

REBUILDING TRUST

(Adapted from *After the Affair: Healing the Pain and Rebuilding Trust When a Partner has been Unfaithful* by Janis Abrahms Spring, Ph.D. with Michael Spring, pgs. 147-159.)

Compiled by Laura M. Brotherson, LMFT, CST – The Marital Intimacy Institute (Feb 2022)

The following information gives an overview of the process of rebuilding trust after infidelity and provides a worksheet to list out your Trust-Building Behaviors to do every day to rebuild trust in your marriage.

Five Elements of Trust

- (1) Clarity (honesty)
- (2) Consistency (reliability)
- (3) Compassion (care, comfort, responsiveness)
- (4) Communication (openness)
- (5) Courage (to forgive, to change, to trust again)

Trust is not a gift. It must be earned, and not with verbal reassurances alone, but with specific changes in behavior.

You, the unfaithful partner, need to demonstrate to your partner through bold, concrete actions that “I’m committed to you. You’re safe with me.” Your main job during this process is to be dependable, consistent, responsive and comforting. You, the hurt partner, need to open yourself to the possibility of trusting again, and reinforce your partner’s efforts to win back your confidence.

Rebuilding Your Relationship

You’re likely to spend months, perhaps years, working to restore trust and intimacy. I hope to give you the tools to:

- decipher the meaning of the affair, and accept an appropriate share of responsibility for it
- say goodbye to the affair

- earn back trust (if you’re the unfaithful partner), or communicate what you need to trust again (if you’re the hurt partner)
- talk in ways that allow your partner to hear you and understand your pain, and listen in ways that encourage your partner to be open and vulnerable with you
- recognize how you may have been damaged by early life experiences, and how you can keep these experiences from contaminating your relationship today
- manage your differences and dissatisfactions, so that you can stay attached even when you don’t feel particularly loved or loving
- become sexually intimate again
- forgive your partner, and yourself

There are many things you both can do to restore trust. I find it helpful to divide them into two categories—what I call low-cost behaviors and high-cost behaviors. As you might expect, the low-cost behaviors are generally easier to produce because they demand less of you emotionally. High-cost behaviors require a much greater sacrifice.

Low-Cost Behaviors

Below is a list of some low-cost, trust-enhancing behaviors that you may want from your partner. Some of them your partner may already do, others your partner may rarely or never do. Using these behaviors

as a starting point, make your own list of what you want from your partner, and write it in the Trust-Building Chart.

You, the hurt partner, need to request behaviors that make you feel more cared for, appreciated, and secure (“Tell me when you run into ‘her/him;’” “Show me affection at times without making it sexual”).

You, the unfaithful partner, need to request behaviors that reassure you that your efforts to restore trust are paying off (“Tell me when you feel more optimistic about our future together”) and that your partner is trying to address your dissatisfaction at home (“Show understanding of my need to spend some time alone”; “Tell me when you like the way I interact with the kids”).

Be sure to address all aspects of your relationship—communication, free time, finances, sex, the children and other family members, personal habits, and so on. Many of the behaviors you request, your partner may also ask of you.

Here’s a list of some low-cost trust-building behaviors:

- “Provide me with an accurate itinerary when you travel.”
- “Limit your overnight travel.”
- “Tell me if you ever run into ‘her/him.’”
- “Tell me if ‘he/she’ contacts you.”
- “Show me what pleases you sexually.”
- “Tell me when you feel proud of me, and why.”
- “Call me during the day.”
- “Tell me how you feel—share your intimate thoughts with me.”
- “Tell me when you like the way I look.”
- “Tell me when you feel happy or more optimistic about our future together.”
- “Come home from work in time to have dinner with the family.”
- “Plan time to be alone with me.”

