

A Guide to Managing Triggers in Affair Recovery

Introduction

Navigating through the aftermath of an affair is a tumultuous journey loaded with triggers—sudden reminders that catapult the betrayed spouse back to the pain of the discovery.

These triggers are not limited to the betrayed; the unfaithful partner also struggles with how to anticipate, react, and support their spouse through these moments. This guide aims to offer insights and practical strategies for both partners on handling triggers, facilitating healing, and rebuilding trust.

Meet Jack & Emma

Once upon a time, in the quiet suburbs of a bustling city, lived Jack and Emma, a couple entangled in the throes of affair recovery. Their story was one of love, betrayal, and the difficult journey towards healing. Jack, having strayed from the vows of his marriage, was now on a path to mend the broken trust with his wife, Emma, who was deeply scarred by his infidelity.

One autumn evening, as they decided to venture out for a dinner date in an attempt to normalize their strained relationship, they found themselves at a crossroads. The restaurant, chosen by Jack in hopes of reigniting their romance, unknowingly became the stage for a painful trigger for Emma.

As they were seated, a song softly played in the background—a melody that was once the soundtrack of Jack's clandestine meetings with the other woman. Emma's heart sank; her pulse quickened as the familiar tune enveloped her. She felt a surge of emotions, a mix of sadness and betrayal, washing over her once again.

Attempting to communicate her distress, Emma mentioned the significance of the song to Jack, hoping for understanding and support. Instead, Jack's reaction was far from what she needed. Frustrated by what he perceived as Emma's inability to

move past the affair, he responded defensively, *"Can we not do this here? I thought we were through overreacting to every little thing."*

His words, sharp and dismissive, cut through the fragile fabric of their rebuilding efforts. Emma, feeling invalidated and alone in her pain, retreated into a shell of silence for the remainder of the evening. Jack's defensive stance, rather than offering the comfort and understanding Emma sought, only deepened the chasm between them.

This moment of miscommunication underscored the delicate nature of affair recovery. Jack's defensive reaction and frustration, instead of empathy and patience, served as a stark reminder of the complexities involved in healing from betrayal. It was a misstep on their path to recovery, highlighting the importance of handling triggers with sensitivity and understanding.

Understanding Triggers: A Comprehensive Look

Definition and Examples

In short, triggers are sensory, emotional, or environmental cues that remind individuals of the affair, causing a resurgence of pain, anger, or sadness.

Specific Dates: The anniversary of the day the affair was discovered, often referred to as "D-day," can trigger intense emotions for the betrayed spouse. Other significant dates, such as the birthday of the affair partner or the wedding anniversary, can also become difficult to navigate.

Locations: A restaurant where the unfaithful spouse met the affair partner, or even a city where the affair took place, can evoke strong emotional responses. These locations become symbolic of the betrayal.

Names and Music: Hearing the affair partner's name in conversation or coming across a song that was significant during the time of the affair can unexpectedly bring back painful memories (Like with Emma in the story above).

Smells: A particular perfume or cologne, especially if it was worn by the affair partner, can be a powerful trigger, transporting the betrayed spouse back to the moment of discovery or suspicion.

Emotional Impact

Intensity of Emotions: Triggers can cause a flood of emotions as intense as those felt when the affair was first discovered. This can be disorienting, making the betrayed spouse feel as though they are reliving the trauma of the betrayal.

Example of Emotional Impact: A betrayed spouse may feel a sudden, overwhelming sense of sadness upon passing by a hotel where their partner had meetings with the affair partner. This sadness can be accompanied by physical symptoms such as a tight chest, difficulty breathing, or an urge to cry, illustrating the profound impact triggers can have on both emotional and physical well-being.

Recognizing and Validating Emotions: It's important for both partners to recognize that the emotional responses to triggers are valid and understandable. Ignoring or dismissing these feelings can hinder the healing process.

For instance, if the betrayed spouse becomes upset after seeing an advertisement for a movie that the unfaithful partner watched with the affair partner, it's crucial for the unfaithful partner to understand and validate these feelings rather than minimize the impact.

In managing triggers, recognizing their potential and the emotional turmoil they can cause is the first step towards healing. By understanding the nature of triggers and the emotional responses they evoke, couples can begin to work through these challenges together, creating a pathway towards recovery and a stronger, more resilient relationship.

