

Ten steps to forgive, apologize and rebuild trust after infidelity.

[Cheating](#) can unleash devastating consequences on a couple and is oft-cited as the ultimate deal breaker, beating out both emotional unavailability and physical abuse. Yet [over half of married couples](#) decide to weather the damage together rather than split up. Unfortunately, the healing process doesn't happen overnight, and even the most committed [couples](#) can get waylaid by hurt feelings, paralyzing guilt, and resentment. YourTango spoke with Dr. Janis A. Spring, clinical psychologist and author of [After the Affair: Healing the Pain and Rebuilding Trust When a Partner Has Been Unfaithful](#) and [How Can I Forgive You? The Courage to Forgive, the Freedom Not To](#) on the ten crucial steps a couple must take before emerging [stronger than ever](#).

1. Honesty First

In the wake of [discovering infidelity](#), Spring asks the wronged party to detail their grievances to their partner by articulating an unsparing and emotionally raw declaration. "It is vital that the hurt person feels heard," Spring emphasizes. "It's easy to feel crazy with grief, and they need to understand that they have a language to talk about their pain."

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2. Bearing Witness

Just as importantly, the [adulterous](#) partner must be prepared to face the heartache that their [infidelity](#) has wrought. Many unfaithful individuals feel paralyzed with guilt; they see the affair as irreparable damage, and mistakenly urge their partners to put the pain behind them rather than take time to grieve. Spring insists that the offender "bear witness" to the pain they've caused rather than defend or deflect the impact, and pinpoints this willingness to take responsibility as vital to the rebuilding of trust.

3. A Written Apology

After the adulterer has listened openly and understandingly to their partner's declaration, Spring suggests that the cheater paraphrase the account in their own words. Spring then suggests that they write out a detailed, specific letter to prove they understand the sorrow they've caused. And a miserly "I'm sorry" won't cut it. "'I'm sorry' goes about a quarter-inch deep," Spring says. "Verbal reassurances, promising you won't do it again, that means nothing after cheating. They have to prove they've heard and understood their partner on the deepest level, and that means citing very specific examples of how they've hurt them and then taking actions to prove they will not do so in the future."

4. Avoid Cheap Forgiveness

Sometimes the desire to salvage the relationship (and on the flip side, the fear of losing a partner) overwhelms the necessity to vent anger, and wronged partners [forgive](#) before they've had a chance to seethe. Spring calls this "cheap forgiveness," and finds this behavior in spades among people who are more afraid of being alone than staying with an unfaithful partner. Not only do cheap forgivers swindle themselves out of a healthy grieving process, they set themselves up for future infidelities by not forcing their partners to understand their pain.

5. Sharing Responsibility

Even in [relationships](#) where only one person has strayed, oftentimes both members bear the blame for an affair. Spring acknowledges that the unfaithful person must own up to 100% of their guilt (because "no one forces you to cheat.") but the wronged party must also acknowledge their own role in fostering an unhappy union, however minuscule. The hurt person must see how they had a hand in facilitating the loneliness or isolation that compelled their companion to have an affair and take steps to ensure greater emotional [intimacy](#) in the future.

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6. Setting Rules

"There are specific ways to earn and grant trust in order to allow the relationship to recover," Spring advises. She suggests that the couple establish ironclad, non-negotiable rules at the beginning of the healing process. "The wronged person can request that their partner always answer the cell phone, even if they can't have a conversation. If someone had an online relationship, the hurt person can demand that every time they walk in the room and their partner is on the computer, they can look over their shoulder and see what they're doing." Though these measures sound a bit like a schoolteacher with a ruler, Spring insists that this power imbalance eases the insecurity and mistrust that the hurt party feels, while also proving the offender's willingness to concede certain rights to privacy while their companion regains confidence in the relationship.

7. Redefine Sexual [Intimacy](#)

One of the greatest hurdles in the healing process lies between the sheets. "Often, a couple feels like the [other person](#) is sitting in between them, like a ghost, and that conception strains [sex](#)," Spring says. The phantom interloper can have dire consequences: the unfaithful person often feels pressured to please in bed, leading to distraction and low performance, which the hurt party, already injured and insecure, interprets as a lack of interest and physical attraction. "It's not about hanging from the chandeliers to regain passion," Spring warns. "It takes time to rebuild physical intimacy after one partner has slept with another person." Spring suggests that [couples](#) fostering sexual intimacy by creating an ongoing dialogue of fears and desires that eventually leads to physical vulnerability.

8. Ignore the Aphorisms

Though conventional wisdom has posited the phrase "Once a cheater, always a cheater," Spring balks at this advice. "That's a very dangerous assumption. So many adulterous people have come to me because they're ambivalent about what they've done, or because they want to know how to stop. Yes, there are people who will cheat again and again. But there are people who cheat once and never, ever do it again. They learn their lesson." Nevertheless, Spring warns against telltale red flags among adulterers. "If they're not willing to listen to their partner talk about the pain they've caused, it's probably not worth the effort of rebuilding trust."

9. Reality Check

In the aftermath of cheating, it's easy to feel as if your relationship is uniquely dysfunctional, yet the majority of long-term couples undergo at least one instance of [infidelity](#). The stigma surrounding [adultery](#) keeps the issue on the DL, but take heart: many couples emerge from an affair feeling closer and more honest than before. Most relationships could benefit from some degree of trust-building and emotional closure, regardless of what spurs the development.

10. Letting Go

Remember the rigid stipulations that Spring suggested in Step #5? Those only work if the wronged person gradually loosens the tight leash as their pain fades and trust grows over time. The onus rests on both parties to prove they are willing to put renewed energy in their relationship, which requires taking risks in a partnership that was formerly fraught and alienating.

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Above all, Spring emphasizes that rebounding from an affair takes time. "The process is a rollercoaster: I tell patients that it can take a year and a half, or longer, to feel okay again." Progress can sometimes feel elliptical—one week you both make leaps and bounds, the next week feels like you're back to square one. If you do push through, you can emerge with a stronger, better union.