- “Spend more time in foreplay—kissing and touching.”
- “Tell me what upset you during the day.”
- “Tell me what pleased you during the day.”
- “Focus on what I’m saying, and don’t be distracted when we talk.”
- “Tell me when you feel I’ve let you down.”
- “Work on letting your anger go and getting back on track with me.”
- “Take a massage class with me.”
- “Show me affection outside the bedroom.”
- “Buy new furniture for the bedroom (where you brought ‘him/her’).”
- “Talk to me directly about your feelings. Don’t clam up and withdraw or attack me. Don’t use humor or sarcasm to make your point.”
- “Ask me how I feel; don’t interpret my behavior or assume you know how I feel.”
- “Hold me and show understanding when I’m upset; don’t give up on me.”
- “Make weekend plans for us.”
- “Work on being more understanding of my need to take on independent projects; don’t assume I’m just trying to escape you.”
- “Tell me when you feel insecure about us, rather than assume I’m deceiving you.”
- “Read and discuss a self-help book with me about making our relationship better.” (Among those I’d recommend are *Private Lies* by Frank Pittman, *Dreams of Love and Fateful Encounters* by Ethel Spector Person, and *Love and Renewal* by Larry Bugen.)

In putting together your own Trust-Building Behaviors lists, be sure to:

1. Be as positive and specific as possible. Make your list more than a litany of complaints. If you indicate only what your partner does that irritates or hurts you, you're not communicating what you want and are bound to throw your partner on the defensive. Concentrate on what you want your partner to do—on those specific, observable behaviors that will bring you closer together. For example, instead of requesting something general or negative (“Don’t be so controlling”), tell your partner in positive and specific terms exactly what you need (“Go along with my agenda at times, even if it’s not exactly what you want to do, and be gracious about it”).

2. Respect your partner’s requests as being important to him or her. Each list is extremely personal; what comforts you (for example, “Call me during the day and show interest in how I’m feeling”) may only annoy your partner. The changes you’re asked to make may seem frivolous or gratuitous to you, but you need to respect that they matter to your partner.

3. Respond to different requests on different days. Vary the requests you choose to fulfill. Don’t just repeat one or two and ignore the rest. Remember: The small, caring things you do for each other from day to day make a tremendous difference in the way you feel toward each other. So do their absence.

4. Put your lists in a visible place. Display them on a refrigerator door or in some other accessible spot so that you’re constantly reminded to satisfy each other’s requests. If you’re worried that your children or visitors will see them, find a more private place, such as inside a closet door or on a bathroom mirror.

5. Record the date on your Trust-Building Chart each time your partner satisfies one of your requests. It may sound compulsive, but by acknowledging your partner’s conscious efforts to please you, you reinforce them and increase the likelihood that they’ll continue. You also may correct a cognitive error in yourself known as selective negative focus, in which you dwell on the negative and screen out whatever contradicts it. It’s normal for you to recall the bad times

more vividly than the good, to sum up the day more in terms of moments that disappoint you or fire up your mistrust, than in terms of those that reinforce a feeling of well-being. By recording the dates of your partner’s actions, however, you remind yourself that change is possible. Should you despair of moving forward, and believe, “I’m the only one who’s trying” or “Nothing I do matters anyway—I’ll never be forgiven,” you have only to refer back to the dates on the chart for a reality check that should make you feel more appreciative, hopeful, and patient.

6. Do what your partner requests, whether or not you feel hopeful about the future. There may be times when reconnecting seems impossible—when you look at your partner and wonder, “Can you really change enough for me to love you, or for me to feel loved by you, again? Do you really care about me, or are you just going through the motions?” Try to hang on at these moments. Your doubts may be fed by your own fears and insecurities. They may also be triggered by a partner as scared and hurt as you are, who is ignoring your needs temporarily to test your resolve and gauge the depth of your commitment. If you stop trying because your partner has, you give that person a chance to blame you for the breakdown of the relationship. If you continue to fulfill your partner’s requests and refuse to get derailed, your partner will be forced to confront not you, but his or her own resistance.

7. Add new requests to your list and discuss them as you learn more about yourself and about what you need to feel secure and loved. When Martha’s husband took her to an office party, he abandoned her to the crudités and hardly spoke to her all night. The next day she added the following request to her list: “When we go out together, touch base with me frequently, put your arm around me or hold my hand if you’re feeling loving toward me, and make me feel you’re proud of me by introducing me to your friends.” As you interact in more conscious ways, you’ll recognize additional behaviors that please or upset you. Add them to your list. The more information you can give your partner about what matters to you, the more you enable your partner to make you happy.

