

Calming the Storm

10 Things to do Immediately Following Discovery of an Affair

By Dr. Butch Losey

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A discussion guide for couples

1- Manage your emotions

Emotional regulation for both partners creates the likelihood that there will be less opportunity for escalation, more open and productive discussions and much better decision making. A critical strategy here is to practice emotional "attunement". Attunement is the ability to focus on the here and now emotions of an experience. Individually, each partner should pay attention to what is going on internally. In situations when one partner is alone and experiencing distress, pay attention to what your body and mind are telling you. Take 30 seconds to a couple of minutes to ask yourself these questions 1) What am I feeling now? 2) What situation or perception is causing me to feel this emotion? and 3) What can I do to take good care of myself? Do this regularly throughout the day.

Attuning to your partner should also be a priority. Do this by paying attention to the partner's cues of distress and responding in a supportive way to the emotions and underlying thinking of the topic expressed. For example, "You are feeling hurt (this is the feeling) because I forgot to call you before I left work (this is the meaning)". Alternatively, try not to ask "what's wrong?" It is better to express understanding, or even an attempt at understanding, than to ask. Taking a non-defensive approach to this is a key ingredient to being successful with attunement.

Managing emotions can also be as simple as knowing when to take a break from heated discussions or taking care to start conversations in a soft, non-confrontational manner. When

couples take breaks during escalating discussions, it can be a good idea to commit to reconnecting to continue the discussion at a specific time, when calmness has returned or a specific relaxing or "distraction" activity has been completed.

2- Think through your decisions

In the first days of learning about infidelity, emotional experiences for both partners are intense. Sometimes couples make decisions in the context of this emotional intensity and can cause long-lasting consequences. Emotionally charged decisions about separating, moving out, divorce, and telling the children about the infidelity can have unintended consequences. If couples are planning to enter therapy, couples are asked to postpone major decisions long enough to work through the initial crisis with a trained clinician.

3- Restrain from contacting the affair partner

Contacting the affair partner should be a well thought through decision. The hurt partner may want to contact the affair partner to get more information, trap the person into giving previously undisclosed information or to threaten disclosure of the affair as retribution. The participating partner may also want to contact the affair partner for closure of the relationship or to warn of impending contact by their spouse. There is limited payoff to any of these scenarios and a good therapist can guide

the couple in understanding the risk and benefits to contacting the affair partner.

4- Tell the whole truth

I tell couples in my practice that the participating partner needs to “tell it like it is” as soon as possible. Leaking information when questioned by your spouse (by telling only partial information) only makes it look like lying when questions are asked a second time and new information is shared. If the participating partner wants to save their primary relationship, they will need to be willing to offer the facts about the affair and offer a timeline of events, including thoughts and feeling around decision-making before, during and after the affair.

5- Answer questions comprehensively

For the participating partner, when asked a question, answer; when asked the same question again, answer. The rule here would be to show your willingness to answer questions and answer them as comprehensively as you can. Also answer similar or redundant questions without irritation and to be expansive as possible in your responses. “I don’t know” and “I can’t remember are not useful. Make sure your responses include information about your behaviors, your thoughts and your feelings.

6- Resist defending the affair partner and calling him or her names

One fantastic way for the hurt partner to create the opportunity to defend the affair partner is to call the person names in front of your spouse. On many occasions when couples come in to treatment, the hurt partner is accustomed to calling the affair partner a whole host of filthy names, whore, slut, etc. The participating partner will likely try to quell the name calling for a variety of reasons, including to reduce their own embarrassment or to demonstrate that the affair partner was not as bad as perceived. Defending this person only creates more hurt. Couples are encouraged to replace name-calling with speaking from their own experience of hurt, discussing the affair’s impact to the relationship and expression of personal thoughts and feelings.

7- Break the attack and defense posturing

It is important to successful discussions and ongoing repair of the relationship that each partner is aware of, and manages, the potential dynamic of attack-defense. The hurt partner needs to manage comments and questions so that they are not interpreted as attacking and construct interactions in a way that that will not create defensiveness. The participating partner needs to try to respond in discussions about the affair as non-defensively as possible, in doing so there will be less potential for aggressive questioning and will also encourage the expression of hurts.

8- Create a non-triggering environment

What triggers the hurt partner? Is it a scene on a television show? How your spouse dresses? Driving by a specific location? It is important that both of you sit down and identify the triggers, what are the early warning signs of the triggers (anxiety, stomach pains, agitation, shortness of breath) and identify specific actions for preventing triggers and intervening when early warning signs are present or triggers happen.

9- Be accountable and accessible

It is important that the work of re-establishing trust start immediately. The participating partner will need to work hard so that he or she can account for all of their time when they are away from their spouse. When schedules change or irregularities in schedules occur, immediate disclosure will be important. It would also be helpful to predict situations that may be uncomfortable for their spouse and avoid these situations.

The participating partner should also be accessible to their spouse. Explanations of poor cell phone reception, cell phone batteries that have died, or situations of not answering text and email messages create strong alarm reactions for the hurt partner. Charging up phones, attending to messages, avoiding hot-spot locations, and offering regular contact when away can make all the difference in establishing *accountability* and *accessibility* and ultimately stability and trust.

10- Validate your partner's experience

A simple communication strategy used by the participating partner that includes the understanding of thoughts, feeling and validates the overwhelming experience of infidelity can make a huge difference in the healing process.

Discussion Questions

Couples are encouraged to read this article and discuss each of these items one at a time. Answer the following questions and discuss your responses with your spouse for each item:

- 1. What do I think about Dr. Losey's perspective on this item? Agree/disagree?*
- 2. How do I evaluate us as a couple on this item?*
- 3. What change would I like us to make concerning this item that would increase stability and trust in the relationship?*

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