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## What's Happening to Us?


*"It's been three weeks since I found out. In some ways, it feels like it just happened, and at the same time it feels like this is going on forever. Just when I start to feel like I'm holding it together, I fall apart again. I know I'm jumpy and irritable. I can't concentrate, I can't sleep, and I'm forgetting things at home and at work. We talk, we avoid each other—it doesn't matter. Nothing's working. This isn't the person I married. I don't trust what I thought we had, and I can't imagine trusting again in the future. Nothing makes sense anymore."*

## What's Going On with Me?

If you've just learned that your partner has had an affair, you're struggling with one of the most traumatic experiences a person can face. (If you're the person who had the affair, you're likely also struggling, and we'll talk about that later in the chapter.) There are all kinds of traumatic events—from floods or plane crashes to infidelity. Any of these can be overwhelming. But natural disasters and mechanical failure are unintentional and typically unavoidable. A partner's affair results from deliberate decisions by your *partner*—the one person who's supposed to love and care for you, protect you from the rest of the world, and treat you with respect, dignity, and honesty. For many people, few betrayals can be more hurtful and disruptive.

Understanding the impact of traumatic events and how most people

recover from them can help you develop a larger picture of what's happening to you and your partner and what's likely to happen to you both in the future. So, first, what *is* a traumatic event?

 A trauma is a major negative event or set of events that destroys important assumptions or fundamental beliefs about the world or specific people—in this case, your partner and your relationship.

Traumatic events disrupt all parts of your life—your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

You assumed that your relationship would be safe and that your well-being would be uppermost in your partner's mind, both when you were together and when you were apart. You trusted that your partner valued you and your relationship. You expected honesty—that no large parts of your partner's life would be hidden from you. Finally, you expected your partner to honor commitments you made to each other—whether stated out loud or just understood.

So what is it about an affair that makes it so painful? If you're like most people, it's particularly upsetting if your partner violates important boundaries in your relationship that you agreed or assumed would be respected. You might have talked about these boundaries (for example, "I don't feel comfortable with you talking to your ex-girlfriend"), or they seemed so obvious to you that you assumed you and partner would honor them (such as "You can't have sex with anyone except your partner; that's a given and no discussion is needed"). Whether you ever stated them explicitly or not, you (and all couples) create boundaries around your relationship that determine how you interact with others—for example, "*This* part of our life is just for the two of us; no one crosses *this* boundary into our relationship. We don't do *this* with other people." Where you and your partner set the boundaries might be different from where other couples set theirs. In affairs, boundaries that are crossed typically involve a couple's sex life (for example, kissing and intimately touching someone else) or romantic connections with others (for example, going on dates with other people when you're in an exclusive relationship or treating a work friend in an overly special way). So, if one of these boundaries has been crossed, of course you're likely to feel betrayed and upset.

For some couples and perhaps for you, it's also a violation if your partner *feels* particularly intimate with another person, even if it's just "inside their head" and not acted upon (for example, fantasizing and having strong feelings about another person). The main point is: *If you're experiencing that your partner has had an affair or has been unfaithful, in most instances this means that your partner has disrespected important boundaries around your relationship in one way or another.* Boundaries protect us and give us safety. And crossing the boundary is made worse if your partner tries to hide, minimize, or even lie about what has happened because it makes restoring trust even more difficult.

It's important that both of you be clear on what boundary violations have occurred. Throughout the book, we'll discuss different types of boundaries that partners sometimes cross that can throw their relationships into chaos; most likely, some of those will ring true for you. It's also important for both of you to understand how the violation came about; an explanation of "it just happened" won't protect you and your relationship from similar betrayals in the future.

Whereas understanding the betrayal of infidelity and how it happened is crucial, often this isn't enough because the impact goes far beyond those specific betrayals. Becoming aware that your partner has betrayed you might call into question other important assumptions you have about your partner and your relationship. How many of the following thoughts have you had since learning of your partner's affair?