Let's look briefly at how one couple, Arlene and Tim, used low-cost behaviors to restore trust.

Arlene wanted to feel more loved, and Tim wanted to feel more accepted for who he was. Arlene had slept with a colleague at work—not to replace Tim, she insisted, but because she felt lonely and neglected. Her list of low-cost behaviors was relatively short, but it got to the heart of what Tim could do to make her feel more cherished:

- “Smile at me and give me your full attention when you talk to me.”
- “Speak to me in a warmer, more loving tone of voice.”
- “Invite me to join you in fun activities; make plans in advance so I can
- look forward to them.”
- “Take my hand when we walk.”
- “Tell me when you feel love for me.”
- “Tell me why you love me.”

Tim's list, also short, voiced his need to feel that he could be himself, that “there was room in our relationship for me to be me”:

- “If I'm quiet, ask me what's on my mind; don't assume I'm withdrawing from you or feeling critical.”
- “Show understanding of my need to work a few hours at the office on weekends.”
- “Realize that I talk more slowly than you, so don't interrupt me. Paraphrase my point of view; help me to open up.”
- “Show more interest in what interests me—politics, for example.”
- “Do more to share the costs and the work of keeping up our condo.”

Nothing that Tim and Arlene put on their lists, or that you and your partner put on yours, should be taken as a demand or a requirement—so don't be afraid to write down everything that matters to you. Talk over what you're asking for and what you expect the positive impact to be. Once you're clear about your partner's requests, try to adhere to as many of them as you can and to act in new ways that you know will be supportive. I encourage you to see yourself at a crossroads, deciding which route to take by asking, “How would I normally handle this situation? What's my usual pattern? What

response does it evoke in my partner? What would happen if I behaved differently?”

When Arlene felt her old urge to pounce on Tim at a restaurant for being so silent and self-absorbed, she stopped and asked herself, “What on Tim's list can I do to make him feel more accepted? Am I taking his behavior too personally?” Instead of berating him, she took his hand and said, “You seem lost in your own thoughts. What's going on?” Appreciating her efforts to reach out to him, he was able to tell her that he had been watching the couple next to them and thinking how bad he was at making conversation. Remembering her list of requests, he revealed his true feelings—that in spite of his silence he was feeling close to her. He then took her hand and kissed it.

Low-cost behaviors can inject fresh blood into your relationship at a time when you've been hemorrhaging. This is likely to create a dramatic surge in trust, and allow you to feel more hopeful and connected. Unfortunately, the transfusion is seldom enough to revitalize a damaged relationship, and the effects often fade within weeks. While you both should continue with these low-cost behaviors—you need them to jumpstart your relationship and get you to believe in each other again—you, the unfaithful partner, must be prepared for some greater sacrifices.

High-Cost Behaviors

The hurt partner shoulders a disproportionate share of the burden of recovery once the affair is revealed. While you both may struggle to make sense of what happened, it's you, the hurt partner, who almost always has a heavier emotional load to carry. It's your job to control your obsessions, calm the rage inside you that continues to scream out at the pain of rejection, restore your lost sense of self, act in ways that are attractive to your partner, risk being vulnerable and intimate again, and forgive yourself as well as your mate.

In contrast, you, the unfaithful partner, typically want to be done with it: You've confessed, you've pledged fidelity—why, you wonder, shouldn't you be trusted now? More often than not, you feel relieved, cleansed, ready to move on. You may even feel emotionally

strengthened by an affair that has reaffirmed your desirability. In short, it's in your interest to trust and forgive, while it's in your partner's interest not to trust and forgive, at least not too quickly.

Both of you need to exchange low-cost behaviors as a way of correcting and sharing responsibility for what went wrong in your relationship. High-cost behaviors are the responsibility of you, the unfaithful partner, alone. They're the sacrificial gifts, the penances, that you must consider making to redress the injury you've caused, and rebalance the scale. It's not enough for you to say, "Trust me, honey—I'm here to stay." You have to back your claim with dramatic gestures that are "expensive"—in other words, that require real sacrifice and will probably make you feel uncomfortable and vulnerable. These high-cost behaviors shouldn't be arbitrary or punitive. They're specific actions that your partner requests of you, or that you commit to on your own, which give your partner reason to believe that you won't stray again and that investing in the relationship isn't a foolish waste of time.

