

# 11 *Affair Recovery* **MYTHS**



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## Introduction

Even before creating the AffairHealing.com website in 2009, I'd spent years providing affair recovery counseling and resources to people wanting to understand how infidelity affects their lives and relationships. I've worked with hundreds of individuals and couples, helping them heal from the wounds of an affair, and still regularly encountered familiar misunderstandings about the process.

This guide summarizes some of the common affair recovery myths. It has been published on [YourTango.com](http://YourTango.com) and discussed in a [Recovery Room podcast episode](#). I hope it will give you a more balanced view of marriage renewal and/or personal healing.



Tim Tedder, Counselor & Author

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### A Package of Resources for You

There are many resources available to you through AffairHealing.com (downloads, articles, courses, podcasts, forums, stories, books, services), but it might be hard to figure out what to do first.

We've made it easy for you to know where to start!

There are **3 different "Start Here" resource collections**, each with a unique focus: one for betrayed partners, one for unfaithful partners, and another for couples who are cooperating in the recovery process.

**Your next steps toward healing:**

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



# 11 Affair Recovery Myths

## MYTH 1 Once a cheater, always a cheater.



This myth reflects the belief that a single act of infidelity either (1) finally reveals the true, unchangeable nature of a cheater or (2) so severely breaks the character of a good person that they cannot be trusted to return to faithfulness. The evidence, however, does not support the claim.

Reliable statistics on the subject (or about any “affair” issue, for that matter) are hard to come by due to the wide variances in how the terms infidelity and affairs are defined. While some studies include behaviors such as looking at porn or visiting a strip club, others focus on inappropriate friendships and romances, and still others limit the definition to illicit sexual contact. Even those who believe a relationship doesn’t become an affair until sex is involved will often distinguish between one-time encounters and ongoing relationships.

So the conversation can get a bit muddled if you don’t adequately define the terms, but even within this wide variety of infidelity experiences, the “once a cheater” claim simply doesn’t hold up.

**The Reality:** Once a person has crossed the line from fidelity to infidelity, their chances (statistically) of repeating that behavior increases. It’s also true that “serial cheaters” (those with a history of multiple infidelities) are not likely to break the cycle without experiencing profound personal shifts. But this is also true: there are many former cheaters who are now faithful and will never cheat again.

## MYTH 2 There is only one right response to being betrayed.



This myth is actually expressed in two different forms, each the opposite of the other.

*The Must-Leave Belief:* Any self-respecting person will dump a cheater. If you stay in the marriage, you’re being a chump.

*The Must-Stay Belief:* A virtuous person is willing to forgive and honor their promise to stay with the spouse for better or for worse, including betrayal.

**The Reality:** We love to turn complicated issues into simpler black-or-white choices, but the decision to leave or stay in a marriage is a personal one that the betrayed spouse should be able to make without condemnation from either extreme viewpoint.

What matters most are the motives for making any particular choice. Whether leaving or staying, doing so for the right reasons will lead to healthy outcomes. Making choices for the wrong reasons will likely result in ongoing struggle and regret.

## MYTH 3 Affairs are evidence of a bad marriage.



This is a common misbelief due to the tendency of many cheating spouses to blame their marriage (or their spouse) for the affair and for outside observers to assume that no one would step out of a marriage unless something was wrong with it.

**The Reality:** The causes for an affair are usually rooted in the unfaithful partner's personal inadequacies rather than relationship shortcomings, whether they recognize this or not. While no relationship is perfect, the problems existing in most marriages when an affair begins are usually rather common—ones that could have been addressed in a hundred ways other than betraying promises. Some affairs, in fact, occur in marriages that would be considered quite good by objective measures.

## **MYTH** A marriage can't survive an affair.

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As an affair-recovery counselor, the first question people often asked by people who find out what I do is this: "Do any marriages actually recover from an affair?" Many assume that the only logical outcome to infidelity is either divorce or a marriage characterized by two people who simply try to "put up" with each other.

**The Reality:** Many marriages don't survive infidelity. Some marriages shouldn't. But I have witnessed many that do. Couples who agree to cooperate in the work of recovery can do more than just avoid divorce. They are evidence of one path toward healing: rediscovering a relationship this is satisfying, intimate, and trustworthy.

## **MYTH** The first step in affair recovery should be marriage counseling.

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Too often, without proper consideration or preparation, couples rush into marriage counseling in a desperate attempt to fix their broken relationship. In all the confusion of affair trauma, they hope a counselor will help them focus on the right marriage-building goals.

**The Reality:** There are a number of scenarios in which jumping into typical marriage counseling may result in more confusion, not clarity. Here are three conditions in which normal marriage counseling should be avoided.

*1. Either partner remains uncommitted to working on the marriage.*

Individual clarity needs to be gained prior to participating in typical couple's therapy. Before working to build their marriage, both partners must agree on a common goal. If either is unsure about their choice regarding the marriage, it is better to seek out individual counseling or Discernment Counseling (couple's counseling with a focus on making a decision about leaving or staying in the marriage).

*2. The counselor wants to focus too quickly on marriage repair.*

This often occurs with therapists who are not knowledgeable or comfortable with the difficult process of guiding couples through affair trauma. Attempting to build a strong marriage before repairing the foundation of trust sets the couple up for frustration and failure.

*3. The affair is still active.*

An active affair will continually sabotage recovery progress. The affair will be a constant, invisible force opposing the efforts of marriage counseling. Individual counseling would be a better choice.

