

Responses to confrontations are varied and may include validation, explanation, alternative perspectives, or defensiveness.

### Before You Confront

1. *Know what you hope to gain through the confrontation* and share this goal with your partner. For example, you might want your partner to acknowledge what you already suspect or know to be true. Then you can figure out together whether to work on the marriage or end it. Remaining in the dark about a secret affair is like playing poker with your cards face up while your opponent's whole hand is face down.
2. *Don't set "truth traps."* You want to discover the truth directly, rather than ensnare through devious methods. Don't begin the search for truth with deception or lies. If your child leaves a trail of cookie crumbs, you shouldn't ask, "Did you have a cookie today?" Start out by saying, "I saw the cookie crumbs. Tell me the truth about how many cookies you ate before dinner."
3. *Give yourself time to cool down and become calm.* Your effectiveness depends on how well you have thought through your confrontation. You want to create as little defensiveness in your partner as possible. Excessive emotionality on your part is likely to cause your partner to build a protective shield rather than a bridge to the truth.
4. *Consider writing down your thoughts first* in order to gain clarity. In some cases, a letter is a more effective confrontation than an in-person meeting.

### The Confrontation Itself

1. Choose a time and place where you are both unhurried and free from distractions.
2. Do not confront on the telephone.
3. Stick to the facts as you know them:
  - What you know.
  - What you saw.
  - What you've been told.

- The contradictions between what your partner has told you and what you've discovered.
4. Say how these lies or discrepancies make you feel (e.g., betrayed, scared, insulted).

### Typical Reactions to the Confrontation

1. **Denial:** Most people deny at first. They try to find out what the betrayed partner knows.
2. **Admission:** Whatever they admit is often just the tip of the iceberg.
3. **Lying:** If the unfaithful partner lies, he or she probably isn't ready to stop the affair but doesn't want to risk losing the marriage.

If your partner acknowledges your accusations, thank him or her for being honest. Say that you would rather know the truth, even though it is painful. Give both of you a chance to cool down before you ask for additional information. If your partner does not admit anything but you are still suspicious, then you can continue to observe, investigate, and confront again.

Jennifer Schneider found that 84 percent of people with patterns of addictive extramarital sex denied any wrongdoing when they were first confronted by a suspicious partner. After some time had elapsed, 96 percent believed that disclosure was the best thing.<sup>4</sup>

### When Accusations Are Denied

The accusing partner endures a period of great emotional turmoil when obvious signs of infidelity are denied. A significant issue in the depth of the deception is how long and in what way the unfaithful partner dismisses the legitimate concerns of the worried partner. The individual who is guilty as charged may try to stop further questioning by the intensity of

the denial. He or she may attack the partner who would even suggest such a thing. "I'm disappointed that you don't trust me" will stop many inquiring spouses in their tracks. The guilty parties can be very convincing when they say, "I'm telling you the truth. Have I ever lied to you before?" Keep in mind that someone who has nothing to hide is more likely to respond nondefensively and with concern for the distress of his or her partner.

One especially insidious way that untrustworthy, cheating spouses try to disarm a suspicious partner is called "gaslighting." The term comes from the movie *Gaslight*, in which a husband plays a mind game by trying to convince his wife that she is imagining things. In a similar way, a manipulative partner can turn every suspicion or accusation of the innocent spouse into an attack on his or her sanity. Every confrontation attempts to reconfirm that the questioner must be paranoid. The betrayed spouses begin to doubt their own perceptions and lose trust in their own sense of reality.

In an infamous case of adultery, murder, and gaslighting in San Diego, Betty Broderick went to her husband's office and found clear evidence that he was having an affair with his secretary. She went home and cut up all his clothes with scissors. Her attorney/physician husband said she was imagining things and put her under psychiatric care for her delusions. He later divorced Betty and married his secretary (who looked amazingly like a younger version of Betty) on the same date that he and Betty had married. After Betty shot and killed him and his new wife in bed, Dr. Don-David Lusterman testified at her trial that Betty was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of her husband's protracted infidelity.<sup>5</sup> The jury, however, found her guilty and she was imprisoned.