- You question previous beliefs about your partner—for example, no longer viewing your partner as caring or trustworthy.
- Your beliefs about the relationship are shattered—for example, you no longer view your relationship as a source of support or fulfillment.
- You adopt extreme, negative explanations for your partner's behavior—for example, thinking your partner *wanted* to hurt you deeply.
- You fear that other betrayals may remain hidden or lie ahead.
- You have the sense that your relationship is beyond your control—that you have little influence over what happens between you and your partner.

Learning about your partner's affair may even lead you to question beliefs or feelings about yourself—for example:

- You feel foolish or ashamed for not having recognized warning signs earlier.
- You don't trust your own judgment, or you blame yourself for not listening to concerns about your partner expressed by family or friends.
- You wonder about your own attractiveness or whether you fell short as a partner in important ways.

Not surprisingly, people are at high risk for developing significant depression and anxiety after experiencing a betrayal such as an affair, just as they would after any significant loss. Affairs bring about many losses—loss of safety and predictability, loss of dreams for your relationship and perhaps for your future, loss of innocence, loss of trust. These are on top of the loss of something special and unique that you two shared exclusively: sex, romance, and your innermost thoughts and feelings.

You might experience a wide range of other negative feelings as well, from anger to anxiety and fear or even guilt and shame. Anger is a common reaction to believing you've been treated unfairly, and affairs feel extremely unfair. Does your anger make sense? Absolutely. Fear and anxiety arise when your world feels unsafe and unpredictable. A partner's affair breaks down all the protective walls, and suddenly nothing feels safe or predictable anymore.

Guilt usually results when you think you're to blame or have done something wrong. In trying to make sense of a partner's affair, some people conclude, "At some level, it must be my fault. I must have done something to cause it to happen." Those feelings, too, are understandable, but make no mistake about it: ***Your partner's affair isn't your fault.*** In Part II of this book, we'll help you explore your own role in creating your relationship with your partner. But your partner has to take responsibility for their own individual behavior—and that includes the decision to have an affair.

Which of these feelings have you already experienced? You may experience some of the following later on, if you haven't already.

- You feel strong, overwhelming emotions such as anger, depression, or anxiety.
- On the other hand, at times you feel nothing at all, just numb or flat.
- You feel profoundly vulnerable and unsafe.
- Your feelings are unpredictable, possibly changing daily or hourly.
- You're confused about what you feel and about what you want either now or in the future.

On a fundamental level, an affair throws your normal emotional state into total disarray. Your feelings might change from one minute to the next. Or they might be so jumbled together that you don't know what you feel. Maybe you're not really feeling much of anything—and think there must be something wrong with you because you're not. Research suggests that a trauma is often followed by an initial sense of numbness, possibly as a way of protecting ourselves from being overwhelmed by intense feelings. In most cases, those feelings surface at some later point. How many of the following descriptions fit with your own experience?

- You have flashbacks in which you reexperience painful feelings, memories, or images from the affair. (We'll discuss these further in Chapter 2.)
- You feel as though your emotions can overwhelm you or are out of your control.
- You have periods of numbness when you don't feel much of anything at all.

If you're one of those people who *is* experiencing a lot of strong emotion, your behavior is also likely to be out of character or at times even chaotic. When you can no longer trust or believe what you've always taken as a given, you're not likely to act the way you used to either. You might find yourself shouting at a grocery store clerk for no good reason or showing up unannounced at your partner's office to talk—only to change your mind and leave abruptly. Or you may find yourself driving toward the outside

affair person's home or place of business, not entirely clear about what you would do or say if you were to confront that person. You might even find that, at times, you act outside of your own value system, which can be confusing to you and make matters worse; for example, research suggests that some people become physically aggressive toward their partner or the outside person after they find out about an affair. While anger is common, such aggression is obviously problematic and potentially dangerous. If you're struggling with managing your anger, you may want to jump ahead to the guidelines for handling strong emotions in Chapter 3.

Which of the following describe some of your own experiences?

