The First 12 Steps of an Unfaithful Spouse
Quick Guide from AffairHealing.com

Tim Tedder is a licensed counselor who focuses on helping people heal from the wounds of infidelity. In 2009, he created the website AffairHealing.com to provide recovery resources and services to people all over the world. He provides the following steps based on his interactions with thousands of couples.

STEP 1
Make your choice.

Getting involved in an affair eventually requires a choice: either choose your spouse, choose your affair partner, or leave both of them. Each choice has benefits and consequences, and each will lead you to a distinct future.

But there is another option: remaining undecided, refusing to move certainly in any direction. The indecisive person repeatedly alternates between spouse and affair partner, afraid to commit to either, shifting when enough fear or longing pushes them in the other direction. Many men and women, once capable and certain, become weak in this uncertainty.

This ping-pong pattern can last for months, even years. Once established, the unfaithful partner is rarely the one to break the cycle. Instead, a choice will eventually be made by the spouse or the affair partner or both. In fact, this is what the unfaithful partner often hopes for, wanting to avoid responsibility for making the final decision.

But the consequences of prolonged indecision are many. Very few relationships (the marriage or the affair) survive and the pain inflicted on everyone is immense. Don't let that happen. If you need time to be more certain, separate from the affair long enough to seek counsel from people you trust and consider your future thoughtfully. Then make your choice.

STEP 2
Speak nothing but the truth.

Your secrets and lies have obviously taken a toll on your marriage, but you have been paying a personal price as well. Your dishonesty has become a trap. Most unfaithful spouses only realize this after they commit to honesty and experience the freedom that comes from simply speaking the truth.

There may be things you're not ready to tell your spouse yet, maybe things you're not sure you will ever tell them. If so, it is better to say nothing than to tell more lies, even if you convince yourself that you lie to protect your spouse. You built your affair with lies; you will have to rebuild your marriage with honesty.

But there are some parts of the truth that are best left unsaid. Certain details (sexual details, comparisons to the affair partner, specific dates, places or events, etc.) of your affair can cause permanent damage to your spouse. These kinds of questions are best left unasked and unanswered but you cannot insist on controlling the information. If you do, your spouse will believe you are still protecting the affair.
I would suggest that you say something like this: “I am willing to be completely honest with you. I am concerned that my answers to some of your questions may hurt you more than they help you, so I’d like you to take some time to think about them. After that, if you still want to know, I’ll tell you.” Seek the advice found in most good affair recovery books, or from a qualified counselor, to direct both of you in this process.

**STEP 3**

Take a one-way exit from your affair.

If you want your marriage to recover, if you want your spouse to learn to trust you again, if you have any hope for a satisfying relationship with your spouse in the future... end your affair now. Don’t leave a backdoor open. If you leave your affair partner by saying, “Let me go try my marriage for a while, but I’ll be back if it doesn’t work,” you’ll probably return to them. Ping-pong (see Step 1).

Close all doors. Sever all contact. Close all email accounts and change your phone number. If you have to, switch jobs or move to a different location. Your marriage is at stake and ongoing contact with your affair partner makes you vulnerable and keeps your spouse feeling insecure.

Ongoing contact with the affair partner is always an issue. Always.

**STEP 4**

Accept full responsibility for every choice you made.

You may have thought of many reasons why you had an affair, but I guarantee that infidelity was not your only choice. Now is not the time for excuses (or for explanations that sound like excuses). You need to take full responsibility for your affair. For a while, you need to let the focus be on your failure to keep the promises you once made.

Eventually, you will need to be honest about all the vulnerabilities in your life or in your marriage, but hold off on these discussions until your spouse has regained emotional stability. That may take a while.

You may wonder if you’ll always be the “bad guy,” getting the blame for every unsatisfactory thing that has ever happened or will ever happen in your marriage. In most cases, that doesn’t happen. If it does, you’ll need to address it honestly, probably with the help of a counselor. But don’t worry about that yet. Let the focus be on you.

**STEP 5**

Step into your spouse’s pain.

I’ll be honest with you: this will be one of the hardest things you ever do. The pain of betrayal is one of the deepest hurts anyone can experience. You will desperately desire to hide from that pain, especially because you know you are responsible for it.

Your spouse cannot just “move on” from this. The wound needs to heal. If you are going to remain in relationship with him/her, you need to be the one who offers comfort and relief.

I’ve tried to explain to him, “What if the table was turned, and you found out all this about me? What if you read those texts and had those lies told to you? How would that make you feel?” Would he take me back if I did that to him? If I lied to him over and over? Is he able to understand, or even try to understand, how much pain I’m in when I cry every time he tries to hold me?