Anticipating Triggers: Awareness and Communication

Awareness

Anticipating triggers requires a deep understanding and awareness of what specific situations, actions, or environments may provoke a painful reminder of the affair. This process is deeply personal and varies significantly between individuals, necessitating a thoughtful approach to identifying potential triggers. Here are some examples:

- **Situational Triggers:** Certain locations, such as restaurants, hotels, or even cities, may serve as reminders of the affair. For instance, driving past a hotel where the unfaithful partner met with the affair partner can trigger intense emotions. Couples should identify these places and discuss ways to avoid or reframe their significance.
- **Date Triggers:** Specific dates, such as the day the affair was discovered or the affair partner's birthday, can become sources of anxiety and sadness. Acknowledging these dates and planning supportive activities or rituals can help manage the emotional impact.
- **Digital Triggers:** Social media, text messages, or emails can also serve as triggers, especially if they were mediums of communication during the affair. Couples might decide on digital boundaries, such as shared social media access or regular check-ins, to build trust.

Communication

Effective communication about triggers is foundational to managing them constructively. The unfaithful partner must take proactive steps to understand their spouse's triggers, which involves:

- **Regular Check-Ins:** Establishing regular, perhaps daily or weekly, check-ins dedicated to discussing feelings, potential triggers, and any emotional upheavals experienced by the betrayed spouse. This creates a safe space for open dialogue.
- **Active Inquiry:** The unfaithful partner should ask specific, thoughtful questions about their spouse's triggers. Questions like, *"How do you feel when we go to that part of town?"* or *"Would you like to do something special to redefine the significance of this date?"* show a willingness to understand and address the betrayed spouse's emotional landscape.
- **Empathetic Listening:** When discussing triggers, it's crucial for the unfaithful partner to listen empathetically, without defensiveness or justifying the affair. Acknowledge the pain that these triggers cause and affirm your commitment to healing together.

Example Scenario:

Imagine a couple, where the betrayed spouse feels a surge of pain every time they pass by a certain cafe. This place reminds them of the affair because it was

the unfaithful partner's confession site. By working together, the couple decides to reclaim this space. They plan a new, positive memory by visiting the cafe together to enjoy a meal, actively rewriting its significance in their relationship. This act of reclaiming not only addresses the trigger but also reinforces their commitment to healing and creating new, positive memories together.

In summary, anticipating triggers through awareness and open, empathetic communication allows couples to navigate the aftermath of an affair with sensitivity and care. By identifying and discussing potential triggers and implementing strategies to manage them, couples can make significant strides in their journey toward healing and rebuilding trust.

Reacting to Triggers in a Healing Manner

Navigating through triggers after an affair requires a compassionate and proactive approach from both partners. Here's a deeper exploration into managing these moments constructively.

Immediate Responses

Examples:

1. **Deep Breathing:** In the moment a trigger surfaces, taking deep, controlled breaths can help mitigate the initial wave of distress. For example, the betrayed spouse might feel a surge of pain seeing a restaurant they used to frequent with their partner. Taking deep breaths can help center their emotions before addressing the trigger.
2. **Stepping Away Momentarily:** If a particular song or location triggers distress, it's okay to remove oneself from the situation briefly. For instance, if a song linked to the affair plays, the betrayed partner could step outside or change the channel, using that moment to regroup.
3. **Repeating Calming Affirmations:** Having a set of personal affirmations can provide immediate solace and perspective. An example could be, "I am moving towards healing, one step at a time."

Processing Emotions

Examples:

1. **Journaling:** Writing down thoughts and feelings can be a release for the betrayed spouse. For example, after encountering a trigger, they might journal about the emotions it evoked, why it hurt, and what they need to feel supported.
2. **Open Dialogue:** It's important for the betrayed to express how they're feeling. This could mean telling their partner, *"When I saw that picture from our vacation, it reminded me of the affair, and I felt betrayed all over again."*
3. **Seeking Support:** Sometimes, sharing with a close friend or a support group can provide comfort and validation. Sharing experiences and hearing others' coping strategies can be empowering.

