Trust After Cheating

# The First 30 Days

## After You Found Out



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Educational content, not therapy, medical or legal advice. In crisis: call or text 988.

# The First 30 Days After You Found Out

A free printable kit from Trust After Cheating

This kit is for you if you just found out that a partner had an affair. It does not matter whether you are a woman or a man, married or not. Print it, write on it, and keep it where you can reach it.

This is not therapy and it is not legal advice. It is a plan for a month in which your head will not feel like your own.

# Read this first

Five rules for the first month. If you read nothing else, read these.

**1. No big decisions in week 1.** Do not leave, do not demand that your partner leave, do not sell anything, and do not announce anything. Clinicians who work on affair recovery describe a first stage built around the shock of impact, then understanding what happened, then moving on. They stress thinking clearly about your best interests before you act[1]. Week 1 is the shock stage. Nothing you decide inside it has to be final.

**2. Protect sleep.** Many people we talk with say everything looks worse at 3 a.m. Pick a bedtime and keep it. Keep your phone out of the bed. Stop talking about the affair by 9 p.m. If you cannot sleep, lie down anyway. Rest still counts.

**3. Choose one safe person.** Pick one person who will listen without fixing, judging, or repeating what you say. Avoid mutual friends, your children, and anyone who works with your partner. A therapist can be this person. In one study of betrayed women, 55% sought help within the first month after discovery[2]. Reaching out early is common.

**4. Health check, and an STI test if sex was involved.** If sex happened outside your relationship, get tested for sexually transmitted infections. Do this even if you feel fine and even if your partner says protection was used. The CDC lists a new partner, multiple partners, or a partner who has an STI among the risk factors for testing[3]. Its treatment guidelines also name a partner with concurrent partners[4]. If you would rather not ask your regular provider, the CDC says confidential, free or low-cost clinics are an option[3].

**5. Safety first.** If your partner is controlling, threatening, or violent, or you are afraid of how they will react, call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 (thehotline.org). Advocates are free, available 24/7, do not need your name or address, and can help you build a safety plan[5]. It may be unsafe if an abusive partner finds out you are thinking about leaving[5].

If you feel hopeless or unsafe with yourself, call or text 988. It also responds to anyone who needs support for mental health[6]. In immediate danger, call 911.

# Week 1: Safety

## What this week is for

Getting through seven days with your body, your safety, and your options intact. You are not here to understand anything yet.

Strong reactions are common. One paper reports that between 30% and 60% of betrayed people experience PTSD, depression and anxiety symptoms at clinically meaningful levels[7]. That does not mean you are broken. It means a real injury happened.

If you had a feeling something was wrong, it will not cushion the blow. In a small interview study of women, suspecting infidelity did not lessen the impact of discovery[8].

## Do

- Eat something every few hours, even if it is toast. Drink water.
- Keep a fixed sleep window, even if you only rest in it.
- Tell your one safe person today.
- Book a health appointment. If sex was involved, ask for STI and HIV testing.
- If your partner is a man who had sex with a man, say so to the clinician. A detailed sexual history helps decide which body sites to test, and infections in the throat or rectum often have no symptoms[9].
- Decide who sleeps where this week. You are allowed to ask for space.
- Write down what you have been told and when, in a few lines. This is a record for your own clarity, not detective work.
- Take a day or two off work or arrange cover if you can.
- Agree on a pause rule: either of you can call a 20-minute pause, and the one who calls it names the time you will resume.
- Save 1-800-799-7233 and 988 in your phone.

## Wait on

- Leaving, or demanding your partner leave. If you are in danger, safety overrides this advice. Call the hotline.
- Telling your children, in-laws, or whole friend group. Do not post anything online.
- Contacting the affair partner.
- Secretly reading your partner's phone or messages, or tracking their location. This can be illegal and it usually backfires. If you want to know something, observe, ask, and talk.
- Big money moves. If money, custody, or divorce is in play, talk to a family lawyer in your state before you act.
- Using alcohol to sleep.
- Signing anything.

