**How Can Trust Be Restored
After An Affair?**

**by Willard F. Harley, Jr., Ph.D.**

If your spouse has had an affair, and is now willing to reconcile, you're likely to ask yourself, how can I ever trust my spouse again? And without trust, how can our marriage ever survive?

Without a doubt, an affair is the ultimate betrayal. An unfaithful spouse is fully aware of the suffering that the affair will inflict on their spouse, but feels justified in causing it to happen. It reflects a total disregard for their spouse's feelings, someone whom he or she had promised to cherish and protect for life.

And then there's the lies. Looking right at you and denying it all, getting angry that you would even think such a thing, and expressing shock that you would have invaded his or her privacy.

How can you every trust someone again who did all of that to you?

But the truth is, you may have more reason to trust your spouse after the affair than before it happened. How could I possibly come to that conclusion?

It's all about understanding how trust is created and destroyed. Trust is the belief that your spouse won't do anything to hurt you and will be honest with you. It assumes a level of care that forms a protective envelope around you.

I've written two rules that encapsulate the concept of trust. The first is the [Policy of Joint Agreement](http://www.marriagebuilders.com/graphic/mbi3500_policy.html): Never do anything without an enthusiastic agreement between you and your spouse. If your spouse's behavior reflects his consideration of your interests and feelings, you have good reason to trust him to avoid doing anything to hurt you.

The second rule is the [Policy of Radical Honesty](http://www.marriagebuilders.com/graphic/mbi3900_honesty.html): Reveal to your spouse as much information about yourself as you know-your thoughts, feelings, habits, likes, dislikes, personal history, daily activities, and plans for the future. This rule adds an important element to the protection that the Policy of Joint Agreement provides. It guarantees transparency so that nothing that your spouse does is ever hidden from you. By following this policy, your spouse gives you good reason to trust that what he tells you is the truth.

Before the affair, it's likely that your spouse was not following these two rules. You may have noticed incidents of independent behavior where your spouse did what he or she pleased knowing full well that you would not be happy with it. You may have also witnessed your spouse hiding the truth, or even giving you false information occasionally. Whatever the excuse would have been for violations of these two rules, you would have had little reason to trust your spouse at that time.

But now your spouse has proven to be incredibly thoughtless. He or she did nothing to protect your feelings, but instead, ran roughshod over them. And your spouse was amazingly dishonest. It was only when your spouse was faced with undeniable evidence did he or she grudgingly and defensively finally admit to one lie after another, rarely accompanied by an apology. Considering these failures can you ever trust your spouse again?

One of the essential steps I recommend in my program of recovery after an affair is for spouses to learn to follow the Policy of Joint Agreement and the Policy of Radical Honesty so that they can create trust in each other. Those two rules define the meaning of trust, and by learning to follow them, they would have good reason to trust each other.

But I have counseled many spouses who refuse to follow the Policy of Joint Agreement after an affair. In other words, they admit that they are willing to let their spouse suffer so they can get what they want. When spouses of alcoholics complain that their drinking causes them to be unhappy, they drink anyway. Workaholics do the same thing. Their spouses' feelings and interests have little effect on their decisions. They do what they want, regardless of the negative effect on their spouses.

So if an unfaithful spouse is unwilling to follow the Policy of Joint Agreement, I explain to their spouse that they should not be trusted. Why? It's because we should only trust those who are willing and able to protect our feelings and interests. Someone unwilling to follow the Policy of Joint Agreement is unwilling to do that. Even if a spouse has never had an affair, may not be an alcoholic, a workaholic, or any other kind of "aholic," if that person is unwilling to follow the Policy of Joint Agreement it means that it's only a matter of time before an incredibly painful act of thoughtlessness will occur. That person should not be trusted.

In addition to refusing to follow the Policy of Joint Agreement, many of the unfaithful spouses I've counseled have also refused to follow the Policy of Radical Honesty. They don't want their spouse to know their passwords, their schedule, their cell phone records, and other personal information. And yet, they tell me and their spouse that they've changed and now we can trust them. I tell them that they should not be trusted.

Many unfaithful spouses have demanded that the betrayed spouse trust them. They argue that without that trust their marriage cannot thrive. They don't use that argument to build their marriage, but rather to avoid doing anything to regain trust. They don't follow the Policy of Joint Agreement, asking how their spouse would feel about their decisions but instead insist that the spouse trust their judgment. They don't tell their spouse what they are doing in secret, but they want the spouse to believe that it is not anything harmful to the marriage. Demanding trust is simply a tactic to get away with further thoughtlessness and dishonesty.

Part of this problem is that spouses are often led to believe that trust is something you are required to do when you are married. You have to trust your spouse. But trust is not a requirement for marriage; it's a reaction to experience. It grows as each spouse shows himself or herself to be trustworthy.

Trust should begin with a commitment to be thoughtful and honest. Without that commitment, it's foolish to trust your spouse. Then, that commitment must be followed up with thoughtful and honest behavior. By following the Policy of Joint Agreement and the Policy of Radical Honesty consistently, a spouse would eventually prove his or her trustworthiness.

If someone who has a long history of dishonesty and thoughtlessness agrees to follow the Policy of Radical Honesty and the Policy of Joint Agreement, that person is on his or her way to becoming trustworthy, in spite of past history. As he or she learns how to be honest and thoughtful, and proves it again and again whenever conflicts arise, it's only a matter of time before trust is restored.

How can you ever be certain that your spouse will not have another affair? How can you ever trust him or her again? If you build your relationship on the Policy of Joint Agreement and the Policy of Radical Honesty, you'll find that your trust will be based on the solid foundation of experience. You'll learn to be honest with each other about every detail of your lives, and you'll be firmly committed to taking each other's feelings into account with every decision you make. By doing those things, you make another affair impossible.

Trust can be achieved in marriage, even after an affair. When honesty and thoughtfulness has been proven over a period of time (usually about two years), trust is created that does not have to be demanded. It comes naturally and effortlessly. And when it does, you have more reason to trust your spouse than you did before the affair took place.