Support from the Unfaithful Partner

Examples:

1. **Active Listening:** When the betrayed spouse shares their feelings about a trigger, the unfaithful partner should listen attentively, acknowledging their pain without interruption or justification. For instance, if the betrayed spouse expresses sadness over a memory, the unfaithful partner could respond, *"I understand why that memory hurts you, and I'm truly sorry for the pain I've caused."*
2. **Validating Feelings:** It's crucial for the unfaithful partner to validate their spouse's feelings, even if they don't fully understand the depth of the pain. Saying, *"Your feelings are valid, and I'm here to support you through this,"* can be affirming.
3. **Reaffirming Commitment:** After discussing a trigger, the unfaithful partner can reiterate their dedication to the healing process and the relationship. They might say, *"I am committed to doing whatever it takes to rebuild your trust and our marriage."*

By implementing these strategies, couples can navigate the painful moments triggered by infidelity with greater empathy and understanding, laying a foundation for deeper healing and connection.

Assisting Your Spouse Through Triggers: Detailed Strategies

Navigating the aftermath of an affair means understanding and addressing the triggers that remind the betrayed spouse of the infidelity. Below is an in-depth look at how the unfaithful partner can assist their spouse through these challenging moments.

Empathy and Understanding

Examples:

1. **Acknowledge the Pain:** The unfaithful partner should acknowledge not just the occurrence of triggers but the deep pain associated with them. For example, if a particular location triggers the betrayed spouse, the unfaithful partner might say, *“I understand how painful it must be to be reminded of my actions. I’m truly sorry for the hurt I’ve caused you.”*
2. **Learn About Their Experience:** Actively seek to understand the betrayed spouse’s perspective by asking them to share their feelings and listening attentively. This could involve asking, *“Can you tell me more about what you’re feeling right now?”* This shows a genuine interest in their emotional well-being.

Reassurance

Examples:

1. **Verbal Affirmations:** Regularly reassure your partner of your commitment to the relationship and your fidelity. Statements like, *“I am fully committed to you and our future together,”* can provide comfort.
2. **Transparency:** Demonstrating trustworthiness might mean offering transparency in areas that were previously secretive. For instance, sharing passwords to social media accounts or regularly checking in when apart can help rebuild trust.
3. **Consistent Actions:** Align your actions with your words. If you promise to be home at a certain time, do so. Consistency in actions over time helps to rebuild trust and provide reassurance.

A 4-Step Process for Handling Triggers in the Moment

The following is from the book *“Help Her Heal: An Empathy Workbook for Sex Addicts to Help their Partners Heal”* By Sheets, Carol; Katz, Allan. Though this book is geared towards sex-addicts, the material is quite appropriate for affair recovery as well. Simply substitute the word “addict” with “unfaithful.”

TRIGGER BUSTERS: RELATIONAL CPR

(4 Steps to Safety & Co-Regulation)

TRIGGER ACTIVATION

Partner: left brain goes offline, right brain takes over as she becomes triggered.

Addict must actively help the partner calm her nervous system.

STEP 1: IDENTIFY THE TRIGGER

Clarification: Clarify if spouse is triggered. *“I can see X, Y, Z. Are you triggered?”*

Accountability: Do Not defend, blame, shame, minimize, invalidate, judge, criticize, debate, stonewall, correct with irrelevant detail, withdraw, escape, or project anger.

Validation: As soon as addict realizes that partner is triggered, s/he validates partner. *“I can see how scared and unsafe you are, it must remind you of... It makes sense to me that you feel triggered, scared, angry, unsafe, etc.”*

STEP 2: ORIENT TO HERE AND NOW

Addict gently reminds the partner that s/he is safe, and nothing bad is happening right now: (triggered partner cannot differentiate between past and present)

“I am not doing anything now to put you at risk or in danger; it’s a bad trigger—that happened when I was acting out. I am not acting out now, you are safe, and I am right here with you, I have your back.”

STEP 3: DE-ESCALATION, SAFETY & STABILIZATION USING TRIGGER BUSTERS

What does the nurturing/protective addict need to continue saying and doing to help the partner down-regulate? (Addict may need to reassure and repeat the message multiple times)

As the hijacked brain comes back online, the addict emphatically attunes to the partner and states:

“I can see this was a really bad trigger. You are safe right now. I have your back.”

STEP 4: SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

Notice the somatic, felt sense signs that the trigger is being defused. For example, the partner’s eyes, voice, and face may soften as the body begins to relax and breathing regulates.

Now the two of you can have a real conversation. In fact, your partner may even want to connect with you.