Marriage counseling is extremely valuable as part of the recovery process, but it needs to be put into its proper place. Joint counseling with a focus on relationship enhancement should be sought only after the affair trauma has been addressed and both spouses are committed to working on personal change that helps them move to a common relationship goal.

## **MYTH 6** Hiding painful affair information is better than causing more hurt.

When confronted with the anger, accusations, and questions pouring out of their betrayed spouse, unfaithful partners often conclude that it may be better to refrain from any further disclosures. Whether they refuse to provide answers or provide false ones instead, they believe there is no benefit to telling more bad news.

**The Reality:** Something I constantly hear from betrayed spouses is that the pain of dishonesty is worse than the pain of any specific act. A willingness to be honest about hurtful or shameful facts is evidence of a return to trustworthiness. The need to believe an unfaithful spouse is telling the truth is usually far greater than the need to be protected from hurtful facts.

Getting to the truth about an affair can be a tricky process. Because of the risks involved with saying too much or too little, I encourage couples to rely on affair recovery resources, including qualified counseling, to help them through the process. Regardless of what questions are eventually asked, a commitment to truth and transparency is necessary for real healing (with very few exceptions).

## **MYTH 7** If the affair is over, friendship with the affair partner does not have to end.

As long as they promise to no longer cross any boundaries, some argue, they should not have to give up the friendship with their affair partner. In some instances, a long relationship history has been established. Sometimes they are co-workers. Just because they took the relationship too far, it doesn't have to end, does it?

**The Reality:** Yes, it does. If a couple wants to repair and renew their marriage, the betrayed spouse is the only person who has the right to approve a continuing relationship between an unfaithful partner and their former affair partner; and that probably will not happen. The "No Contact" rule is a common standard in affair recovery because of the many risks involved.

To minimize any future vulnerability with the affair partner and re-establish trust with a spouse, great efforts should be made to break off personal contact, even if it means making some life changes. In cases where complete disconnection cannot happen (legal issues, family connections, etc.), the married couple needs to clearly define the boundaries of that relationship, primarily determined by the betrayed partner's expectations.

## **MYTH 8** Forgiveness requires trusting.

After their affair, unfaithful partners often seem irritated when their spouses becomes suspicious or expects assurance of changed behavior. They've decided, somehow, that since their betrayed partner agreed to stay in the marriage, they should be able to just "move on" and stop bringing up anything related to the affair. They'll say, "If you forgive me, you need to trust me."

**The Reality:** Forgiveness and trust are two different things. The first is given, the second needs to be earned. The two don't always go together.

It's possible for a wounded spouse to forgive the offender (no longer holding the offense against them) while refusing to trust them again. That choice allows a betrayed spouse to confidently leave a marriage while letting go of damaging emotional baggage. But those who choose to forgive and learn to trust again will require ongoing evidence of honest behavior before they feel safe again.

## **MYTH** An affair is too personal to talk about with anyone.



The shame attached to infidelity often causes people to remain silent about this significant event in their lives. The fear of judgment (including long-term stigmatizing) or misunderstanding causes them to conclude that nobody else should know about it.

**The Reality:** Some people talk too much about their affair, but the greater tendency is to talk too little. I encourage every client to have at least one confidant. Without an outlet for the internal emotional pressures, other psychological or physical problems will likely develop.

Honest, vulnerable conversations with a confidant are beneficial to both the betrayed and unfaithful partner. Follow these guidelines:

- Your confidant should be committed to your well-being. Avoid those who are likely to push you with their own agendas; choose someone who values your growth and healing, no matter what that might look like.
- Your confidant should be trustworthy, able to guard your privacy. Don't talk to someone who is a gossip.
- Your confidant should not have romantic potential. The emotional neediness you've experienced can create a vulnerable context in which unintended emotional bonds can be formed with others. Avoid the risk of being drawn into another relationship before you heal. Of course, for the unfaithful spouse, this omits the affair partner from being an appropriate choice.

## **MYTH** The betrayed spouse will feel relieved once they get an answer to WHY the affair happened.



One of the first statements I hear from a hurt spouse is, "I just need to understand why this happened." Some believe that if they can once they get that answer, they will know what to fix so that it never happens again.

**The Reality:** Answers to the why questions are important to understand in order to provide clarity to the past and changes for the future, but they seldom brings the desired relief for the following reasons.

- To the wounded partner, even earnest attempts to explain why the affair occurred may sound like excusing or blaming.
- The real question for many is, Why did you do this to ME? But hurting the betrayed spouse is usually a consequence, not an intent, so the answers do not satisfy the question.
- Exploring "why" leads to greater insight into various *vulnerabilities* that existed when affair choices were made, not to a single *cause* of the affair. Even after every vulnerability is identified and explained, the fact remains that the affair was not inevitable. It can always be said, "Yes, but even so, you didn't *have* to lie and cheat." In the end, the betrayer is completely responsible for making a selfish choice.
- No explanation, no matter how complete, can eliminate future risk.

## MYTH An affair ruins your future.



The betrayed spouse feels deep pain. The unfaithful spouse feels heavy shame. Both wonder if there is any hope for experiencing peace or joy again.

**The Reality:** An affair changes your life and your marriage. Neither will be the same afterward, but a different future is not necessarily a ruined one. Infidelity is a wound, not a death blow.

We live in a world of cause and effect, where bad choices have their consequences. But grace exists here as well and it makes room for good things, sometimes beautiful things, to grow out of the rubble.

Whether your marriage ends or rebuilds after the affair, there are more chapters to be written in the story of your life. You have some say in what they will be. You can still have a good ending.

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For more free resources, go to [AffairHealing.com](http://AffairHealing.com).