to ensure total separation for life from a former lover."

In *Torn Asunder*, David Carder writes:

"...the partners separate physically—move to different locations, change jobs, and so on... If such a decisive break is not made, the recovering [unfaithful partner] will be tempted to renew contact... Continually "running into" the partner damages the trust and refuels the anger of the spouse who is trying to forgive and rebuild."

An unfaithful partner who resists going to extraordinary measures to break all contact may be guilty of either wanting opportunities to encounter the former lover (even if they try to convince themselves they won't cross "the line" again) or of failing to have empathy for the betrayed partner's suffering.

Certain work or social settings may complicate the separating process, but decisions must be made out of a consideration for what the relationship needs. The necessary choice is often not an easy one. Unfaithful partners committed to making things right may still struggle with the sacrifice required. But sacrifices need to be made to protect a betrayed partner from having to accept conditions that feel dangerous.

What can be done? If you want relief from the stress of ongoing contact between your partner and the other man/woman, then one of these relief strategies will need to be followed.

STRATEGIES FOR RELIEF

Strategy 1: Do whatever is necessary to break all contact.

The quickest relief to this stress is realized when the affair partner willingly accepts responsibility for making whatever change is needed to end all contact of any kind with the former affair partner. When a spouse/partner realizes that severing all ties is the only realistic way to alleviate fears and re-establish trust, they should move quickly and decisively toward changes necessary to accomplish that separation.

This will often require sacrifice. In order to save their marriage, I have seen couples make these kinds of changes in an attempt to assure no more contact:

- Selling a home and moving to another location.
- Quitting a job or changing vocation.
- Stepping away from certain friends or social circles.
- Ending participation in hobbies, recreation, events, or organizations they previously enjoyed (or finding new, safe ways to experience them).
- Walking away from financial investments.

Why go to such extraordinary measures? If the affair has ended and promises have been made to never start it again, are such dramatic changes necessary? In most cases, yes, for two reasons.

A. Ongoing contact makes it too easy for the affair to start again.

Intentions to end an affair are usually strongest just after it has been disclosed or discovered. The unfaithful partner often works overtime to make assurances that the relationship has ended and will never start again. They may actually be sincere in their intent.

But recovery is a rough process. The betrayed partner will have significant needs and may express feelings of disappointment, confusion, sadness, or anger for weeks or months. Contact with the affair partner during this time will make comparisons inevitable: *Things were so much easier in the affair. Why should I be working so hard at something that makes me feel so miserable?* Once this sentiment is expressed to the affair partner, the door opens to that relationship again. Whether the affair was sexual or emotional (or both), its promise of renewed relief is a strong enticement to anyone in such a vulnerable place.

I encourage a “do whatever it takes” approach to ending contact in nearly every affair scenario, but there is one condition in which it is absolutely mandatory. If the affair was emotional (feelings of love) and if it was discovered (not ended on its own or confessed), then ongoing interactions between the affair partners will almost certainly result in the continuation of their relationship.

B. Ongoing contact causes repeated harm to the betrayed partner.

Here is a sentiment I have often heard expressed by an unfaithful partner: “The affair is over, so you need to let it go. Your insecurity is driving us both nuts. I’ve said I’m sorry and told you it’s over, so you just need to trust me.”

They say this as though they believed they would be capable of this kind of blind trust if the situation was reversed, but this is never true. Whenever circumstances enable ongoing contact between two affair participants, the betrayed partner will feel unsettled and fearful.

This is not the betrayed partner’s fault. They did not cause this trauma; they are victim to it. And as long as the danger of ongoing contact remains, they will struggle in every attempt to move toward forgiveness and trust.

Breaking all contact is an act of loving commitment. It demonstrates the sincerity of the unfaithful partner. It provides a safe context for healing affair wounds and nurturing relationship bonds.

This “break all contact” strategy should be followed if at all possible, but I understand why there may be exceptions. Sometimes there are legal considerations (for example, when the unfaithful partner owns the business in which the affair partner is employed). Sometimes a tremendous financial risk is not worth taking due to current family needs, including medical. And the desire for complete separation might not

feel as necessary (in a work setting, for example) if the affair ended years ago but was only recently disclosed. Whatever the reason, if both partners agree that some degree of ongoing contact may be necessary, then focus should shift to implementing the second strategy.