- You act disoriented—for example, staring off into space or wandering about with no apparent purpose or direction.
- You retreat emotionally or physically—for example, withdrawing into long silences or avoiding interaction and finding places to be alone.
- You repeatedly ask for an explanation of your partner's behavior—for example, "How could you do this?"
- You seek revenge—for example, attacking your partner verbally or physically, destroying your partner's property, or harming their relationships with others.
- You try to reassure yourself—for example, initiating frequent and intense sexual encounters with your partner in an attempt to make up for your partner's previous complaints about your sexual relationship.

Your usual daily routines with your partner may also be called into question. Are you really going to get up and make coffee for someone who betrayed you? You used to give each other a quick kiss when one of you left in the morning—but now that feels awkward. Or perhaps now when your partner touches you, you cringe as it brings back painful memories, or instead maybe you want to sink into an embrace, trying to feel connected again. Should you still go out to dinner together with friends? If so, are you cold and distant, or do you pretend to be the happy couple while inside you just want to scream? Behaviors you took for granted, which had become routine and almost automatic, now seem awkward, disgusting, or unsafe.

The bottom line is that a partner's affair is a big deal. *It's traumatic.* It involves violations of boundaries and core assumptions about your partner, your relationship, and perhaps even yourself. You can anticipate a wide variety of feelings, most of them negative. And at times you're going to say and do things that just aren't like you. It's miserable. It feels awful. But it's also a normal reaction to what's happened. And our research and clinical work with couples strongly suggest that if you go through the recovery process in a healthy manner, these feelings won't remain as strong as they are right now, and they won't be there all the time. Things can get better.

## What's Happening to Our Relationship?

Part of what's happening to you as a couple right now is a direct result of the turmoil that's going on with each of you individually. Let's face it: No matter how well your partner might be managing their own feelings, your relationship isn't likely to go well when you're still struggling with the initial trauma of finding out about the affair. You're not likely to express yourself effectively. You're probably not able to listen in a caring way to your partner's views. You may find it difficult to work together on even routine tasks such as paying bills together, making decisions about the children, dealing with a car that needs repair, or the hundreds of other mundane chores involved in having a committed partnership. And when these tasks don't get done, the negative consequences of neglecting them can bring additional stress. The phone company threatens to disconnect your phone; one of the kids gets into trouble at school; the rattle under the hood turns into a major engine overhaul with no money to pay for it.

All that can happen even when your partner is handling their own feelings reasonably well. Chances are they aren't. Independent of what you're feeling, your partner is probably struggling with their own turmoil. Right now, you may have too much of your own hurt or anger to be very sympathetic. That's understandable. But at some point, if you want to be able to interact more effectively, you're going to need a better understanding of what your partner is experiencing. Reading the material on pages 23–27, where we speak to your partner, might be helpful when you decide you want to gain more of this understanding. But for now, just consider that your partner is probably wrestling with difficult feelings too—possibly

including confusion and uncertainty about the future, anxiety about your relationship, aloneness, hurt, anger, guilt, or shame. In fact, even if *you* are managing your own feelings well, there's a good chance your relationship would still be feeling crazy because of what's going on with your partner right now.

Mix together these two factors—your own turmoil and your partner's—and you have the perfect formula for chaos. Just when you feel able to talk constructively, your partner won't. And just when your partner feels able to approach you or respond constructively, you can't. Moreover, whatever feelings either one of you is struggling with at any given moment can trigger equally intense and difficult feelings in the other.

To understand why this happens, it's helpful to think of your interactions as serving three functions—communication, protection, and restoration—each of which is made more difficult by the trauma of the affair:

- 1. It's too hard for your partner to hear what you feel has to be said.** You want your partner to understand the awful feelings and confusion caused by the affair. Those feelings are intense, sometimes exceeding your ability to express them well. And if your partner cares for you at all, hearing you express these feelings will be uncomfortable or even painful—especially if they're struggling with their own guilt or shame. After all, your partner was the source of your trauma, so hearing you talk about it may increase their own distress or impulse to pull back or stop listening when you continue to express your feelings. At that point you're likely to feel unheard, and you're going to crank up the volume. But then a person who already feels on the defensive or overwhelmed by the intensity of your feelings is going to pull back even further or possibly lash out in response, and you're going to feel even less heard and less understood. It's a vicious cycle of wanting to be understood and instead feeling less and less heard by your partner.