## Say this, not that

| Say this | Not that |
|---|---|
| "I need to stop for tonight. We can talk tomorrow at 6." | "You owe me answers right now." |
| "I am not deciding anything this week." | "We are done." or "It is fine, we will get past it." |
| "I need you to sleep in the other room for now." | Silence and slammed doors with no explanation. |
| "I need to know if I have to get tested." | "I do not even want to know what you did." |
| To a friend: "I need you to listen, not fix." | To a friend: "Tell me I should leave." |

> **What we see:** Many people we talk with say the first week was the most disorganized of their lives. They forgot to eat, they replayed one sentence for hours, and they felt pressure to "do something." The ones who later felt best about their choices usually did the least in week 1, and did it deliberately.

## Checklist

- ☐ I told one safe person
- ☐ I have a sleep window and a phone-out-of-bed rule
- ☐ I ate and drank water today
- ☐ I booked a health appointment (and an STI test if sex was involved)
- ☐ We have a pause rule
- ☐ 1-800-799-7233 and 988 are saved in my phone
- ☐ I wrote down the basic facts I know so far
- ☐ I made no big decisions

# Week 2: Facts

## What this week is for

Getting a short, honest, usable picture of what happened. You need enough to make safe choices. You do not need every detail.

Researchers who study recovery describe the early work as assessing the damage and establishing accountability[10]. Affair-recovery clinicians separate the stage of impact from the stage of meaning, where you work out what happened and why[1]. This week sits between them.

Your partner may call it "just online" or "only emotional." Most people do not see it that way. In a national sample of 2,000 U.S. adults, 76% said a secret emotional relationship in real life is cheating, and 72% said the same of an online one[11]. A review of internet infidelity research found partners overwhelmingly felt cyberaffairs were as emotionally painful as offline ones[12]. Your pain is not an overreaction.

## Do

- Set one conversation per day, 30 to 45 minutes, at a time you both agree on. Outside that window, park the topic.
- Ask the questions in the table below, in the order shown.
- Ask for contact with the affair partner to end, and ask how that will happen. Do not accept vague answers.
- Write down answers, with dates. If answers change, ask again calmly on another day.
- Keep your appointments. Get your test results.
- Start looking for an individual therapist. If you both want to try repairing things, look for a licensed couples therapist who works with affairs. The Gottman Institute's page says seeing a couples therapist together is most helpful if both partners are committed to reconciling, or at least to trying[13].

## Wait on

- Graphic, play-by-play details. These become pictures you cannot unsee. Ask what you need to protect your health and safety first.
- Deciding why it happened. Early answers are often defensive or incomplete.
- Blaming yourself. Research on predicting infidelity found that relationship satisfaction is not a reliable sign either way, since some highly satisfied people also cheat[14].
- Contacting the affair partner or their partner. Talk it through with your therapist or safe person first.
- Traps, tests, or secret checking to "catch" a lie. Observe, ask, and talk.
- Forgiveness, in either direction. It is not due this week.

## 10 questions worth asking, and when

| Question | Why it matters | Ask now or later |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Is it over, and has all contact ended? | You cannot steady yourself while it is still going on. Accountability starts here[10]. | Now |
| 2. Was there sex, and was protection used? | Your health. It decides whether you need testing[4]. | Now |
| 3. Is there anything else that could affect my health, money, or safety? | Prevents a second shock. Covers other partners, debts, and legal exposure. | Now |
| 4. Roughly how long did it last? | A rough timeline lets you orient. You do not need exact dates yet. | Now, short answer |
| 5. Who else knows? | You do not want to learn from a coworker or relative. | Now |
| 6. Will you still see this person at work or in your social circle? | Logistics decide whether "it is over" is believable. | Now |
| 7. Will you answer my questions as they come up, without anger? | The ability to be asked is part of accountability[10]. | Now or within days |
| 8. Will you see a therapist, alone or with me? | Therapy is repeatedly named as part of healing[10]. | Soon |
| 9. What did you tell yourself that let this happen? | This belongs to the "meaning" stage[1]. Early answers tend to be thin. | Later (week 3 or 4, ideally with a therapist) |
| 10. Do you want to stay in this relationship? | Affirming commitment is one step in the healing model[10]. You need the answer, but not under pressure. | Later (week 4) |