Strategy 2: Work together to reclaim that “space” for your marriage/relationship.

If the affair partner remains present in a work or social setting from which the unfaithful partner cannot immediately separate, then the couple should work together to send clear messages that their marriage/relationship is secure and off-limits to others. Every attempt should be made for the betrayed partner to feel welcomed and wanted in the places (work or social settings) that were touched by the affair.

Steve had a 7-month affair with a co-worker in a respected marketing firm. After finding out about the affair, Judy, his wife, agreed that he should not leave his job. But she clearly explained that in order for her to feel secure about his time at work, he needed to be more intentional about making her feel invited.

They discussed this during one of their counseling sessions. At first, Steve resisted the idea of his wife visiting him at the office. His caution, it seemed to me, did not stem from a desire to protect the affair relationship, but from a real concern about whether this mixing of work and marriage would seem inappropriate to co-workers. He also feared that Judy's insecurity might cause her to show up too often and interfere with his job.

Judy didn't back down. She explained that she would have difficulty trusting him if she remained excluded from his workplace. Steve agreed to make the necessary changes. Here are some of the ways this couple used office visits as part of their recovery:

- Judy had a new photo taken of the two of them, put it in a frame, and gave it to Steve as a gift of hope, asking him to keep it on his desk.
- Twice a week, Judy brought food to the office so they could spend lunchtime together.
- Steve made the commitment to show appropriate but open expressions of affection to his wife in front of others (welcoming her with a hug, holding her hand, saying “I love you”, etc.).
- Steve agreed to welcome unannounced visits or phone calls from Judy. Judy agreed to refrain from constant interruptions and to respect Steve's need to do his work.
- Judy agreed to avoid any confrontation with the other woman at the office. (On one visit, the other woman was in the hallway outside the office as Judy arrived. Judy stopped next to her, looked at her, smiled, then walked into Steve's office. Nothing else needed to be said.)

As time went on, the office lunches became less frequent. They still meet for lunch, but usually go to a nearby cafe. Steve's workplace feels like a safer place to Judy and Steve has learned that he can trust her to respect the attention his job demands.

Working with an ex-lover is a vulnerable situation. A betrayed partner knows this instinctively. They cannot wish the danger away or pretend it doesn't exist. The remedy for reducing their stress is either to leave the dangerous environment (Strategy 1) or to regain a sense of control and comfort in the environment (Strategy 2). But what if the unfaithful partner is unwilling to make the changes required for either of these strategies? Sadly, then, the betrayed partner will be left to save him/herself with Strategy 3.

Strategy 3: Exit the unsafe environment on your own.

Let me restate the problem: *If any contact remains between a spouse/partner and their affair partner, even if it is due to career expectations or long-established social interactions, the betrayed partner will experience*

ongoing stress. There should be no expectation of diminishing stress while two affair partners have ongoing contact in an environment that excludes the betrayed partner.

A person in this situation should realize that their stress is not due to their inability to cope. On the contrary, their stress is a natural response to risk. Sometimes the only way to alleviate the fear is by removing themselves from the danger. Separation from their partner may be necessary.

I am mindful of the fact that, to some people, the cost of separation seems too great; leaving the relationship simply feels like trading one problem for another. The financial or emotional burden of separating may be too much to carry, so the choice between "bad or worse" keeps them stuck until something shifts. It is a decision that must be carefully considered by each individual, but if there is any reasonable way to separate, even for a little while, my encouragement would be to do so.

Before moving to this option, I encourage the betrayed spouse to make a final attempt at clearly communicating their need and intent. The message may sound something like this:

Your affair hurt me more deeply than you can understand. You've been witness to some of that pain, but you may never understand how hard this has been. Your betrayal cut deeply, more than any other wound I've felt.

I still love you. I still want to be with you. But what I need is a relationship that is healing. If I can ever hope to trust you again, I need to feel safe with you. And I need to know you WANT me to feel safe with you.

I cannot feel safe while you are still in contact with [the affair partner]. I just can't. If you are not willing to make the changes needed to help me forgive and trust you again, then I need to leave. Remaining in this stressful situation is not good for my emotional or physical health.

Will you help me?

If this plea evokes no change, then the betrayed spouse should consider leaving, either permanently (including divorce) or temporarily (until circumstances change).