- 2. The need to feel safe often means trying to protect yourselves from each other.** In addition to wanting to be understood, both you and your partner want to feel safe. But you can't feel emotionally safe when you're afraid you might be hurt again. You've probably heard of the "fight-or-flight" response to feeling threatened. When you choose to "fight" in response to danger, you go on the offensive and keep others away by



threatening to do them harm. So, in an effort to protect yourself, you may sometimes punish your partner verbally: “How could you be so cruel? I hate you.” “Where was your integrity? Just wait until I tell the children.”

Forcefully pursuing control can be another way to “fight” your way to safety: “You’re never going anywhere again without my knowing where and without checking in.” “You can’t be trusted; I want our bank accounts signed over to me.” Physical aggression can be still another way of seeking safety, even when initiated by someone who’s physically smaller and less powerful. It’s a way of saying “Stay away from me unless you want to get hurt.” However, fighting in a relationship is rarely an effective way to ensure safety and can lead to counterattacks from your partner.

Some partners who need safety choose “flight” instead of “fight,” retreating physically by demanding separate bedrooms or separate living quarters or retreating verbally—withdrawing into silence and refusing to interact. Other kinds of retreat can be more subtle. For example, some couples end up leading a civil life together but really talk only about superficial things, ignoring more difficult issues and never restoring an intimate relationship.

What can make this all very complicated and confusing is that your efforts to create safety can backfire. For example, when your questioning triggers an angry defense from your partner, each of you may be trying to feel safer but instead end up feeling more threatened. Or there may be times when you’ve pulled back into silence and your partner tries to reassure you, but your partner’s caring behaviors feel too scary for you, and you use anger to push your partner away.

**3. It’s not just the thought that counts in efforts to restore the relationship—it’s applying the right strategies at the right time.** Each of you may be trying in your own way to restore your relationship, but these efforts just aren’t working. Those who have been involved in an affair often try to repair their relationship by convincing the injured partner that the affair didn’t really mean anything or that they’re totally committed to the relationship but just didn’t realize it before. Injured partners sometimes try to restore their relationship by trying to push thoughts of the affair completely out of their minds or by finding out “why” the partner had the affair. Such attempts may ultimately reflect the right goal, but they can fall short unless they are well thought through:

- **Is this the right move?** Sometimes efforts backfire, doing more damage instead of restoring the relationship. For example, trying to promote closeness by insisting that you and your partner do everything together may instead make your partner feel suffocated and desperate to escape.
- **Is it the right time?** Even fundamentally good strategies have to be implemented in the right order. Insistence on having long discussions about what led to the affair, while ultimately a crucial part of restoring long-term security to your relationship, won't be constructive if one of you still feels deeply misunderstood or too emotionally vulnerable to the other. Deciding when to have difficult discussions can be critical to listening well and hearing what your partner has to say.

Fortunately, both ineffective strategies and poor timing often can be avoided. In fact, the whole purpose of this book is to provide you with effective ways of communicating, reestablishing safety, and restoring individual and relationship security—and implementing these strategies in a sequence and time frame that are more likely to be successful.

## Do We Have a Future Together?

This question may be the most important issue you're facing right now. Can you and your partner truly recover? Can you restore a trusting, loving relationship and move on together to bring each other joy and enrich one another's life?

Our answer to this is "Maybe." We can tell you that among legally married couples in which one member has recently learned of the partner's affair, only a minority go on to divorce. Most, approximately 60–75%, remain married. Among those couples who stay together, many go on to restore a loving and secure relationship. But some couples struggling to recover from an affair remain married yet continue feeling hurt, distrustful, and very unhappy. It's also not clear to what extent affairs lead to break-ups for couples who aren't legally married; there's little research on these couples, and moreover, they don't have to deal with the legal complications

of ending a marriage. So it might be easier to end these relationships from a practical and legal standpoint, although not necessarily easier emotionally. For couples who have relationship agreements that may allow for romantic and sexual involvement with others (for example, some people in polyamorous or “open” relationships), boundaries still exist (“You can sleep with other people, but don’t fall in love with them”) and can be crossed (secretively or not), although there are no data on whether those relationships are more likely to end after an affair. The important message is that what will happen with your relationship as you move forward isn’t predetermined; this is up to the two of you, and there are lots of factors to consider in making those decisions.

