

Trust Rebuilding

Most people regard trust as an essential component of a healthy relationship. Couples often come to counselling just after a crisis where one or both individuals have broken either a verbal or assumed condition or boundary of the relationship. Common trust breaches seen in couples counselling include affairs, abusive behaviour, inappropriate spending, or drug or alcohol use.

Trust may be considered an emotion or sense: 'I feel like I can trust you now' or an attitude: '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. After a trust breach, is it possible to transition from a willingness to demonstrate trust to a felt sense again?

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 then set about focusing your efforts effectively.

An important uncontrollable is time. We are all familiar with the saying 'time heals all wounds'. 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 all wounds? In other words, what are the controllable factors that may help while time passes? What do the trust-breaker and the trust-injured both need to do to allow a genuine sense of trust to reemerge?

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 expected to try and 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.

- **Don't lie, and tell the whole truth:** Again, this sounds obvious but, as most of you will have noticed, being completely honest is very difficult in an intimate relationship because of how sensitive people are to criticism. However, soon after a trust breach, your partner will probably see any lie or lack of openness as a serious and possibly even devastating setback. Daunting as it may be, try to tell the whole truth. The more open you are seen to be, the more your partner will believe that you are rethinking your role in the breakdown of the relationship and attempting to create a more open and honest one.
- **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 now that you keep your partner in touch. If you can indeed be trusted, then put your partner's mind at rest so they won't feel obliged 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.' Also, checking in with your partner throughout the day more times than you usually would, perhaps via text message, may make them feel more secure and stop them from imagining the worst. If in doubt, ask them how you can 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 show a huge time and energy commitment to their partner and also be breaching their trust. It is also possible to be completely honest, but at the same time not put much time or effort into a relationship. While you can not directly restore your partner's trust levels, you may be able to indirectly soothe and settle them by committing extra time and energy to them, if that is what he or she wishes for.
- **Be patient with your partner's recovery:** The duration and fluctuation of emotional recovery is impossible to predict. As you may have experienced or observed, when something upsetting has happened to you, you can have ups and downs and the downs can be either obviously triggered by something specific, or come *apparently* out of the blue. If you have breached your partner's trust, then expect both false positives and false negatives. In other words, 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

The role of the trust-injured partner is less obvious, but equally important. I have seen situations where the trust-breaker has made a huge and sustained effort to reassure their partner of their trustworthiness and yet the relationship has not healed due to the trust-injured partner's inability or unwillingness to modify their own behaviour. Putting some responsibility on yourself as the trust-injured partner can be a delicate process, especially

if you see yourself as the victim. Try to think beyond notions of blame and consider that if your partner has breached your trust and is trying to heal the relationship, chances are that they are also suffering in their own way.

- **Help your partner empathise with you:** Mutual empathy is the main ingredient for healing the relationship. The biggest pitfall here is making harsh, critical, accusatory or disrespectful statements about your partner or any other people involved in the situation. Such treatment will evoke a defensive response from your partner that inhibits their ability or desire to learn how you have been affected by their behaviour. Avoid name-calling and any terms that overly shame such as ‘You are a ... for betraying me with that ...’ The harsher and more unreasonable you seem, the less motivated your partner will be to play their part in trying to heal the relationship. Help your partner empathise with you by, as respectfully and clearly as possible, explaining how their actions have affected you *emotionally*. For example, ‘When I discovered what you did, I was shocked, very angry, and then incredibly hurt.’
- **Manage your partner’s shame:** You want your partner to feel an appropriate degree of shame for their trust breach. If they feel too little, they may not realise how much damage they’ve caused and may breach your trust again. If they feel too much, they may not want to, or feel capable of helping rebuild the relationship and may either leave you or even breach your trust again. You want them to feel that regaining your trust is achievable. So again, avoid shaming words when you talk about them and their behaviour. Shame is a social emotion too in that it relates to the 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 of the relationship. It may be important for you to get outside support, but ask yourself what effect that might have on your partner’s shame level.
- **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 also go out of their way to put your mind at rest in various ways as discussed above. However, if you never ‘loosen the leash’, they may grow resentful at feeling restricted, particularly if they are a social person. You want your partner to have some hope that it is possible to get back into your good graces and eventually regain your trust. If they can see you making this leap of faith, hopefully they will want to honour it with their own faithfulness.

A stage model of trust rebuilding

Following a trust breach, there may be so much tension and upset and so little harmony and intimacy that it may be hard for you to retain hope for the relationship. Think of recovery as a series of stages. The earliest stages require the strictest adherence to the above strategies and any mistakes during this time may be powerfully experienced by



either person as 'going back to square one' or even total hopelessness. However, if both people truly understand the importance of their role in trust rebuilding and make a concerted effort, then things should get easier.

As a couple, you can then move into the next stages of recovery where each person is more resilient and reasonable, and slowly the rules can be softened and you can both get on with life. It is largely about perception. If both people see their partner applying the above changes for the good of the relationship, as time passes, good will, love and ultimately trust can be restored. After a trust breach, it is very common for couples to create an even stronger, richer and more intimate relationship if they both manage the trust-rebuilding process wisely.