



My Spouse Cheated. Should I Stay Or Go?

By Tim Tedder | AffairHealing.com

She sat across from me, pulling herself deeper into the corner of the couch while telling me about the discovery of her husband's affair. *"We've been together over 20 years and I never thought he would do this... I always told him that if he ever cheated, I would be out the door. But now it's happened and I'm still here. I don't want to lose him. Am I really that weak? Or am I just crazy?"*

A member of our AH Community posted this: *"I just keep asking myself, why would I stay with someone who isn't sure he wants to be with me? Why would I give him time to figure out who he wants to be with? I always thought that if I was cheated on, I would most definitely leave him in an instant. Now that it has really happened, why am I still here? Am I the weak one? Am I just asking to be hurt again? It's so hard to throw away 13 years together, all the great memories we have. Can it ever come back?"*

These are common questions. People are often confused by their reactions to a spouse's affair. In that confusion, it is natural to wonder if the choices they're making are born out of strength or out of weakness. And the contradictory opinions of the people around them just add to the perplexity.

So how do you decide whether to leave or stay?

You have three options: (1) leave now; (2) give it some time; (3) stay no matter what. Let's consider each of these alternatives.

Option 1: LEAVE NOW

I want to be clear about one thing: if you have been betrayed by your spouse, you have every right to exit your marriage. When trust has been so profoundly broken... when vows have been so deeply violated... nobody should tell you that you are obligated to give your spouse another chance, even if it is your spouse's first and only affair.

And let's be honest; there are advantages to leaving right away. You save yourself from a process of recovery that will be harder than you want, take longer than you expect, and has a rather high rate of failure. It is possible that even after months of agonizing attempts, swinging back and forth between hope and despair, your marriage will end. So why drag things out? Why risk even more hurt? Why not just go ahead and get it over with?

Because there may be hope for healing and the discovery of a marriage that is even more satisfying than the one you experience before. Because you've already invested so much of yourself, and fixing what is broken may ultimately be better than letting it go. And because, generally, it is better to avoid making permanent decisions during the initial stages of a deeply emotional experience. Your first reaction is often not the one you would make after your feelings stabilize. If you've invested years in your marriage, would it be worth waiting a few months before setting your course of action?

Some spouses, like the one mentioned at the beginning of this article, feel self-imposed pressure to leave immediately simply because it is what they always claimed they would do. To consider anything else

seems like cowardly compromise. But the choice to give your marriage more time, if made for the right reasons, is often an act of strength, not weakness.

Under what conditions would I recommend leaving immediately? If your spouse has had previous affairs followed by apologies and repeated promises of "I'll never do this again," then you probably need to go because staying will simply encourage the repetition of this cycle. Don't try to save your marriage; don't try to fix things. It's not your responsibility anymore. Your spouse needs to work alone on his/her own changes, so you need to move deliberately away from your relationship, whether that means separation or divorce.

Option 2: GIVE IT SOME TIME

Cindy (not her real name) anguished over her choice to stay with her husband who had recently been caught having an affair with a coworker. Her usual self-confidence seemed to abandon her, leaving her in tears as she wrestled with the fear that she had become the kind of pathetic, weak woman she used to criticize. In the twenty-plus years of their marriage, she had frequently warned her husband that if he ever cheated on her, their marriage would be over. No second chances. But when it actually happened, she did not follow through on her repeated threats.

Is waiting an act of weakness, or an act of love? It depends. If a betrayed spouse remains in the marriage because they fear being alone, or because they believe they need their spouse in whatever condition they can have him/her, or because there is too much shame in a broken marriage, then the choice is not a healthy one. But if the spouse remains because the history of the marriage and family holds enough value worth salvaging, or because they want to be part of their spouse's recovery/healing, or because the choice to stay is most consistent with the kind of person they want to be (or believe they were created to be), then it is a choice of strength.

Here's the problem: In an affair crisis, both spouses may experience wide swings in their awareness of what they want. The affair spouse often feels caught between not being ready to let go of the marriage while still longing to be with the affair partner. The betrayed spouse can feel both repulsion and attraction to their spouse. The intensity of this emotional confusion often leads them to wonder, Am I going crazy? It is a constantly changing environment; not a context in which permanent life choices should be made.

If you've recently found out about an affair, take time before making any final decisions regarding your marriage. Get counseling. Set boundaries between you and your spouse if they are still caught in some sort of affair confusion. Do whatever you need to make sure you are safe (relationally, physically, financially) and wait two or three months before you make any decision to end your marriage. Focus on clarifying what it means for you to be whole and healthy, then make your choices.

Option 3: STAY NO MATTER WHAT

I was raised to believe in the permanence of marriage. The words 'til death do us part are meant to be a sacred vow, not just a statement of optimistic hope. I learned that "God hates divorce," reinforcing the expectation that once a person committed to marriage, they were in it for life. Many betrayed spouses, raised with these (or similar) convictions, feel guilty at the very thought of leaving their spouse. Choosing to walk away from their marriage means disappointing God, the church, or their family. They are too hurt to stay, but too ashamed to go.

This is an unnecessary trap. Yes, the bible states that "God hates divorce." But there are things that God seems to hate even more than divorce, and adultery is one of them. If your spouse has had an affair, God doesn't require you to stay in your marriage (Matthew 19:4-9). You have a choice.

Is it ever healthy for a person to remain married to a spouse who continues in infidelity? Perhaps, if their choice is based on grounded inward principles (not shame driven), if they accept that the behavior of the spouse may not change (not manipulative), and if they can be content with their choice despite the circumstances (not resentful). Few people, in my experience, are capable of doing this.

Normally, when betrayed spouses sense no real changes in their wife/husband, I encourage them to set healthy boundaries in the relationship and then determine a reasonable date by when they expect to see some movement toward healthy change. This date becomes a line in the sand. It can be adjusted to an earlier or later date, but it is kept private. They should contemplate their course of action, deciding what they will do if they reach that line and nothing has improved. At that point, they may stop considering how to work on a healthy marriage, since their partner is no longer cooperating. Instead, they move away from the marriage to work on becoming a whole and healthy individual.

Each time I sit across the room from a marriage that has bleeding from the deep wounds of an affair, I long to help them find a way toward recovery. The goal is not to just get back to what they had before, but to something even better. But while I always try to point toward hope, I promise to be honest with them. I wish they all could stay together. For some, the better choice will be to go.