

# Cheating recovery toolkit



Relate



## About this resource

Discovering a partner has cheated is usually incredibly painful. Regardless of how you made the discovery, it can feel like the end of your relationship. In some cases, that's the best thing for everyone involved. But it's also absolutely possible to build a new, potentially even stronger relationship if both partners want to stay together and are willing to put in the work.

That's why we've created this toolkit – to hold space for all the emotions you're feeling, and to guide you gently as you navigate this challenging time in your life. It's designed to help you process your emotions, establish a self-care routine, and rebuild your life, one day at a time. The exercises, reflections, and resources here are created with empathy and understanding by our team of relationship experts, aiming to help you heal at your own pace.

This toolkit doesn't prescribe a one-size-fits-all solution, because every individual, and every relationship, is unique. Instead, it offers you a variety of tools and perspectives, empowering you to choose what feels right for you.

## Navigating this toolkit

As you move through this toolkit, you'll find sections dedicated to helping you understand infidelity and the unique challenges it presents. You'll find exercises to help you reflect on your feelings, your relationship, and your individual journey. There are guidelines to help you communicate your feelings and establish boundaries with your partner.

You'll also find resources to help you understand if speaking to a counsellor could help you at this stage of your relationship. We have Centres across England and Wales and a network of licensed local counsellors offering in counselling in person, over the phone and online. And if you're not quite ready to speak to anyone yet, we have loads of self-help resources to look through instead.

You don't have to go through this toolkit in order. You can choose to start with the section that speaks to you the most. Remember that healing also isn't a linear process. There will be days of progress and days of setbacks. What's important is to be gentle with yourself, to look after yourself, and to reach out for support when you need it.

### **A note about language**

Before we start, we want to acknowledge that we use words like cheating, affair, and infidelity interchangeably in this toolkit. Words like this can sound loaded and judgemental - this isn't our intention, but we wanted to use terms most people would recognise.

## **Why do people cheat?**

The reasons people cheat are varied, but there are a number that crop up time and time again in the counseling room. If you're struggling to understand why this happened to you, you might find it useful to think about some of the following...

### **Disconnection**

One of the most common reasons for infidelity is the feeling that you and your partner have drifted apart. In this case, cheating can feel like a way of finding something new and exciting when your relationship has become predictable and familiar. A sense of disconnection from your partner can happen for a variety of reasons. There may be a lack of proper communication in the relationship (talking about specific issues or just generally keeping in touch about how you feel). Life may have become dominated by work or looking after kids, so time together has become more functional than loving.

### **Feeling unloved**

In counselling, we often use the term 'love languages' to describe how people express affection to one another. Some partners communicate more verbally by saying 'I love you' or giving compliments, whereas others might prefer to express affection physically by cuddling or kissing. If your love language is different to your partners it can leave you feeling unloved - and potentially more open to the affections of someone who seems to understand you better.

### **Imbalance**

If there's a lack of balance in a relationship, one partner can begin to feel a bit like a parent and the other like a child. For example, one partner may feel like they have to be the responsible one, making all the decisions, organising the home, and managing the finances, while their partner doesn't pull their weight. An affair might then be tempting to feel appreciated and equal. At the same time, the partner in the 'child' position may feel criticised and as if nothing they do seems to be enough, meaning an affair might feel like a way of reclaiming some sense of independence and authority.



# **Why do people cheat?**

## **Fear of commitment**

Sometimes, affairs occur at times when you might assume people would be the most secure in their relationship, such as after getting engaged, moving in together, or when someone is expecting a baby. But worries about commitment can be very destabilising. Sometimes, people can sabotage what they have, consciously or unconsciously, as a way of rejecting feelings of responsibility.

## **Issues related to self-esteem**

Affairs can also arise from personal insecurities. Low self-esteem can cause people to be very dependent on the attention of others - and in some cases, the attention of just one person isn't enough. It may also cause someone to feel insecure in their own relationship, so much so that they might cheat as a way of rejecting rather than being rejected.