> **What we see:** Many people say the hardest part of week 2 is the urge to ask everything at once, at midnight. The people who felt steadier afterward usually asked fewer questions, at set times, and wrote the answers down. A written record means you can stop re-asking the same question to see whether the answer changes.

## Checklist

- ☐ We have a daily conversation window
- ☐ I asked questions 1 to 6 and wrote down the answers
- ☐ I asked for contact with the affair partner to end
- ☐ I have my test results, or an appointment for them
- ☐ I started looking for an individual therapist
- ☐ I did not read anyone's messages in secret
- ☐ I did not ask for graphic details I do not need
- ☐ I still have my sleep window

# Week 3: Steadiness

## What this week is for

Letting your body and mind settle enough to think. The adrenaline of discovery wears down, and what often replaces it is a heavier mix: grief, anger, and intrusive images.

Symptoms are common. In one study of unmarried adults whose partner had been unfaithful, 45.2% reported symptoms suggestive of likely infidelity-related PTSD. Those symptoms were significantly associated with depressive symptoms[15]. Symptoms are not a diagnosis, but they are a reason to get support.

Your sense of worth matters here too. In a study of 232 people who had recently been cheated on, those with higher self-esteem showed smaller effects of negative appraisals on stress. They also showed smaller effects of that stress on depression and anxiety[16]. Small acts that protect your sense of yourself are doing real work.

## Do

- Keep the same bedtime and wake time.
- Walk for 10 to 20 minutes daily. Moving counts, even slowly.
- Eat three times a day.
- Ration the topic. One 30-minute conversation a day about the affair, at a set time. Everything else goes on a "parked" list.
- Begin individual therapy if you have not. Many people find it easier to say the unsayable to someone outside the relationship.
- Do one ordinary pleasant thing a day: a show, a friend, a meal you like.
- Write three lines each evening: "What I know today. What I do not know. What I did to look after myself."
- Re-check any test results and follow-ups.

## Wait on

- Checking the affair partner's social media. It feeds the spiral.
- Rehashing the affair after 9 p.m.
- Big gestures in either direction: a dramatic reconciliation, a dramatic exit.
- Sex or physical closeness before you have your test results, and before you feel ready. You can say "not yet" without it being a verdict.
- Revenge, public posts, or contacting people to "set the record straight."
- Comparing yourself to the affair partner. It will not give you an answer.

## Say this, not that

| Say this | Not that |
|---|---|
| "I am having a flashback. I need 20 minutes." | Reopening the whole argument at midnight. |
| "I need you to tell me where you are, when you say you will be there." | "I am going to track you." |
| "I am not ready for sex. That is about me healing, not a final answer." | Silence or accusations when your partner reaches for you. |
| "I am struggling today. Please be patient." | "Stop looking at me like that." |
| To yourself: "This hurts because something real was broken." | "I should be over this by now." |

## The 2 a.m. plan

Intrusive thoughts tend to arrive when you are tired and alone. In a study of people whose relationships ended because of infidelity, researchers found that disrupted core beliefs lead to intrusive and then deliberate rumination[17]. In plain words, your mind is trying to rebuild its map. At 2 a.m. it does that badly. Use this plan.