-a betrayed spouse
Start by taking responsibility, every day, to ask how they are doing. These are not fun conversations, but they can be healing ones. They provide regular relief to the pain. They result in fewer emotional explosions and a quicker return to emotional stability.

**STEP 6**

Confide in a friend of your marriage.

You need support. You need to open up to someone you can be very honest with. This is not the kind of problem you should expect to handle on your own. Swallow your pride and talk to someone.

But if you have hope for your marriage, make sure your confidant is a friend of your marriage. Avoid counsel from anyone who encourages (or practices) unfaithfulness. Avoid connecting with anyone for whom you could develop romantic feelings. Avoid counselors who focus on self-empowerment (“you deserve to be happy... you have the right to do whatever you want”) without recognizing the sacrifice required for trusting, intimate relationships.

**STEP 7**

Start minimizing your regrets by defining who you will become.

You are telling a story right now. You are telling a story of an affair. You are telling a story of a marriage. You are telling a story of love. And maybe you're quite confused with how it should be told.

My work allows me to see what choices look like years down the road. I’ve listened to stories filled with regret, and lived one myself. Anyone in their right mind would want to avoid that, but many focus on their problem in a way that almost guarantees remorse.

Most people are only weighing their options by looking at two things: their obligations and their desires (what they believe they should do and what they really want to have). If either of these is your primary focus, you are failing to attend to the thing that is more likely to minimize future regret.

You should, instead, focus on answering this: Who is the person I am becoming? What is the story I will be telling? The true answer to these questions will not depend on circumstances. The true answer will reflect the core of who you are. And it’s very likely that the true answer will not be in conflict with the people who have always mattered most in your life (usually family, children, and possibly your spouse). But you have to do the work necessary to be convinced of that.

Define the character, heart and soul of the future you. What is he/she like? What will that future you say about the present you? Will it be a conversation of satisfaction or regret? It's up to you.

---

One of the first things that came up with my solo counseling session was what kind of man did I want to be regardless of how everything progressed. I knew for me I wanted to be able to walk away from this whole experience and (1) be able to look myself in the mirror and be okay with my actions, (2) make a legitimate effort toward reconciliation... knowing I did everything I could, and (3) improve other relationships in my life.

-an unfaithful spouse
**STEP 8**

**Turn your marriage into a safe place.**

Don’t let your spouse to fight for their security. If you do, he/she will remain anxious and you will resent their attempts to “control” you. They are insecure because you broke their trust; they will only begin to feel secure again when you take responsibility for making them feel safe.

Here’s what you need to say to your spouse, constantly and consistently, until they are no longer in need of this level of attention: “I know that what I’ve done has made you afraid of what I might do again. I want you to learn that you can trust me again. I’ve tried to think of everything that might make you feel anxious and here’s what I’ve come up with… Here’s what I will do to help you feel safe… Is there anything else I haven’t thought of?”

The kinds of things you need to do:

- unlock your accounts or provide passwords to assure that nothing is being hidden;
- get rid of *everything* that is a product of the affair (gifts, reminders, pictures, emails, clothes, etc.)
- keep your phone unlocked and in the open, offering it to your spouse if they ever seem uncertain;
- explain your schedule and volunteer information about where you are and what you’re doing;
- willingly set boundaries in any relationship that feels unsafe to your spouse;
- ask frequently to find out if there is anything else you can do.

**STEP 9**

**Consider what to tell your children and family.**

If your affair is unknown to others, I understand the tendency to keep it as a private matter between you and your spouse. The decision over whether or not to telling anyone else is a personal one. There is no single answer that fits every person or situation. But let me encourage you to consider the benefits of disclosing your affair to your family, including your children.

**Telling Your Family** (including your spouse’s family): There is great benefit to you when you choose to be honest and authentic with your family. None of us like to admit failure or to negatively impact others’ opinion of us, but one thing to learn from your affair is that you are a healthier person when you value truth above impressions. There are likely family lessons that will only be learned through the risk of honesty.

- **When you absolutely should talk to your family:** When they already know about or suspect the affair. Clear the air. If necessary, ask their forgiveness. Don’t let the elephant take it’s permanent place as the unmentioned thing in the corner of the family room.
- **When you should not talk to your family:** If your family is highly dysfunctional, or if they have failed to love you well in the past, or if you cannot trust them, or if they are more likely to offer you shame than grace, then don’t tell them if they don’t already know.