## **Sexually compulsive behaviour**

Affairs can sometimes be linked to sexually compulsive behaviour, which is sometimes known as sex addiction. There is a lot of debate about what constitutes sexually compulsive behaviour. What we do know is that sexually compulsive behaviours can cause real distress to the lives of individuals and those around them. For some people, this can mean they end up engaging in behaviour such as affairs, one-night stands, watching porn, or seeing sex workers repeatedly. The behaviour may feel out of control and hard to stop despite having negative consequences on their lives and relationships.

## **To connect with a different version of themselves**

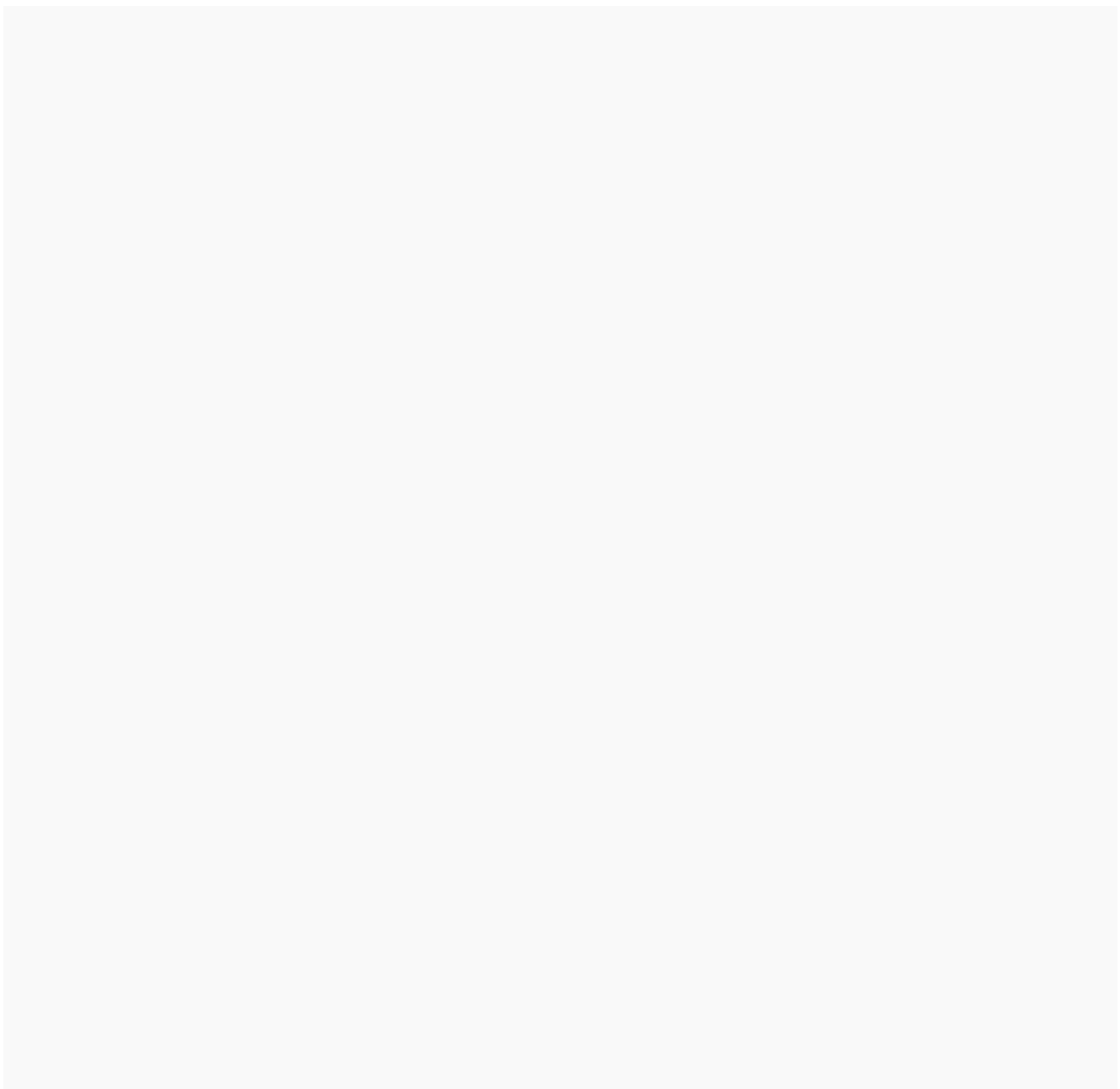
It's often thought that if somebody cheats there must be a problem in the relationship. The truth is that sometimes people in happy relationships cheat. As psychotherapist Ester Perel explains in her book *The State of Affairs*: "They often stray not because they want to find another person but because they want to reconnect with a different version of themselves...It isn't so much that they want to leave the person they are with as much as sometimes they want to leave the person they have themselves become."