Knowing the truth after being suspicious for a long time brings the tremendous relief of realizing "At least I'm not crazy!" You *can* trust your own eyes and ears after all. But close on the heels of relief is fury at having been made to feel overly jealous or weak because of a legitimate suspicion. Soon thereafter a whirlwind of different emotions ensues and you feel anger, disbelief, and affirmation, all at the same time.

### The Many Pathways to Discovery

There are as many ways to find out that your partner has been unfaithful as there are unfaithful partners. And although no discovery is easy, the

nature of the revelation can make the infidelity itself seem more or less horrible than it might have been otherwise. Couples regain trust more readily after voluntary confessions than after repeated denials that are eventually refuted by indisputable evidence, such as tapes, letters, or photographs.

Disclosure of infidelity leads to divorce more frequently for unfaithful wives than husbands. Still, although telling appears less risky for men, the consequences were three times more negative when men's affairs were discovered by their wives than when men revealed the affairs themselves.<sup>6</sup>

### Confessions

Confessions may come after many months of accusations and denials, or like a deadly strike of lightning on a sunny day. Disclosure shock can be so profound that the naïve partner experiences feelings of unreality. He or she feels disconnected, as if the event were happening to someone else. That's how Christopher felt during his wife's confession. He had absolutely no idea that Carly had been having an affair. When she told him in the car coming home from a romantic dinner, without any advance warning, he couldn't believe what he was hearing: "I kept waiting for Allen Funt to appear and tell me I'm on Candid Camera. . . . I couldn't imagine it. . . ."

*To end the deception:* When Carly decided to tell Christopher about her affair, they had just worked through a difficult patch in their marriage by promising each other greater openness through honest communication. Carly felt that not to tell would violate their renewed commitment. It was hard to upset her husband's newfound sense of comfort in the marriage, but she felt it was the right thing to do. Christopher began to understand that her motivation was to stop deceiving him and to end her affair.

Christopher believed that his wife was sincere when she told him how much she regretted her involvement with the other man. He had faith

that it would never happen again. Carly's honesty was intended to alleviate her guilt and start the next phase of their married life with a clean slate.

There are many reasons an involved spouse may choose to confess an infidelity. Obviously, a confession intended to strengthen the relationship is different from one that is intended to destroy it. Sometimes, though, the motivation for telling is to trigger a crisis that will lead to separation.

*To end the marriage:* One night, Tamara confessed to her husband, Tom, that she was attracted to someone else. She said she expected Tom to kick her out, but he pleaded with her to stay and work on their marriage. Surprisingly to him, she refused to answer his questions and would not offer any explanation for what had happened. All she could say was, "You're strong. You'll get through this." When he couldn't seem to get himself together, she suggested that he call his sister. When Tamara moved out just one week later, Tom felt as if he had been lobotomized. Because she essentially cut off all contact after that, he had to heal alone. Picking up the pieces of his broken life was made more difficult without the opportunity to hear her story and get some closure.

*To send a message:* Some unfaithful partners confess in order to punish their partner for unmet needs or to elicit a reaction from an inattentive spouse. Harold got his wife's attention with innuendoes about his sexual intimacies with a young woman he had met at the fitness center. He had complained for a long time about the infrequency of marital sex. When his wife, Hope, understood that she could actually lose him to another woman, she realized how much he meant to her. For the first few weeks after his confession, they had sex every morning and evening. Although their newfound passion did eventually lessen, his revelation was the catalyst for a new beginning.

*To stop the inquisition:* Most confessions unfold in a torturous manner. Beginning with outright denial, the accused partner progresses to foot-dragging and admissions of minor infractions. Men will initially minimize or deny deep emotional involvement, and women are more inclined to deny having engaged in any type of sexual intimacy. Just to get off the hot seat, the unfaithful partner may finally cave in and admit the full extent of sexual and emotional involvement.