Joint Coping Strategies

Examples:

1. **Therapy Sessions:** Attending couples therapy together can offer a safe space to explore and understand triggers, with guidance on how to support each other. This shared commitment to healing can significantly strengthen the relationship.
2. **Establish a Calming Routine:** Develop a routine to follow when a trigger is encountered. This might involve taking a walk together, practicing

mindfulness, or having a specific phrase or action that offers comfort, such as a hand squeeze that means, *"I'm here for you."*

3. **Create a 'Trigger Plan':** Together, outline a plan for how to handle triggers when they arise. This plan could include steps such as acknowledging the trigger, expressing feelings safely, deciding on an immediate comforting action, and discussing the trigger at a later, calmer moment. For example, if a trigger occurs in public, the plan might be to acknowledge it with a code word, squeeze each other's hand, and then discuss it in depth once home.

By adopting these empathetic, reassuring, and strategic approaches, the unfaithful partner can play a crucial role in healing the relationship. These actions demonstrate a commitment to understanding and supporting their spouse, which is essential for rebuilding trust and moving forward together.

Long-Term Management of Triggers: In-Depth Exploration

Healing Together

Example:

A couple decides to dedicate one evening each week to discuss their feelings, fears, and progress. This regular check-in becomes a safe space for both partners to express any pain triggered by memories of the affair, discuss any difficulties faced during the week, and acknowledge positive steps taken towards healing. Over time, these sessions foster a deeper understanding and empathy, transforming the way they handle triggers and enhancing their emotional connection.

Personal and Couples Therapy

Examples:

1. **Exploring Triggers in Therapy:** In therapy sessions, the betrayed spouse might delve into why certain actions or words are particularly triggering, tracing these feelings back to specific moments of betrayal. The therapist

guides the couple in understanding these emotions and developing healthier responses.

2. **Underlying Issues:** Couples therapy can reveal that the affair was symptomatic of deeper relationship issues, such as emotional neglect or communication breakdowns. Addressing these root causes can alleviate the frequency and intensity of triggers over time, as the couple works to resolve the core issues.
3. **Constructive Healing Strategies:** A therapist may introduce techniques such as mindfulness, emotional regulation exercises, or communication exercises tailored to help the couple navigate triggers more effectively. For example, they might learn a specific communication technique that allows the betrayed spouse to express when they are feeling triggered without sparking defensiveness in the unfaithful partner.

Growth and Forgiveness

Examples:

1. **Personal Growth:** The unfaithful partner might embark on a personal journey to understand their reasons for the affair, learning about their vulnerabilities and how to address them. This self-awareness can be reassuring for the betrayed spouse, showing a commitment to change and reducing the threat of future triggers.
2. **Forgiveness Process:** Forgiveness is often a gradual process that unfolds over time. As the couple works through the affair's aftermath, they might set milestones for their healing journey, celebrating moments when a trigger is managed more healthily than before. These milestones are reminders of their progress, making forgiveness feel more attainable.
3. **Renewed Sense of Partnership:** As trust is rebuilt, the emotional weight of triggers begins to lessen. The couple may find new ways to connect and express their love, such as planning a trip together or starting a new hobby as a team, symbolizing their commitment to a renewed relationship beyond the affair.

Managing triggers through empathy, therapy, and mutual growth allows couples to transform their relationship into one marked by deeper understanding, resilience, and a renewed sense of partnership.

Resources:

Guide: Infidelity and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

This awesome report is authored by Joyce Smith, MA, MFT and will educate you about what PTSD is, what it's all about and what you can do about it – including triggers.

There is also an audio recording where we spoke to her at length about some additional issues relative to infidelity recovery and healing.

<https://www.emotionalaffair.org/ptsd-information-guide/>

Book: *“Help Her Heal: An Empathy Workbook for Sex Addicts to Help their Partners Heal”* By Sheets, Carol; Katz, Allan.

Amazon link: <https://amzn.to/49Qrm3a>

Module: *“Regaining Control - Dealing With Obsessive Thoughts, Triggers and Memories of the Affair”* This module is part of our program, *“Survive and Thrive after Infidelity”*. Technically, it’s more geared towards the betrayed spouse, though the unfaithful is sure to learn from it as well. (It can be purchased separately or as part of the 8-module program.)