## **Self reflection**

First, let's start with self-reflection, to explore your thoughts and feelings about some of the reasons why people cheat and if any of these resonate with you in your relationship.

Try to be honest and patient with yourself as you go through this process and remember there are no right or wrong answers.

Do any of the reasons why people cheat resonate with you or feel familiar in your relationship? How do you feel about those reasons?



## Do you and your partner agree on what counts as cheating?

Different people often have different ideas on what counts as cheating. One person might consider it a form of cheating for their partner to even think about someone else in a certain way, whereas someone else might consider their partner kissing someone to be hurtful, but not an unforgivable offense.

If you aren't sure whether this could be a potential area for conflict in your relationship, these questions will help you consider whether you and your partner's boundaries around cheating are the same.

### Have you and your partner ever discussed what would and wouldn't count as cheating?

- A. Yes, we've talked about it and have a good idea of each other's beliefs
- B. Maybe in passing, but not seriously
- C. No, we've never talked about it

### Is jealousy ever a source of arguments in your relationship?

- A. No, that rarely if ever happens
- B. Sometimes but not a lot
- C. Yes, a frequent source

### Do you and your partner agree on whether it's okay to watch porn?

- A. Yes, we've talked about it and we agree
- B. We briefly mentioned it once, but I'm not sure we did agree
- C. We don't agree or we've never talked about it

**Do you ever find yourself trying to convince your partner you're not attracted to other people?**

- A. No
- B. Sometimes
- C. Frequently

**Do you and your partner have the same ideas on what constitutes 'emotional cheating'?**

- A. Yes, we've talked about this, and have a clear boundary
- B. We've talked about it but we don't agree.
- C. We've never talked about it, but I don't think we would have the same ideas

**Have you and your partner ever discussed your preferred relationship style? eg monogamy, polyamory, etc.**

- A. We have, and we're on the same page about whether that's something we want
- B. We have, but we're not on the same page about the kind of relationship we want.
- C. We haven't, because that would probably end in an argument

**Has the question of what is and isn't cheating caused friction for either of you in a previous relationship?**

- A. No
- B. Not really
- C. Yes

**Do you feel like your partner trusts you?**

- A. Yes
- B. I hope so
- C. No, I don't think they do



### How often do you and your partner disagree on big topics in general?

- A. Once in a while, but we make sure we're civil about it
- B. Not often, we tend to avoid difficult topics
- C. Fairly frequently, we have different mindsets

### How often do you and your partner talk openly about other issues in your relationship?

- A. We frequently make time to talk if something is bothering one of us
- B. Sometimes, although it can come out as an argument instead
- C. No, we generally avoid talking about difficult issues

## Results

### Mostly As or Bs

It sounds like you and your partner have a clear understanding of what counts as cheating. You've talked about it, you've listened to each other's views, and you've agreed on a definition that suits both of you.

It's important to be able to talk about issues like this, even if they can sometimes feel like they might cause friction - or even worse.

