

## WHAT TO DO WHEN TRUST IS BROKEN

By Marlene and Bob Neufeld

We frequently get clients in our office who have lost trust in their partners. Trust can be broken in many areas, the big ones are usually around sex or money.

Unfortunately, people often wait too long to get help when trust has been broken.

**GET HELP:** Find a good counselor who can help with the feelings, understand the wounds that may have led to the broken trust, and help you reinvent your relationship. Plan to have a number of sessions (10 to 20 sessions have been recommended by some experienced counselors). Here are the steps we find necessary in rebuilding a relationship after trust is broken.

1. **TELL THE TRUTH:** Acknowledge the **OBSERVABLE FACTS** about what actually happened to all concerned parties. Apologies may make one or both of you feel better in the short term, **BUT** in the long term, they don't actually rebuild trust. Genuine regret comes later and is felt in the heart.

If you know you have broken trust, and your partner has not yet discovered it, **AND** you want to have a healthy relationship, it is better to **DISCLOSE** than to wait to be asked or to be found out. Be prepared for your partner to have big feelings, and get help to explore what can be done to rebuild your relationship. It is also better to get it all out on the table rather than to have the facts come out in bits and pieces.

Answer all questions **EXCEPT THE NATURE AND DETAILS OF THE SEX**. Give all relevant details. Frequently, after breaking of trust, partners ask questions about what happened. They are trying to make sense of what happened and make sure that there are no further lies or withholds. However, if details about the actual acts are given, then the partner can be traumatized and experience visual flashbacks even though they didn't actually witness the acts. The brain can't distinguish between an actual memory and an imagined memory.

Re-commit to honesty between you. Reveal any other offenses, the relationship cannot take another betrayal, another offense being discovered. This is the time to make a new start, clear up any withholds and commit to revealing.

2. **ALLOW AND ENCOURAGE FEELINGS:** Both of you need to feel your feelings and communicate what is true for you; the anger, the pain, the guilt, the hurt, the fear, the shame. Although it is normal to want to allocate blame, it is not useful. Typically you may feel guilty about what you have done or scared about the consequences. Ride the wave of feelings and let the concerned parties know. If possible, communicate that simply "I feel scared and am imagining that you won't trust me in the future". Or if someone else has broken your trust feel your feelings, which may be anger, "I feel angry that you went outside of our relationship." You need to speak your pain as openly and simply as possible, don't make a case that you are a victim. Stay focused and describe the pain, and how it affects your safety with your partner. Don't try to limit the time when you will be feeling feelings; emotions may come up years after the event.
3. **LISTEN TO THE RESPONSES AND FEELINGS FROM YOUR PARTNER:** You may need to listen over and over, hearing them out. Allow others to have their

feelings and to express them. Don't try to control your partner's feelings. If you have broken trust, he or she may be angry with you. Allow them to express their anger. Acknowledge the pain and hurt you may have caused. Learn to stay emotionally present to your partner's pain. Beating yourself up for what you did is a detour and doesn't help the partner feel heard. Neither does justifying nor minimizing. You may think that your partner will be less upset if you point out that it could be worse, but that usually doesn't help.

If you are communicating your feelings to your partner about something he or she has done, they may also have feelings. Listen without taking their feelings personally. Learn to validate without necessarily agreeing; especially learn to validate that your partner and his or her feelings are important and worthy of being heard.

4. **TAKE FULL HEALTHY RESPONSIBILITY:** This includes exploring how the person who broke trust justified it to themselves. It also includes what was going on before the offense. It doesn't usually include apologies or demanding an apology. Responsibility is ultimately not about "who did what" or "why he or she did it" but about "What can I learn from this?" Don't get caught in "why?" The part of the brain that deals with causation is about the size of a quarter. When a person responds to "why" you only hear how they justified it to themselves, which doesn't help either of you make sense of what happened. You may never "understand" fully. However, as the person who broke trust takes ownership of the pain they caused, they are able to acknowledge that their partner's pain has an effect on them and express genuine regret and remorse. Genuine regret and remorse is heart-centered, and can be felt.

Focus on your ability to respond creatively, rather than blame. The person who broke trust has to BUILD A TRACK RECORD to demonstrate trustfulness. Make new agreements and talk about how you can and will demonstrate that you are keeping them. You need to become predictable again. For more about how to make clear agreements, see our article "How to make and keep agreements" on our website <http://www.marleneandbob.com/articles.htm>.

5. **REINVENT YOUR RELATIONSHIP:** Create a new togetherness, a safe haven, and a secure healthy adult attachment. There is no return to the way it used to be. You have the opportunity to create a new story; you will be *the couple who lived through broken trust*. Look at the patterns, beliefs, and feelings that led the person who broke trust to tell him or herself that it was OK to do it. Create the relationship that you both want as allies. Identify and heal the source of breaking trust so it doesn't repeat. Know your learning edges and re-commit to learning.
6. **FORGIVENESS<sup>1</sup>:** Forgiveness cannot be willed or forced. It is not an event; it is a process. Both parties need to make a 360-degree turn away from blame, including self-blame. It includes a willingness to forgo using what happened as ammunition in future arguments.

Forgiveness rituals can assist. A person can identify what is needed to bring closure and ask directly for what they need in order to let go, and this will be different for each

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<sup>1</sup> Many of the ideas in this section come from a presentation on Forgiveness by Janet Hardy from the Church Council for Justice and Corrections.

individual. For some people, doing some penance may be helpful, others may find that this reinforces the idea that one person is the victim, or that one person is wrong, bad.

We may need to explore and understand our childhood experience of forgiveness. For many of us forgiveness meant denying our anger. Marlene has memories of being told to “kiss and make up” when she was still angry and hurt at what her brother had done. In some cultures and families forgiveness is earned, and once the person has done what is necessary to earn it there is an obligation to forgive. In other families, grudges were held beyond death.

A person who is unwilling to forgive may need to explore their own desire to punish, their “punitiveness”. This may have been learned in the family of origin. Cynicism, vengeance, and fear block forgiveness. Holding on to unforgiveness may come from a desire to protect yourself from feeling the pain of loving again. It also may be an attempt to control the other person; if I forgive you, then you will think you can do it again. If I let go of this, I will have to be responsible for myself. A person may need to make a decision to trust again. We never forget; we let go and move on.

Forgiveness is NOT forgetting, denying, condoning, or excusing what happened. It is not about seeking justice or compensation. Forgiveness is happening as a person attempts to learn, understand, and build a way of life after the pain. It goes hand in hand with identifying and handling the source of breaking trust so it doesn't repeat (as mentioned in step five). Forgiveness cannot be expected to end pain.

Forgiveness helps those who do the forgiving, not necessarily those who did the harm. Forgiveness is an attitude, a generous goodwill gesture, a gift we give our partners and ourselves. It is a new way of viewing the world for the sake of loving oneself and eventually the one who harmed us.

Forgiveness requires discipline and concentration; it requires active participation and self-motivation to decide to come out of victimization into wholeness.

Gradually, together you open up to trust again. You begin to create a new relationship story that includes what happened, how it happened, and the way trust is being re-established, and how you are healing and forgiving together. In fact, your relationship may be stronger and healthier than it was before.