At this point you’re undoubtedly struggling with so many confusing emotions that you don’t even know whether you both *want* to stay together. That’s fine. Just keep in mind that eventually you’ll have to figure out what you both want in addition to what’s possible. As to whether you can restore a secure relationship, we emphasized in the Introduction that ***couples need to accomplish three critical tasks:***

1. Find ways to manage and minimize the painful emotions
2. Come to understand how the affair came about
3. Reach an explicit, informed decision about how to move forward

If you’ve just recently found out about the affair, you and your partner need to concentrate on task number one, finding ways of surviving the immediate crisis, because it’s difficult to start exploring what happened when you’re preoccupied by confusing and troubling emotions and don’t know how to interact with your partner anymore. This requires managing strong feelings to address a lot of practical decisions in addition to simply taking better care of yourself: Should you touch each other, sleep together, make love? How do you handle anger? How do you start talking about the affair without making things worse? What do you do when your daily routine is disrupted by repeated memories or “flashbacks” of the affair? How do you deal with the outside affair person, and what will you tell your children and others, if anything?

Once you’ve addressed these issues, you’ve cleared a path for determining what happened that led you to this situation. What placed your relationship at risk for an affair? What has to happen so you can eliminate

or reduce those risks in the future? How can you assure yourselves and each other of your commitment to pursuing these changes? ***Answering these questions is difficult, without a doubt, but lies at the very heart of recovery.*** You'll have to be willing to look closely at your relationship, at things that were happening outside your relationship, at your partner and even yourself if you want to get more complete answers. As we said earlier, no one is responsible for their partner's infidelity, but it's important to find out whether you contributed to an environment that makes either partner susceptible to an affair.

Difficult conversations with Damien led Liz to conclude that there were some early warning signs of Damien's emotional withdrawal before he had his affair, but at the time these felt too threatening to Liz to confront directly. To eliminate the danger of the same pattern happening again, Liz ultimately agreed that she would ask Damien what was going on with him if she thought he was withdrawing again, and Damien agreed that he would address her concerns directly and honestly. Both agreed to work at expressing and responding to such concerns without anger. Each pledged to protect their relationship from situations that had placed them at risk for an affair in the past, and they committed to making their marriage their top priority. But it took time and effort to get to this point. The reward, both felt, was worth it all: they reestablished the emotional security that's critical to an intimate relationship.

With that emotional security in place, Liz and Damien were able to reconcile, as many other couples are too. But the goal of doing this work is to reach a healthy, informed decision about how to move on, and that doesn't necessarily mean reconciling or staying together. People can work through this recovery process by restoring their relationship to its previous form, by changing and strengthening it, or by ending it. By "moving on" we mean that each of you will be able to move beyond focusing almost exclusively on the affair, and you'll voluntarily stop punishing each other. Instead, you'll each be able to redirect your efforts toward an emotionally satisfying and productive life, either together or apart. This affair will never be forgotten. But it will no longer dominate your lives.

The step-by-step process for recovering from an affair that we outline in this book has helped many couples move forward in a healthier way. Most—about 70%—choose to rebuild their relationship. Many of

these—nearly half—restore an intimate relationship that's stronger than it was before the affair. Other couples find this process helpful but may continue to struggle with individual or relationship problems that were present long before the affair—such as sexual difficulties, substance use, depression, or other emotional or behavioral difficulties. Some individuals work through the process outlined here and decide to end their relationship and move on separately. Among these, many discover that their improved understanding of themselves and others allows them to develop stronger, deeper relationships in the future, perhaps including a new partner.