Keep being open with each other and your relationship could go from strength to strength.

## Results

### Mostly Bs

It sounds like there's room for misunderstanding in the way you and your partner have communicated about cheating.

You may have briefly mentioned it in passing or even squabbled about the idea from time to time, but it doesn't sound like you've been able to talk properly about it or come to a shared definition.

It's important to try to talk about issues like this, even if it can sometimes feel like it would cause tension. If your ideas don't completely line up, just being able to chat openly means you can at least try to find a way to compromise on things -- and you'll be less likely to accidentally upset each other or cause conflict in the future.

### Mostly Cs

It sounds like you and your partner don't have similar ideas about what is and isn't cheating.

While this isn't necessarily a problem by itself, what could be is that you haven't tried to address this together. Avoiding talking about tricky issues is often a tempting option, but it can create real potential for hurt and conflict - especially when there's space for misunderstanding to develop.

## **Does an affair mean the end of a relationship?**

When you find out your partner has had an affair, it can feel like the end of the relationship. But what if you still love them and can't imagine being with anyone else? What if you have children and a house and joint assets together? What will you be leaving behind if you walk away? You might feel ashamed or embarrassed to consider staying with a person who has broken your trust, but does an affair have to be the end?

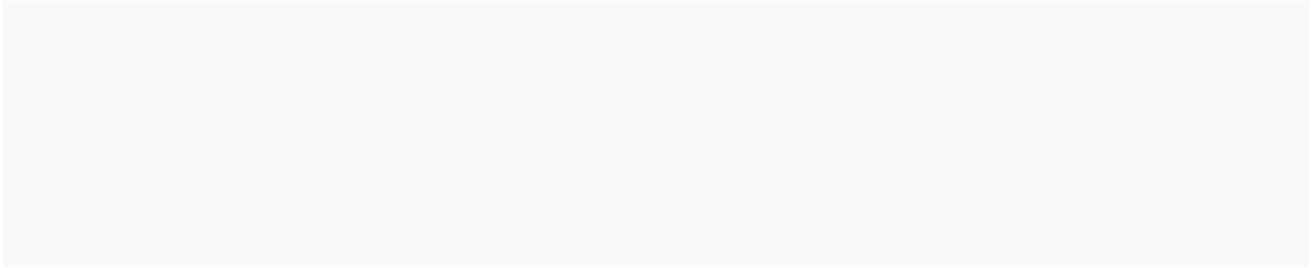
We surveyed the public to see if they thought a relationship could survive an affair. Only 33% said yes. But when the same question was posed to Relate counsellors, the numbers were very different. 94% said they thought a relationship could survive, and potentially even thrive, after someone has cheated.

With the right support, it's possible to make it past infidelity. We see people in counselling begin to heal and recover - and find ways to grow and learn together.

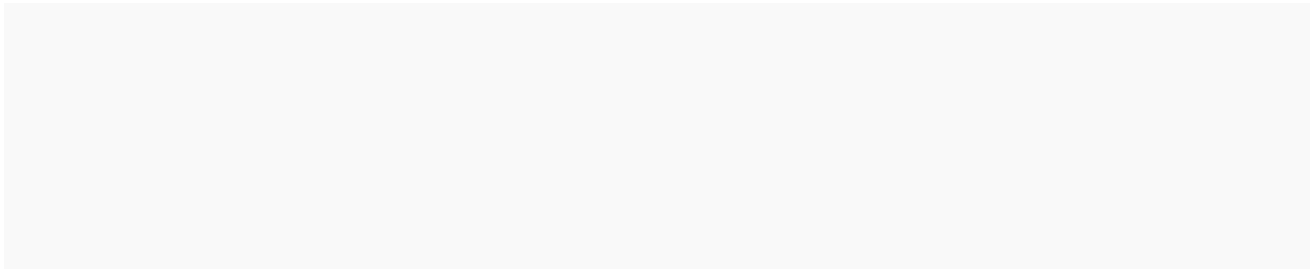
It will take some hard work and commitment from both of you to really look and what's been going wrong, but the pain caused and suffered by cheating - on both sides usually - is a huge motivation to never get back to this place again.

