

## Signs of a True Affair Confession

By Tim Tedder, NCC, LMHC

Andy sits at one end of the counseling couch, downcast, head in his hands, elbows on his knees. His gaze finally lifts from the space between his feet to settle on his wife, Cara, curled up in a tight ball at the other end of the couch. "How am I supposed to believe you?" he asks.

She hesitates, obviously frustrated with her inability to convince her husband. "Whether you believe me or not, I'm telling you the truth."

"You told me that before and I found out you were still lying. This whole affair was about making me believe one thing while you were doing something else. So how do I know you're being honest now?"

Cara remains silent. Andy shakes his head, then turns to me as I sit in witness of their struggle. "Do you think I should trust her?" he asks, somehow hoping my counselor's insight will provide him with assurance one way or the other. He desperately wants to believe Cara. He wants to believe the affair is over, that she desires him and not the other man, that she is committed to truthfulness, that it is safe for him to risk trusting her again. But her betrayal makes it impossible for him to be convinced, and so he asks me to make a judgment.

I've watched hundreds of couples go through the steps of affair recovery and have listened to many affair confessions. Because of this experience, couples rely on me to guide them through the process of recovery. Like Andy, many betrayed spouses want me to tell them what they ought to believe or not believe. Honestly, I wish I could make it that easy for them, but I can still be fooled by lies, too.

The words of confession are necessary, but they cannot be the only measure of truthfulness since everyone (liars and truth-tellers alike) swears they are speaking honestly. The more accurate measure of sincerity is behavior, not words. When confessing an affair, I've found the following behaviors to be reliable signs of a spouse's honesty or dishonesty.

## The Signs of a True Affair Confession

1. **Selfless remorse.** Your spouse shows genuine sorrow over hurting you, not just regret over getting caught. It is expressed in an attitude of humility rather than defensiveness.
2. **Concern for your relief and comfort, not just their own.** Your spouse listens to you and attempts to alleviate your pain. They are willing to reach out to you rather than being self-absorbed in their own pain (which is also very real and must be acknowledged).
3. **Ongoing commitment to truthfulness.** If no secrets remain, your spouse will no longer need to fear discovery. In fact, the relief they experience from finally coming clean will likely move them to ongoing transparency, wanting to assure you of their honesty. (But be aware of this: ongoing interrogations about shameful details of an affair will almost always cause a defensive reaction and will probably not be helpful to you in the long-run.)
4. **Willingness to play a major role in the healing process;** to fix what they broke. Not every marriage can be repaired, but a repentant spouse is almost always willing to do their part in trying. They accept responsibility for helping you feel safe again and regaining your trust.

## The Signs of a False Affair Confession

1. **Confessions are limited to what has been uncovered.** One of my clients referred to this as "trickle truth" since it only came out a little at a time as she found new evidences of his lies. Spouses who grudgingly confess to each new bit of discovered evidence are only admitting to what they have to admit. True confessions will almost always include more than what you already know.
2. **Confusion, not clarity, tends to be the outcome of any discussion about "the truth."** When it is hard to make sense of your spouse's story, then it is likely that they are being deceptive. Full honesty tends to make things very clear, even though it often reveals an ugly picture. But deception is full of awkward twists, and turns, and unexpected dead-ends. When you are listening to lies, you will likely leave the conversation being just as confused (or even more confused) than before.

**3. Quick shifts to defensiveness and blaming when questions are asked about the affair.** Once a person has decided to tell the truth, it is an easy thing to do. In fact, it's easier than managing the lies. But if your spouse is still lying, they will want to shift the focus away from themselves (since it is dangerous if too much attention is given to their story) by either becoming defensive (shutting down) or turning the tables by blaming you.

**4. Expectation that you do the major work in recovery rather than accepting the responsibility themselves.** If your spouse claims to have made a full confession and then leaves you to do the major work in fixing your marriage, something isn't right. Here are a couple examples: (1) Instead of taking the initiative to create a trustworthy environment, your spouse expects you to provide a checklist for change ("Just tell me what you expect me to do.") that is reluctantly followed. (2) Your spouse leaves it up to you to fight for the boundaries that help you feel safe rather than voluntarily establishing new rules for outside relationships. Genuine confession should be followed by genuine change.

As you assess your spouse's sincerity, be aware that your hurt may cloud your judgment. Your fear of being betrayed again will cause you to be hyper-sensitive to any inconsistency in your spouse's words or behavior. Although you certainly need the assurance of your spouse's consistent commitment to truthfulness, do not expect perfection. Be willing to give some grace and rely on the input of good friends and counselors in helping you assess the trustworthiness of your spouse's confession.