Whether you move on together or separately is something we encourage you to decide later, after you've finished obtaining a more complete understanding of what's happened. If you and your partner have already reached a long-term decision about your relationship, that's okay. But we'd still suggest that you hold the decision open and revisit it from time to time as you gain new information and understanding.

In reaching any decision, it's important to understand what was happening with both of you that set the stage for an affair. If you feel ready to consider some of what your partner might be experiencing in all of this at present, read on. If you don't feel receptive to that right now, put the book away for a while and come back to it when you're ready. Ultimately, to move on with your own recovery process, you'll want to continue from here and understand your partner better. It's not uncommon that our most intimate and rewarding relationships are also the source of our deepest hurt and disappointment. However, recovery from even the most profound relationship heartaches *can* occur. The process we've outlined in this book can help.


## For the Involved Partner

*"I know I've screwed up; that's not the problem. The problem is, I don't know how to make it better again. I'm doing everything I know how to get us back on track. But nothing seems to work. She wants to talk about the affair, and I don't. Talking about it just seems to get her more upset. But if I don't talk about it, she thinks I'm trying to hide something, or that I don't understand how hurt she is, or I just*

don't care enough to work on it. Sure I care. That's why I'm trying to avoid these awful arguments we get into every time she asks questions about how I cheated on her. We go over and over the same old stuff. I don't know if there's anything I can do at this point to make things better."

### How Can I Be Helpful?

If your partner has recently learned about your affair, and you're reading this book, you've already taken a critical step toward being helpful.

 The most important things you can communicate to your partner right now are that:

- You want to understand what's happening to each of you.
- You're willing to take a hard look at how this affair came about.
- You want to figure out the best way to move on.

That's what this book is all about. It's going to take patience, commitment to the entire process, and lots of hard work. But continuing to read through the next few pages is an important first step.

You may not be willing to do this. Some people who've had an affair already have their bags packed and have one foot out the door. Others apologize and take their punishment but don't really want to do any additional work to make the relationship right again: "I've ended it; what more do you want?" And even if you *are* willing, you and your partner might not be able to make your relationship survive despite patience, commitment, and hard work. Affairs happen for all kinds of reasons, to all kinds of people in all kinds of circumstances. So we couldn't begin to tell you at this point whether your relationship can—or should—be saved.

As mentioned above, some couples stay together; some don't. Of the couples that stay together, some go on to build a better and stronger relationship; others stay together but remain hurt, angry, distrustful, and generally miserable. The same is true for couples who break up or divorce following an affair. For partners who've done the work to know themselves better, understand their own needs and vulnerabilities, and find a way of

placing their own or their partner's affair into a bigger life picture, moving on separately can sometimes permit new, healthier relationships to develop. But for partners who divorce out of anger, confusion, or just not knowing a process for making good decisions, life after a divorce can continue to feel as hurtful or as empty as the relationship did following the affair.

How can you help the recovery process? For now, we invite you to take three very important steps. None may be easy. Each might be more difficult than the one listed just before it.

**1. Work at understanding your partner's experience.** If you haven't done so already, go back and read this chapter from the beginning. You're going to read about how your affair has impacted your partner. Reading this might be uncomfortable or even painful. But an important message you'll be communicating to your partner is this: "I want to understand how you're feeling right now. Sometimes it's hard for me to listen to you when you're so angry, or to ask about your feelings when you've pulled back into silence. But I do want to understand so I'll know better how to respond."

**2. Commit to a recovery process.** You and your partner don't need to decide right now whether to stay in this relationship for the long term. Instead, we encourage you to commit the necessary time and effort to understand the impact of your affair, explore the various reasons for it, and then decide with your partner how you can each move on to a full and enriching life—together or separately.