What does infidelity or cheating mean for you?

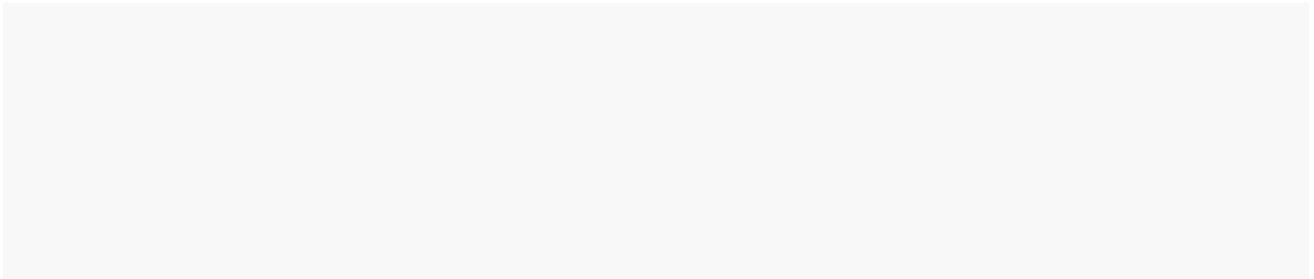
Are there certain actions or behaviours you consider to be “grey areas”? What are they?



Do you think emotional (non-physical) connections can be considered cheating? If yes, when is that line crossed?



Have you experienced infidelity in past relationships? How have those experiences shaped your views on trust in your current relationship?



## Understanding your own reaction

It can be very distressing to discover that your partner has been cheating. It's likely you'll experience a whole host of feelings and uncertainty over how to react. As difficult as it may be, there are some general dos and don'ts it can benefit you to follow if you can.

### Do

- Give yourself some time - Finding out this news can leave you feeling angry and hurt. Give yourself some time to process your emotions and seek support before you act.
- Talk to your partner - Although bringing the event up with your partner may feel painful, it's important to ask questions so you can assess exactly what's happened.
- Ask for the truth - Recovering from infidelity is usually much harder if lies are told early on.
- Focus on the facts - Asking why an affair happened, or if sex was better with them, might be tempting but it's unlikely to give you an answer or perspective that will be helpful. Instead focus on the facts, like how long the infidelity lasted.
- Think about what you want to happen next - You'll need to reflect on whether you're able to forgive the breach of trust. Only after talking and establishing the reasons for the affair, will you be able to decide.
- Let your partner talk - Try not to cut in on what your partner is saying if you can.

### Don't

- Ask for every detail - Doing this can cause you a lot of pain for little benefit.
- Seek revenge - After a betrayal, it can be tempting to try and hurt your partner in the way they've hurt you. Some people engage in "revenge cheating" where they are intimate with someone else as a way at getting back at their partner. If you do decide you want to stay in your relationship, this can make things even messier down the line.
- Involve your children - If you have children, it can be tempting to ban your partner from seeing them or share the betrayal with your children. This can be distressing for children and won't help your family relationships in the long term.

## Talking to your partner about infidelity

Discovering cheating can be a gut-wrenching experience. The journey from discovery to communication is an emotional one, where you might be feeling anger, sorrow, confusion, and even despair. As you navigate these feelings, the idea of communicating with your partner looms large, and you could feel uncertain or apprehensive about the conversation. This section of the workbook is designed to guide you through this phase, providing you with tools and strategies to approach this conversation with clarity, empathy, and assertiveness.

### Preparation

Before you find yourself in the midst of a potentially heated conversation, it's important to get mentally and emotionally prepared. Before talking to your partner, take time to reflect on your own feelings. It might be helpful to journal or speak to a friend or a counsellor to help you gather your thoughts. When you do decide to have the conversation, choose a time and a place that's calm and free from distractions.