Here are some examples of high-cost behaviors:

- "Don't contact or associate with 'him/her' circle of friends or relatives."
- "Quit the club or association to which 'he/she' belongs."
- "Transfer some of your assets into my name."
- "Put some of your money into a joint account."
- "Assign your secretary [the affair partner] to someone else, and if that's not possible, find another job."
- "Register the house in my name."
- "Go on a romantic vacation with me."
- "Pay for me to complete my college education."
- "Show me your monthly bank statements, credit card statements, and phone bills."
- "Get into therapy and discuss starting a family with me."
- "Do whatever it takes to give up drugs or alcohol (enter an inpatient detox facility or regularly attend AA meetings)."
- "Move to another town with me."
- "Explore in therapy the effects of your father's/mother's infidelity on you."

- "Get into couples therapy with me and work to figure out exactly what the affair says about you, about me, and about us."
- "Answer all my questions about the lover in front of a therapist, so I'm more certain that you're telling the truth."

The difference between high-and low-cost behaviors is totally subjective, and varies from one person to the next. What one of you finds easy to comply with ("Throw away your pornography collection"), another may find threatening and compromising. How critical a particular behavior is for you depends in part on the circumstances of the affair. If your wife financed her weekly rendezvous from a personal account, you may find it essential to have access to her bank and credit card statements. If your husband was sleeping with his secretary, you may require him to change jobs, or secretaries. It can be particularly stressful for you, the unfaithful partner, to negotiate high-cost behaviors that threaten your sense of self, as defined by your income or career. Compromise is possible, however, as the following case illustrates.

Roy, an established attorney in a small suburban community, had a history of one-night stands, usually with women he picked up in bars. One night his wife, Barbara, came home early and found him in bed with his latest find. When she shared her humiliation with a friend, she discovered that everyone in town already knew about her husband's womanizing—neighbors, the owner of her favorite restaurant, even her son. "I was so publicly disgraced, I couldn't imagine functioning in this community anymore," she told me.

Roy seemed sincere about controlling his sexual addiction and entered individual and couples therapy to prove it. But Barbara was nervous about the future. A proud woman nearing retirement age, she felt incapable of creating enough financial security for herself to maintain a fraction of her current lifestyle. "What if Roy not only cheats on me again but leaves me?" she asked. "What if I feel I have to leave him? How would I support myself?" Barbara considered cutting her losses, ending the thirty-six-year-old marriage, and going after the best settlement the courts would grant her. Both partners clearly wanted to stay together, however, so I encouraged Barbara to voice

her anxieties directly to Roy, and to construct with him a list of high-cost behaviors that would directly address those anxieties. What she asked for was this:

- “I’d like him to continue in therapy.”
- “I’d like him to transfer 75 percent of his assets to my name.” (She needed this display of commitment to allay her financial concerns and convince herself that he was serious about staying faithful.)
- “I’d like him to seek a new job in another community, and resettle there with me.” (She felt publicly exposed in her home town.)

Roy was willing to stay in therapy and get help with what he, too, saw as a problem. He also felt comfortable transferring most of his assets into Barbara’s name to demonstrate his commitment in a tangible way. They went to an attorney and worked out an agreement.

The third request—relocating—was the one he had serious trouble with. He found it outrageous, even manipulative. He was established professionally, and moving meant a loss of status and income. He saw, however, that he risked losing Barbara if he gave her too little too late, and that she was asking him to agree to a fresh start not to hurt him but to help her believe in him again and overcome her sense of shame. In the end, he pursued a transfer to another town.

Fortunately, by the time it was granted, Barbara felt reintegrated into the community and didn’t want to leave. Roy’s willingness to forfeit what mattered so much to him—to do what it took to help her trust him again—was sufficient for her. His high-cost behavior didn’t by itself restore trust, but, combined with other behaviors, it served as a bridge to recovery.

OTHER RESOURCES FOR REBUILDING TRUST

- ARTICLE - [For the Betrayer: 8 Things You Must Know and Do to Rebuild Trust After an Affair](#)
- ARTICLE - [Reviving Trust After an Affair](#)