**3. Avoid doing more damage.** As obvious as this step sounds, it can be the most difficult of all. Right now, both you and your partner might have some very strong feelings. It's easy to escalate into heated arguments. It's easy to be misunderstood. It's hard to avoid falling into the trap of attacks and counterattacks. In the next three chapters, we're going to give you some concrete steps for avoiding doing more damage. But for now, specific things to do are:

- *Be patient.* If you expect recovery to be quick, you're going to be frustrated. If you expect your partner to get over it, you're going to be disappointed. And if you require yourself to be perfect in your own responses, you're going to feel disillusioned.
- *Be truthful.* Continued dishonesty, deception, and half-truths

ultimately will be more destructive than your affair itself. This doesn't mean that you have to disclose every detail of your affair; that can also be destructive. But if you say something, be sure it's the truth. If your partner asks you a question and you're not yet willing to answer, just say so: "I know this is important to you. And I don't want any more secrets or dishonesty. But I'm not able to talk about this with you yet."

- *Be trusting.* Specifically, trust the process. We're confident that if each of you commits to the process we're going to take you through in this book, you're each going to end up in a better place—less hurt, less angry, and better equipped to move on and lead a happier life again.

## What about Me?

Marcus had been feeling hurt and neglected by Lucia, who seemed to be completely wrapped up in their new baby and too tired to even think about sex. He thought visiting a sexually explicit chat room on the internet would be a safe outlet and never expected to arrange to meet someone in person. It just felt so good to be wanted, and a small part of him felt angry and justified in his behavior. Later, when he looked back on the experience, he felt dirty and ashamed. How could he do that to his new family? What had come over him?

Your partner's probably not the only one who feels misunderstood. There's a good chance you do too. You might be feeling one or more of the following:

*Confused.* "How did I get into this mess? How do I get out of it? How do I make things right again?"

*Hurt.* "Can't she see that I didn't intend to hurt her? What more can I say? Why can't she accept my apology?"

*Angry.* "It's not all me. Yes, I'm the one who had the affair. But this relationship was far from perfect, and he had a lot to do with that. I'm tired of taking all the blame and punishment for this mess. Enough is enough."



*Guilty or ashamed.* “I deserve whatever I get. I want her to forgive me and move on, but that’s probably too much to hope for and certainly too much to ask. I can’t stand to hear her talk about her feelings about the affair; it makes me feel terrible, like I’m a heartless jerk or something. I wish she’d just let it be.”

*Alone.* “If I thought I was alone before, that was nothing compared to how I feel now. Right now I have no one. I don’t know how much longer I can go on this way.”

*Uncertain.* “I just don’t know for sure what I want. I know having an affair wasn’t the right answer to whatever problems or feelings I was having before. But I’m not sure what the right answer is or how to find it.”

During the process you’re about to undertake, you’ll be addressing difficult feelings and questions that you and your partner both have—whether you’re working together as a couple or separately by yourself. Early in this process, your partner might have difficulty listening to what you need or how you feel. Your partner might feel that your relationship is already unbalanced and you’ve been focusing mostly on what *you* want. As you move through this process and are able to listen to your partner’s hurt and pain, often your partner can start to do the same in hearing from you.

We encourage you to be patient and truthful and to trust in the process. We’re not going to ask you and your partner to do this all at once. We’re going to take you through the process step by step. However, as therapists we’ve experienced the remarkable strengths that both partners can bring to a damaged relationship when they’re given a process for doing so. ***We’ve worked with many couples whose relationships actually ended up stronger, more faithful, and more personally fulfilling for both partners after the affair.*** We hope this may be possible for you; but if you need to end the relationship, we’ll try to help you do this constructively.

So what’s next? Whether you’re the injured or the involved partner, do the exercises on the following pages. If you’re reading this book alone and want your partner’s involvement, we encourage you to approach your partner and say something like the following: “I know this is really difficult, but I want us to find a way of working through this situation. I found a book that I think could help us. I’ve read the first chapter, and much of it

makes sense to me. Please read through the first chapter and let me know when you're finished. I need to know whether we can commit to a process that can help us work together to move forward." Find a way to express your wish as an invitation or request, not as a threat or demand. What's important is that the message comes out of your sincere concern for your relationship. Neither of you needs to commit to anything other than the wish that you'll each be able to recover and move on toward a fruitful and happy life.