### During the conversation

1. **Be clear and specific:** Clearly state what you discovered without being overly accusatory. It's important to be specific about the actions that hurt you.
2. **Practise active listening:** Allow your partner the space to communicate their perspective. Listen to understand, and not just to respond.
3. **Watch your body language:** Be mindful of your body language, and try to maintain an open and non-confrontational stance if you can.

### Managing emotions

It's only natural for these kinds of conversations to be highly charged emotionally. If you can, try to stay calm and take breaks if the conversation becomes too heated. If your communication is getting heated and it's going on for longer than 10 minutes chances are that you're both getting entrenched into your own positions and have



stopped listening as you search for ways to strengthen your own position. It starts to become about winning rather than finding a resolution. Once this stress process has been activated, the executive functioning bit of the brain that can find solutions shuts down. It might help to agree to take a break if things get heated, so you can come back to the conversation later.

### **Suggested questions**

Not sure what to ask? Here are some suggested questions to get the conversation flowing:

#### **Can you help me understand what happened from your perspective?**

This question opens up a space for your partner to share their side of the story, giving a broader view of the situation

#### **What was going through your mind at the time?**

Asking about their mindset at the time can offer insight into their thought process and motivations.

#### **Did you consider the impact this would have on our relationship?**

This question can help in understanding whether your partner has considered the repercussions of their actions on the relationship

#### **How do you feel about what happened?**

Understanding their feelings can give you an insight into their state of mind and their level of regret or acknowledgment about the situation.

#### **Is there anything you kept from me that I should know?**

This question gives them the opportunity to come clean about any other secrets or omissions that are pertinent to the discussion.

#### **Are you willing to work through this, and if so, what steps are you prepared to take?**

Understanding their readiness to work on the relationship can help in gauging their commitment to resolution and healing.

#### **What can we do to rebuild trust in our relationship?**

If there is a mutual interest in repairing the relationship, discussing potential steps to rebuild trust can be a positive, forward-looking approach.

## **Suggested questions**

### **How do you see our future together?**

This question encourages them to reflect on the future of the relationship and can reveal their hopes and intentions moving forward.

### **Is there anything you feel I should understand or know about your feelings or experiences in our relationship?**

Giving them a space to share their feelings can sometimes reveal underlying concerns or feelings that have not been previously expressed.

## **Talking to friends and family**

In the aftermath of discovering an affair, you may find yourself wanting to confide in a friend or family member. Sharing your experiences and emotions with others can be cathartic, offering comfort and perspective. However, discussing sensitive topics requires a thoughtful approach to protect your privacy and maintain respectful boundaries. Here are some tips for navigating this conversation:

### **Choose your confidants wisely**

Ensure the person whom you are confiding in is someone you can trust with sensitive information. Choose someone you think is a good listener and who will be empathetic to and non-judgemental about your situation. If you don't know anyone like this, you can always speak to a counsellor.

### **Set boundaries**

Before delving into the discussion, make your boundaries clear. It might involve requesting them not to share the information further or advising you unless you ask for it. Be mindful of the other person's boundaries as well, understanding that they may have limitations on the guidance they can offer.

### **Protect your privacy**

When discussing sensitive topics, be careful not to divulge information you might not want your friend to know later down the line. Think about how you'll feel if you resolve your relationship with your partner.

### **Keep emotionally safe**

Create a safe emotional space for the discussion where you and the other party feel secure expressing your feelings without judgement. If the discussion becomes too intense or uncomfortable, don't hesitate to pause and return to it when you feel ready.

### **Remember you can stop at any time**

Discussing sensitive topics, especially after a painful discovery, is a delicate task that requires mutual respect, understanding, and empathy. Remember that you're not obligated to share anything you're not comfortable with, and it's okay to seek support in a manner that's safe and respectful to you and your partner.