Natasha remembered every detail of the morning her husband finally confessed his affair. "When I told him I knew, he denied it. He insisted that they were *just friends*. But I kept after him; I didn't let him off the

hook. Finally, he admitted that he had visited her at home one afternoon and they kissed a couple of times. When I told him I didn't believe that that was all, he got furious that I didn't accept his story. Three months later, he admitted they'd gone further."

When evidence has been accumulating, a dishonest denial adds insult to injury. People have a double wound to deal with when they learn long after futile confrontations that their partner repeatedly lied to them with false reassurances and fabricated stories.

### The Informant

There is a lot of disagreement about whether friends or family members should inform a betrayed partner when they know that an affair is going on. Ann Landers tended to advise people to MYOB. Other advisors and experts give conflicting advice. My answer is "It depends." Whether or not to reveal an affair depends on the signals a friend or relative is getting from the naïve spouse. Some spouses want to know and others don't. Watch for cues before you decide. A word of caution: In situations where the betrayed partner could become violent or severely depressed after hearing about the infidelity, you might reconsider whether it's beneficial to tell.

*A friend:* If the informant is a trusted source with legitimate information, telling can be a considerate action. This is what happened to Theresa. She and her husband had been married for fifteen years when her husband's relentless distancing made her ask him if he wanted a divorce. He told her that maybe he did, and they decided together that he should move out. After a few weeks he started calling her to talk about reconciling. Pleased, she agreed that they could start dating each other and see what happened. They spent many happy evenings together and talked seriously about getting back together. Then Theresa got a call from a friend who had attended a birthday party. Guess who had been there as the affectionate companion of one of the invited guests? Theresa's husband!

Theresa was distraught but grateful that her friend saved her from being a fool. The information that her reconciling hubby was acting in public as another woman's boyfriend helped Theresa cut the cord and get on with her life. She knew that she would never be able to trust her soon-to-be-ex-husband enough to attempt a reconciliation.

*Anonymous informants:* When the informant is an anonymous voice

on the other end of the phone or an unidentified letter writer, the tip-off may not be so helpful. It is impossible to judge the intention behind the information or the truthfulness of what is being alleged. Mike found that out when he got a phone call at home from a man who said, "Just thought you ought to know. Your wife's having an affair with her boss." *Click*—the phone went dead. Mike was terribly upset. He had no reason to think his wife was having an affair, but the experience was gut-wrenching. His wife appeared to be as shocked as he was at the phone call and swore it wasn't true. It took many weeks of reassurance and investigation before they could put the matter to rest. Apparently, the call had been made by a colleague of his wife's who was angry because she had rebuffed his sexual advances.

*Affair partners as informants:* It is not uncommon for the revelation to be made by unmarried affair partners. One woman discovered her husband's affair when his lover forwarded her a sexually explicit greeting card with the husband's seductive message. Another wife found out when her husband's girlfriend showed up at the front door with a packet of e-mail correspondence.

Revelation by the affair partner is more likely to happen when an unfaithful husband has indicated that his wife doesn't understand him and that their marriage is a sham. The affair partner believes him and waits and waits for him to leave his wife so they can be together. After months or perhaps years of waiting for his children's bar mitzvahs, graduations, and weddings, the affair partner takes matters into her own hands; she tells the wife herself, thereby forcing a confrontation, which she believes will resolve in her favor. The crisis of disclosure from the lover most often results in the termination of the affair.

*Betrayed partners as informants:* I have known betrayed spouses who have called the unsuspecting spouse of the affair partner. They regarded their revelation to another betrayed partner as "obtaining justice." They reasoned, "Why should our marriage be hurt by the affair while their marriage remains unscathed?" One unfaithful husband begged his wife not to call his affair partner's house because he was fearful that her betrayed husband could be violent. She respected his request not to call, and in turn he ended the affair through an e-mail correspondence that she approved.