If your partner still won't join you in working through the recovery process outlined in this book, there are three important things you can still do:

1. **Work through this book on your own.** Begin by working through this first set of exercises to reach for your own personal recovery. You could end up restoring this relationship through your own understanding of what's happened and how to prevent it from happening again. Or, if you end this relationship, your own recovery will leave you better able to pursue a satisfying life single or as part of a new couple.

2. **Don't give up hope.** Your own personal recovery can demonstrate the positive effects of the process and demonstrate to your partner the benefits of joining you in it. Both the research and our clinical experience have shown that in at least half of the cases in which the injured partner started out working alone toward recovery, hope for the relationship was renewed and the partner who had the affair made new efforts to participate.

3. **Do the end-of-chapter exercises by yourself.** Some are designed for you as an individual; others will be for you as a couple. In many cases you can do the couple exercises if you just change them a bit; we'll help you do that.

## EXERCISES

The goal of the exercises at the end of each chapter is to help you take what you've been reading and apply it to your own situation. You'll move closer to recovery as you bring these ideas to life in your own relationship.

Some exercises will suggest that you write things down. We recommend that you create a notebook or use an electronic device where you

keep your responses, no matter how brief or how detailed. If you're working with your partner, it might be good for each of you to have a separate record of your responses. For the exercise that follows for this chapter, we recommend that even if you and your partner are working through the book together, you do it separately and not share your responses with each other for now. Take some time by yourself to look at what's happening for *you* right now.

At times later in the book, we'll suggest you go back and see how things have changed during this journey, so writing down your responses can help you see your progress. Take whatever time you need for each exercise. Give yourself the gift of time to focus and understand and to plan for the future.

### **EXERCISE 1.1** Understanding Your Reactions to What's Happened

Before you can change something, you need to be aware of what's happening. For now, we want to make sure you know what's happening to you individually. Later we'll ask you to try to understand your partner and the affair.

Look again at the lists of common reactions following discovery of an affair described on pages 13–16 in this chapter—including common thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Use those descriptions to help clarify what your own experiences have been.

#### **Thoughts, Assumptions, and Boundaries**

Affairs not only make you feel bad; they also tear away some of your core beliefs about your partner, your relationship, and maybe even yourself. *List your major beliefs or views about your partner, your relationship, or yourself that have been damaged or have changed as a result of the affair. What boundaries have been crossed? For example:*

*“What’s most upsetting to me is that I thought you were the one person in my life I could count on to care for me, and now I can’t.” Or “It seemed so clear to me that we wouldn’t behave that way with other people; how can you say it’s no big deal and I’m overreacting?” Or “I always thought I was weak and couldn’t make it on my own. But since dealing with this, I actually think I’m stronger than I realized.”*

## Feelings

What are the main feelings you're having now and since the affair was revealed? Are you angry, sad, or frightened? Confused or numb? Relieved at having it in the open? Have you had any good feelings as you've talked with your partner—warm, close, reassured, or some other feelings?

*List your major feelings and try to link them to what you're thinking at the time or to what's just happened. For example:*

"I get furious when you refuse to talk to me about what happened."

Or "I get really frustrated when you ask me the same questions night after night." Or "Whenever we work through really painful discussions together, I feel more hopeful."

## Behaviors

When you and your partner are this upset, you might behave in ways that aren't typical for you. This is understandable, given the situation, but if you continue behaving this way for long, things probably won't get better or will even get worse. *List the major ways that you've started behaving differently as an individual that might get in the way of recovery or are making things worse. For example:*

"I've been saying all kinds of cruel things to my partner, but sometimes that makes me feel worse about myself." Or "I'm withdrawing even though I know we have to talk." Or "I'm now checking on my partner constantly—where they are, what they're doing, questioning them about their whereabouts many times a day."

*You might also be acting in some new ways that you feel good about. List those too. For example:*

"I'm standing up for myself now, and that feels good." Or "I'm being totally honest now. If that creates conflict between us, then we'll just have to deal with that. But I like the new, honest part of me."