**Telling Your Children:** Don’t assume that you should not discuss your affair with your children. Sometimes, it is the best thing you can do. Here are some general considerations:

- Don’t tell young children who do not know anything.
- Don’t lie to ANY child if they ask direct questions. You should talk to them with an appropriate level of information (based on age and knowledge). Teach them about failure and forgiveness.
- If children know or suspect, you should initiate conversation with them as soon as possible. Talk to them truthfully. Ask them if they have any questions. Repeat this conversation several times over the following months. (By the way, if your child is 12 or older and they have been witness to the conflict between you and your spouse, you can assume they wonder about an affair even if nothing has been said.)
- As life goes on and your children make their own mistakes, your willingness to be vulnerable about this incident in your life can be of tremendous value to them.
Work to understand WHY you had an affair.

You could likely give me a short list of obvious reasons why you started this affair. Your list may be accurate, but it probably wouldn’t be complete. For anyone raised in a culture where adultery is considered wrong, the choice to have an affair is usually rooted in some kind of brokenness. That broken part of you is something you need to understand if you want to be able to trust yourself.

Getting to the “why” answers is not easy work. And it's never a single answer. You’re searching for the pieces of a puzzle that, when put together, present a clear and accurate picture of the affair’s meaning. When you see it, you will be less likely to make that same choice again.

You may need to read a lot, or talk to healthy people, or spend time with a counselor. Whatever it takes, do the work necessary to answer that question.

Commit to the long process of earning forgiveness and trust.

Forgiveness and trust, while related to each other, are two different choices to be made by your spouse. They are not earned in the same way or received at the same time. Forgiveness may be offered after weeks or months; trust may follow after months or years.

What you do now will have a tremendous effect on your spouse’s ability to genuinely offer them. The worst thing you can do right now is expect or insist on quick action. What should you do instead?

Forgiveness: Ask for it, don't demand it. The genuine expression of “I'm sorry” should offered often as you witness your spouse's pain. Take time to consider all the consequences of your affair and ask forgiveness for each one. Be willing to wait for full forgiveness. You'll know it has happened when your spouse begins focussing on the present and future rather than using the past to remind you and accuse you. Give it time.

Trust: Your spouse may choose to start trusting you in small ways, but the genuine emotional trusting will only come when adequate amounts of two ingredients have been mixed together: (1) enough time, filled with (2) right stuff. The “right stuff” is consistent trustworthiness. You can have all the time in the world, but without trustworthy behavior, trust will never be restored. Conversely, even if you begin acting in a 100% trustworthy manner, it will take time before your spouse feels confident.

Invest in qualified counseling, together or alone.

If there is ever a time when a couple needs a good counselor, it is after an affair. If you and your spouse are committed to rebuilding the marriage, I encourage you to start couple's counseling as soon as possible. Individual counseling should be an addition to your joint work.

Make sure you find a counselor who is experienced in the work of affair recovery. There are many good marriage counselors who are honestly uncomfortable focussing on the trauma work required for infidelity issues. These counselors will minimize the trauma and push you toward marriage building too soon. Don't waste time or money with someone who does not fully understand this problem.
What if your spouse refuses to go to counseling? Put the responsibility on their shoulders by saying something like this: “I want us to succeed, but I wonder if we can figure this out on our own. In my opinion, we need a counselor. If you are opposed, we need you to come up with a plan to get us through this. Let’s take a few days to think about it, research our options, then come up with a plan.” Participate in this plan wholeheartedly, but be honest if it isn’t doing enough for you or your marriage.

Additional Information

These 12 Steps are an overview of the expanded eBook: *When Vows Are Shattered: A Manual for the Unfaithful Partner, 2nd edition*, written by Tim Tedder, LMHC, NCC. The book includes full guidance for each step along with worksheets to help you put them into practice. The book is scheduled to be released in July 2015 and will be available on the Affair Recovery Books page of AffairHealing.com.

**The book you should buy right now:**
*How to Help Your Spouse Heal from Your Affair* by Linda MacDonald
Linda, a counselor who has specialized in infidelity for years, wrote this book as “a compact manual for the unfaithful.” She provides a clear and direct explanation of what needs to be done in order to help bring healing to a wounded spouse and marriage.

**Quick Guide: Finding a Qualified Affair Recovery Specialist**
Tim helps you consider what to look for (and what to avoid) when seeking a qualified counselor in your area. You can download this 3-page Quick Guide by going to [AffairCounselor.com](http://www.AffairCounselor.com).