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## **Privacy and trust in a digital world**

What does digital privacy mean to you?

How do you feel about your partner's digital behaviour?

What boundaries have you set about sharing personal details or relationship updates online?

## **When to speak to someone**

Navigating the aftermath of a betrayal can be incredibly challenging, and at times, a deeply isolating experience. While friends, family, and this workbook can offer support, there may come a time when seeking the guidance of a professional counsellor could be the right step. Therapy can provide a safe, structured environment to work through your feelings and develop strategies for healing. This section will help you identify when it might be the right time to seek therapy.

### **Recognise the signs**

Not sure if therapy could be beneficial? Here are some signs that talking to a professional might be the best next step:

1. When emotions become too intense to manage on your own.
2. If you start experiencing physical symptoms like sleep disturbances or changes in appetite.
3. Constant preoccupation with the event that leads to intrusive thoughts that disrupt your day-to-day life.

Identifying your personal readiness for counselling is a vital step in the process. Ensure you're open and willing to undertake the counselling process. Periodically assess your emotional and mental state to understand if you're ready to seek therapy.

### **What service is right for you**

Once you decide you want some support, what's next? There are a few different ways we can help.

#### **Ongoing counselling**

Ongoing counselling is one of the main ways we support people to strengthen their relationships. In ongoing counselling, you'll be matched with a counsellor who will work with you over a defined period of time. You can attend ongoing counselling on your own, or with your partner.

## **What service is right for you**

### **Chat with a counsellor**

Not ready to commit to ongoing counselling? That's okay. We're here to listen and support you to find a way forward. You can schedule a 30 minute chat with one of our counsellors to get things off your chest and talk through your options for next steps.

### **Email a counsellor**

Prefer working through your problems in writing? Then our message a counsellor service might be best for you. Message a Counsellor lets you send the details of your issue in an email instead. It's equivalent to one hour of counselling, but without ever needing to leave the comfort of your sofa.

### **One session therapy**

One session therapy is a new service to help you work through a specific issue quickly. It's perfect for individuals or couples who can identify one specific skill they want to build or problem they want to work on.



## Deciding to work through it

This section is for those who decide to work on their relationship and are looking for exercises to help them build trust. That might not be you, and that's okay.

### Exercise: How do we make sure this doesn't happen again?

This discussion guide is designed to help you and your partner explore your individual and shared boundaries in various aspects of your relationship. It serves as a tool to foster understanding and build trust by encouraging open and honest communication.

It might help to create a relaxed and comfortable environment to have this discussion, you will hopefully have reached an agreement on where the boundaries lie in your relationship, while also understanding each other's perspectives and feelings.

What do we consider to be flirting?

How do we feel about flirting with others?

How do we feel about engaging in physical intimacy with others?

How can we help each other feel secure during these situations?

Are there specific situations, such as going out with friends or interacting on social media, that may require special consideration?

What boundaries should we have in place regarding emotional connections?

What constitutes a sexual connection?

How do we feel about forming sexual connections with others?

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## Exercise: Discussion guide

How do we feel about watching porn individually?

How would we feel if the other visited a sex worker?

What do we consider to be physical intimacy?

How can we maintain trust and transparency in our communications with others?

What boundaries should we have regarding text messages, social media, and online friendships?

How do we feel about forming emotional connections with others?

Are there any circumstances under which there would be an exception to anything of the things we've discussed here?

How can we create a safe space to revisit these topics in the future?

Are there other points or boundaries that we haven't covered but should discuss?

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## Chat to us

Hopefully this resource has helped you begin the process of recovering from infidelity.

You might have realised that your relationships need a bit of TLC - and that's totally normal. So if you need a chat, we're here for you.

Head to [relatebooking.as.me/OneSessionTherapy](https://relatebooking.as.me/OneSessionTherapy) to discuss your answers with one of our counsellors specifically trained in supporting people recovering from infidelity. Use the code AUDIT for £10 off a 60 minute session.