

How to Tell Your Partner You Cheated

Objective

To tell your partner you have cheated so you can both move forward.

You Should Know

Telling your partner you have cheated might be one of the most difficult things you ever do – but it will be worse coming from another source. If your relationship is going to survive infidelity, the chances of that happening are greater if you honestly disclose it to your partner. In fact, therapists tell us that telling your partner can actually strengthen your relationship – even when the initial disclosure and work toward rebuilding the relationship is challenging. Admitting you have cheated also gives you the opportunity to rebuild trust.

Cheating is a symptom of bigger problems, and telling your partner might allow for the problems to be resolved. The alternative to disclosure is to keep infidelity a secret, allowing the guilt and shame to erode the connection with your partner.

Here are some suggestions when you decide to tell your partner you have cheated.

- 1. Focus on your mistakes.** In the early stages of talking about it, anything you say to justify or defend what you did might result in your partner getting angry or feeling ashamed. Approach the subject with statements like, “I need to confess because I want to rebuild our trust,” or “I recognize I have made a mistake.” The key is to focus on what you did wrong, not what your partner could have done to prevent you from cheating. Avoid accusatory statements like, “You never make time for me,” or “We never have sex,” because this shifts the blame to your partner.
- 2. Stick to the facts.** Give a clear account of the infidelity, and leave nothing open to interpretation. Avoid lying to make yourself or your partner feel better, but ask your partner if he/she really wants to know the details. Be as honest as you can about what led to the infidelity. You might say, for example, “I had sex with this person on three different occasions.” If there was sexual contact, you need to discuss whether or not you used protection. Either way, your partner should probably get tested for sexually transmitted infections. Respect your partner enough to say, “You deserve the truth, and I’m not going to hide anything from you.”
- 3. Have the conversation at home, privately.** Ensure you and your partner are in a safe, comfortable place before you make your confession. Avoid alcohol or drug use. Try not to plan the conversation too close to appointments or social engagements.
- 4. Even after you confess, things might be hard.** The healing process for a couple can take up to two years, according to marriage therapists. During this process, it is important to be patient. Your partner might want to discuss the infidelity even after you thought it was over. Try to listen without getting angry.
- 5. Healthy relationships are built on trust.** An affair breaks that trust, but hiding an affair can destroy the trust altogether. Trust in a relationship includes having the ability to say, “I messed

up.” Hiding your mistakes removes that trust entirely. Although your partner might not have the ability to trust, as you rebuild the relationship your honesty will count for something.

6. Know what you are willing to do to save the relationship — if that is what you both want.

Be prepared to put in the work. Confessing is one thing, but having the ability and willingness to put in the work to repair your damaged relationship is quite another. If you both decide the relationship is worth saving, then you will need to determine what you need to do to move forward. Slow, vulnerable steps are the only way to make progress.

7. Infidelity does not give your partner license to attack or abuse you. You are not obligated to give up your privacy or allow your partner to control your life. If your partner is demanding unrestricted access to your phone or social media accounts, acknowledge you want to regain trust but suggest there are healthier ways to do that.

8. Decide if anyone else will be told. This might include children, family members, or friends. Regardless of the outcome, there should be a conversation about revealing the infidelity to anyone outside the relationship. If you choose to stay together, you should come to a decision as a couple if the infidelity should stay between you. If you break up, you should decide what explanation, if any, you will give family and friends.

9. Counseling might be required. Making the commitment see a therapist with your partner shows your commitment to rebuild your relationship. Let your partner know you will answer every question, but you want to do it where a professional can help you both process and understand feelings that come up. Your partner might need time to process their feelings, as he or she might be furious, hurt, sad, or even relieved to know the truth. Your partner is entitled to whatever emotions he or she experiences, and a defined timeline for healing and forgiveness should not be imposed.

The most important thing to remember when you are telling your partner you have cheated is you are confessing so you both can move forward. This worksheet helps you focus on telling your partner about your infidelity.

What to Do

Set a time and place to discuss your infidelity.

Date: _____ Time: _____ Place: _____

Describe what you will say to your partner. Be specific.

What can you say or do to take responsibility for your choices? Be specific.

Remember, cheating is a symptom of bigger problems, and telling your partner might allow for the problems to get resolved. What are the problems that led to infidelity? Describe what you would like to tell your partner.

Are you interested in rebuilding the relationship? _____

If yes, describe potential ways you can do this. For example, you might want to involve a counselor or psychotherapist in your efforts. What is the desired outcome? What are you willing to do to save the relationship?

Are you concerned your partner will attack or abuse you when they learn of your infidelity?

If yes, what can you do to ensure your safety?

Is there anyone outside your relationship that needs to know about the infidelity? If yes, list.

What can you do to validate your partner? How can you show your partner you empathize with his/her feelings?

During your discussion, have a plan in place so you or your partner can call for a break if required. When you have both calmed down, return to your discussion. What can you say to indicate you need a break? What can you do to avoid escalation?

After you have your discussion, write down your experiences, noting what each partner said or did.

What do you need to do, moving forward, if you have decided to rebuild your relationship?

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