*Medical and legal informants:* When the method of discovery is shocking, the betrayals themselves often have serious implications that con-

tinue to shape the lives of everyone involved. For example, a doctor becomes the reluctant informer who has to tell a betrayed partner that he or she has a sexually transmitted disease. Will learned that his herpes resulted from an affair that his wife had had with an old boyfriend after Will and she were engaged. I have worked with several couples where the wife discovered the husband's sexual addiction when the police arrested him for soliciting a prostitute.

Even in these extreme situations, couples have recovered from the crisis and created a strong, safe relationship through long-term individual and couple therapy. The recovery process takes place on many different levels and usually lasts several years.

### Accidental Discoveries

Melissa called her husband's hotel room at 7:00 A.M. A woman answered and told her that he couldn't come to the phone because he was in the shower. Yvette was walking hand in hand with her lover in a beautiful park when she was spotted by her in-laws, who had taken her children out for a picnic. Needless to say, they did not keep her secret from their son.

For many people, the moment of revelation is frozen in time forever. Every detail is indelibly etched into their memory. For Harriet, it's the image of her husband, Harvey, talking on a pay phone in a beautiful hotel in Rome. They had planned a luxurious trip to Italy for their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. After they checked into their hotel, Harriet stepped into the shower to refresh herself while her husband went to the concierge desk to make dinner reservations. She dressed quickly and decided to go down to the lobby to look for him. As she rounded a corner, she could hear him saying into the phone, "I love you too, sweetheart. I can hardly wait until I'm home again so we can be together." That was how she discovered Harvey's seven-year affair with his secretary, Kitty. She was so traumatized that they had to fly home the next day. She did recover, but full healing took several years.

Accidental discovery is difficult no matter what the circumstances. But how both partners react in that moment and for the next few hours significantly influences the road to recovery. One betrayed partner was able to make a big leap toward healing her marriage by how she reacted to the news that her husband had been having an affair. She was able to put aside her shock and say to him, "I want our marriage to last. I love you.

But if you determine that she can make you happier than I can, then I will step aside." He was floored. His response to her was, "I never knew you loved me so much." The crisis of his affair was a catalyst that saved their marriage.

### The Immediate Aftermath

Disclosure shock is a universal reaction to the betrayal of infidelity. Even suspicious partners are devastated when their worst fears are confirmed. Being betrayed by someone you have trusted feels like a mortal injury. Clearly, it matters *how* you find out that you have been betrayed. Finding out the truth from a remorseful partner is quite different from being forced into hiring a detective to uncover the truth after months of unanswered questions.

At the time of discovery, each partner reacts strongly but differently. Injured partners need to know that the affair will be stopped. They also need to know that all of their questions will be answered. Involved partners can also be in a place of profound suffering: Their lives are in shambles; they're caught in what feels like a no-win situation; they cannot escape the pain they've caused; and they now know that they must relinquish either the affair or the marriage. *Their double life has crashed and burned.*

The involved partner may respond to the revelation with complete honesty, staggered disclosures, or stonewalling. Even if the straying partner eventually comes clean, earlier denials or partial truths hinder healing and recovery. Dragged-out admissions are like driving long distances on a flat tire. Quick attention gets you back on the road fast, but delaying the repair after a blowout can cause irreparable damage to the wheel and axle. Immediate honesty is the best way to rebuild trust.

The betrayed partner may respond to the revelation with tears, numbness, or rage. When tempers are escalating, call a time-out to avoid further scarring. Make an appointment with each other to talk about the issue when you have both calmed down. Don't just walk out without saying something. You can say, "I am ready to explode. I don't want to make things worse than they already are, so I am going to go for a walk. Let's table this discussion for later, when we've both cooled down." Don't follow your partner if he or she is trying to do some damage control. Regard

withdrawal as a strategy that can help the relationship at this time rather than as an avoidance maneuver.

What comes next in the hours and days that follow the crisis of discovery depends on how you react to the changes that have torn your world apart. In the next chapter, we discuss how some couples are able to survive disclosure shock together and how others break in two.