1. **Name it.** Say out loud or in your head: "This is an intrusive thought. It is not new information."
2. **Ground yourself.** Feet flat on the floor. Name five things you can see and four you can touch.
3. **Slow your breathing.** In for 4 counts, out for 6. Do this for 2 minutes.
4. **Get out of bed** if you are still awake after about 20 minutes. Turn on a low light and drink water.
5. **Park the thought.** Write it on a pad with the words "Tomorrow, 30 minutes." Closing the page is part of the plan.
6. **Do something dull** for 15 minutes: fold laundry, listen to a calm audio program, read something you have read before.
7. **Do not check anything.** No partner's phone, no affair partner's profile, no accounts. Do not wake your partner for an interrogation unless you both agreed to that in advance.
8. **If your thoughts turn to hurting yourself, or you feel unsafe with yourself,** call or text 988 right then. It responds 24/7 by call, chat, or text[6]. The fact sheet says numerous studies show most people who contact 988 feel less depressed, less suicidal, less overwhelmed and more hopeful afterward[6].

   **What we see:** Many people say the second or third week is harder than the first. The shock lifts and the grief arrives without a cushion. Almost everyone we talk with says the 2 a.m. thoughts feel like new evidence, but they are usually the same few thoughts on repeat. Writing them down tends to loosen their grip.

## Checklist

- ☐ I kept my sleep window most nights
- ☐ I walked or moved most days
- ☐ I ate three times a day most days
- ☐ I limited affair talk to one window a day
- ☐ I have a therapist booked, or I made three calls
- ☐ I printed or memorized the 2 a.m. plan

- □ I did one ordinary pleasant thing most days
- □ I did not check anyone's social media or devices

# Week 4: Direction

## What this week is for

Moving from reacting to choosing. You do not have to decide the future on day 30. You do need a direction for the next 60 to 90 days, and a way to tell whether it is working.

Affair-recovery clinicians describe the goal as getting past the initial shock, understanding what happened and why, thinking clearly about your best interests before acting, and moving on emotionally whether or not you reconcile[1]. Staying and leaving are both allowed to be the outcome.

For people who choose to stay, the research offers cautious hope. A small study of 19 couples with infidelity found they started therapy more distressed but improved at a greater rate than couples in therapy for other reasons[18]. The group was small. A randomized trial of 89 couples who had disclosed an affair found anxiety improved for both partners with large effect sizes. The treatment improved individual complaints, but not relationship satisfaction enough for both[19]. Therapy can help you steady yourself. It does not guarantee a result for the relationship.

For people who choose to go, there is also movement ahead. In the study of people whose relationships ended because of infidelity, intrusive and then deliberate rumination led to refining what they want in a partner, detaching from the former relationship, and becoming open to new connections[17].

## Do

- Review your 30-day tracker. Look for patterns in sleep, appetite, and your hardest moments.
- Write two lists: "What I would need to see to stay" and "What would make me leave." Do not show them to anyone yet.
- Ask the "later" questions from week 2: why it happened, and whether your partner wants to stay.
- Start or continue therapy. If you both want to try, book a first session with a licensed couples therapist who works with affairs[13].
- Set a decision date you can live with, such as day 60 or day 90. Tell your partner the date.
- Tell one or two more trusted people what is going on, if you have not.
- Plan one thing to look forward to in the next month.

## Wait on

- Any final decision under pressure, from your partner, your family, or your own panic.
- Telling your children until you and your partner have agreed on what to say. A therapist can help with the wording.
- Forgiveness as an obligation. The healing model describes a move from initial to deeper forgiveness over time[10].
- Treating a good week as proof, or a bad week as proof. One week is one week.

