

Trust Rebuilding

Most people regard trust as an essential component of a healthy relationship. Couples often come to counselling following a crisis in which one or both individuals have broken either an explicit or understood condition or boundary of the relationship. Common trust breaches seen in couples counselling include infidelity, abusive behaviour, inappropriate spending, and substance abuse.

Trust can describe an emotion or felt sense: “I feel that I can trust you now.” But it can also describe an attitude or choice: “I suppose I am just going to have to trust you.” The latter example demonstrates a willingness to offer trust in the absence of the felt sense of trust. So, after a trust breach, how can we rebuild it?

Identifying the controllables

With psychological challenges, as with challenges in general, it is important to identify the controllable and uncontrollable factors. In other words, which aspects of the situation can you directly influence, which can you indirectly influence, and which are completely beyond your control? Once this is determined, you can set about focusing your efforts effectively.

An important uncontrollable element is time. We are all familiar with the saying ‘time heals all wounds’. But what does this actually mean, and is it really true in all cases? We know that if a wound remains infected, it will actually get worse. Some wounds will even kill you!

The important question is: under what conditions does time heal wounds? In other words, what are the controllable factors that may help while time passes? What does each partner need to do to allow a genuine sense of trust to re-emerge?

The tasks of the trust-breaker

The tasks of the trust-breaker are, in a sense, more obvious—or at least more commonly focused on. The trust-breaker’s actions damaged trust, and so that person is generally expected to try to repair it. The following actions may help:

Look your partner in the eye and reassure them

This sounds pretty obvious, but it is remarkable how many people miss this essential ingredient. Maybe it’s because you aren’t really convinced of your own trustworthiness; maybe you think there is no point because they won’t believe you anyway; maybe you are

uncomfortable with eye contact. Whatever your reason, ask yourself why your partner would trust you if you are not reassuring them in the most straightforward way possible.

Be bravely honest and open

Again, this sounds obvious but, as most of you will have noticed, being completely honest and open can be very difficult in an intimate relationship because of how sensitive we can be to one another's behaviour. However, soon after a trust breach, your partner will probably experience any further lie or lack of openness as a serious, and possibly even devastating, setback. Daunting as it may be, try to tell the whole truth about what happened, while being sensitive about unnecessary details. The more open you are seen to be, the more your partner is likely to believe that you are genuinely rethinking your role in what went wrong and attempting to create a more open and honest relationship.

Be transparent about your whereabouts, communications and company

This is another type of openness. Even if this is not your usual way of operating and you value your privacy and freedom of movement, it is important, especially in the early stages or recovery, to keep your partner informed. If you can indeed be trusted, then try to put your partner's mind at rest so they feel less need to check up on you or monitor your movements. For example:

"I'm just letting you know that I'll be home half an hour later tonight because I'm meeting my supervisor. I can call you when I'm on the train if you like."

Similarly, checking in with your partner more often throughout the day than you usually would, perhaps via text message, may help them feel more secure and reduce the tendency to imagine the worst. If in doubt, ask them what you could do to help put their mind at rest.

Show commitment to the relationship

Trust and commitment are separate but related elements of a healthy relationship. It is possible for someone to devote a huge amount of time and energy to their partner while also breaching their trust. It is also possible to be completely honest while putting very little time or effort into the relationship. While you cannot quickly restore your partner's sense of trust, you may be able to indirectly soothe and reassure them by committing extra time and energy to the relationship, if that is what they want or need from you.

Be patient with your partner's recovery

The duration and fluctuation of emotional recovery are impossible to predict. As you may have experienced or observed, when something upsetting has happened to you, there can be ups and downs. The downs may be obviously triggered by something specific, or they may come apparently out of the blue. If you have breached your partner's trust, expect both false positives and false negatives. In other words, don't read too much into their emotional state at any particular moment. Their current good mood or pleasant demeanour does not necessarily indicate that they are 'back to normal', just as their current bad mood or unpleasant demeanour does not necessarily mean that the relationship is permanently damaged.

Tasks of the trust-injured partner

The role of the trust-injured partner is less obvious but equally important. I have seen situations where the trust-breaker has made a sustained effort to demonstrate their trustworthiness, yet the relationship has not healed because the trust-injured partner has been unable or unwilling to make any changes of their own. Being asked to take some responsibility for the *recovery process* as the trust-injured partner can be hard to hear, especially if you understandably see yourself as the victim of the original trust breach. Try to think beyond notions of blame and consider that, if your partner has breached your trust and is genuinely trying to heal the relationship, they are also suffering in their own way.

Help your partner empathise with you

Mutual empathy is a key ingredient in healing the relationship. One of the biggest pitfalls here is making harsh, critical, accusatory or disrespectful statements about your partner or any other people involved in the situation. Such treatment is likely to evoke a defensive response from your partner that inhibits their ability or willingness to understand how you have been affected by their behaviour. Avoid name-calling and other overly shaming statements. Are you trying to push them away or draw them in?

The harsher and more accusatory your communication becomes, the more difficult it may be for your partner to play their part in trying to heal the relationship. Help your partner empathise with you by explaining, as respectfully and clearly as possible, how their actions have affected you *emotionally*. For example:

"When I discovered what you did, I was shocked, very angry, and then incredibly hurt."

Consider your partner's guilt and shame

You want your partner to feel an *appropriate* degree of guilt about their trust breach without becoming overwhelmed by shame. If they feel too little guilt, they may not fully appreciate how much damage they have caused and may be more likely to breach your trust again. However, excessive shame may leave them feeling so badly about themselves that they withdraw, become defensive, leave the relationship, or even breach your trust again. Ideally, you want them to understand the seriousness of what they have done while still feeling that regaining your trust is achievable.

So again, avoid unnecessarily guilt- or shame-inducing words when you talk about them or their behaviour. Shame is a social emotion, in that it relates partly to a person's perception of how they are viewed by others. Bear this in mind if you decide to discuss your partner's trust breach with people outside the relationship. It may be important for you to seek outside support, but also consider what effect this might have on your partner's level of shame.

Take a leap of faith

Give your partner a chance to show you that they can be trusted. It is understandable that you may want your partner to be more transparent about their movements and to go out of their way to put your mind at rest in various ways, as discussed above. However, if you never gradually relax these expectations, they may grow resentful at feeling restricted, particularly if they are a social or independent person.

You want your partner to have some hope that it is possible to regain your trust and eventually return to a less restricted relationship. If they can see you taking this leap of faith, hopefully they will want to honour it by continuing to behave in trustworthy ways.

Trust rebuilding happens in stages

Following a trust breach, there may be so much tension and upset, and so little harmony and intimacy, that it can be hard to retain hope for the relationship. Think of recovery as a series of stages. The earliest stages require the strictest adherence to the strategies described above, and any mistakes during this time may be powerfully experienced by either person as 'going back to square one' or even as a sign of total hopelessness. However, if both people understand the importance of their role in rebuilding trust and make a concerted effort, things should gradually get easier.

As a couple, you can then move into later stages of recovery, where each person becomes more resilient and flexible, the rules can gradually be softened, and you can both get on with life. Much of this is about perception. If both people see their partner making these

changes for the good of the relationship, then, as time passes, goodwill, love and ultimately trust can be restored.

After a trust breach, couples can sometimes create an even stronger, richer and more intimate relationship if they both manage the trust-rebuilding process wisely. Over time, the trust breach may become less painful to recall and come to feel more like an episode in the relationship that you overcame *together*.