## Say this, not that

| Say this | Not that |
|---|---|
| "I am not ready to decide. I will tell you by day 90." | "Convince me right now." |
| "I need to see the contact stay ended, and I need honest answers when I ask." | "Prove you love me." |
| "I want us to try therapy, and I am going to my own sessions either way." | "Fix this or I am gone." |
| "I need time to see whether things hold." | "Everything is fine now." |
| "I am still angry, and I am still here." | Silence about how you actually feel. |

## Conditions to see before you decide

These are conditions to look for, whichever way you lean. If you are leaning toward staying, these show whether repair is possible. If you are leaning toward leaving, they show you what you are walking away from.

| Condition | What it looks like | If it is missing |
|---|---|---|
| Contact has ended | No contact with the affair partner, and a plan for unavoidable contact such as work. | Repair cannot start. Do not decide to stay yet. |
| Accountability | Your partner names what they did without minimizing, blaming you, or rewriting the story[10]. | Ask again in a week. Raise it in therapy. |
| Honest answers | Questions get answered, even when your partner finds them uncomfortable. | Talk to a therapist about what stops this. |
| Consistent behavior | Words and actions match for several weeks, not days. | Keep your decision date. Do not rush it. |
| Commitment is stated | Your partner says clearly whether they want to stay and what they will do[10]. | You need this answer before deciding to stay. |
| Willingness to get help | Your partner attends therapy and does the work between sessions[13]. | You can still go alone. |
| You are safe | No threats, no intimidation, no control[5]. | Call 1-800-799-7233 before any further conversation about leaving. |
| Your health is known | Tests done, results back, follow-ups booked[3]. | Finish this first. |
| You are steadier | You are sleeping some, eating, and getting through the day. | Wait. Decisions made on no sleep are rarely the ones you keep. |

> **What we see:** Many people we talk with say that by day 30 they do not know what they want, and that this scares them. The ones who felt better later usually did not force an answer. They set a date, kept their routines, got support, and watched what their partner did over time. Many say that repeated action, not one apology, is what they trusted.

## Checklist

- ☐ I reviewed my tracker and noticed my patterns
- ☐ I wrote my two lists
- ☐ I asked the "later" questions, or have a plan to ask them with a therapist
- ☐ I set a decision date and told my partner
- ☐ I have a therapist, and I booked the next session
- ☐ I chose one thing to look forward to
- ☐ I did not make a final decision under pressure
- ☐ I know who I would call if I felt unsafe

# Daily tracker

Fill in one row each day. Keep it short. A few words are enough. The goal is to notice what helps.

| Day | Sleep (hrs) | Ate | Moved | Hardest moment | One thing that helped |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Day 1 | | | | | |
| Day 2 | | | | | |
| Day 3 | | | | | |
| Day 4 | | | | | |
| Day 5 | | | | | |
| Day 6 | | | | | |
| Day 7 | | | | | |
| Day 8 | | | | | |
| Day 9 | | | | | |
| Day 10 | | | | | |
| Day 11 | | | | | |
| Day 12 | | | | | |
| Day 13 | | | | | |
| Day 14 | | | | | |
| Day 15 | | | | | |
| Day 16 | | | | | |
| Day 17 | | | | | |
| Day 18 | | | | | |
| Day 19 | | | | | |
| Day 20 | | | | | |
| Day 21 | | | | | |
| Day 22 | | | | | |
| Day 23 | | | | | |
| Day 24 | | | | | |
| Day 25 | | | | | |
| Day 26 | | | | | |
| Day 27 | | | | | |

| Day | Sleep (hrs) | Ate | Moved | Hardest moment | One thing that helped |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Day 28 | | | | | |
| Day 29 | | | | | |
| Day 30 | | | | | |

# If you are not safe

**If you are in immediate danger, call 911.**

**If you feel hopeless, or unsafe with yourself:** call or text **988**. It responds 24/7 by call, chat, or text to anyone who needs support for mental health, suicide, or substance use problems[6].

**If your partner is controlling, threatening, or violent, or you fear how they will react:** call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at **1-800-799-7233** or visit thehotline.org. Advocates are free, available 24/7, do not need your name or address, and can help you build a safety plan[5].

If you are thinking about leaving and your partner could react badly, call before you say anything. It may be unsafe if an abusive partner finds out you are thinking about leaving[5].

You did not cause this, and you do not have to get through it alone.

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