

BRAVING HOPE

Becoming
MORE than
your betrayal story

Understanding the Healing Process

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PartnerHope

Braving HOPE after betrayal

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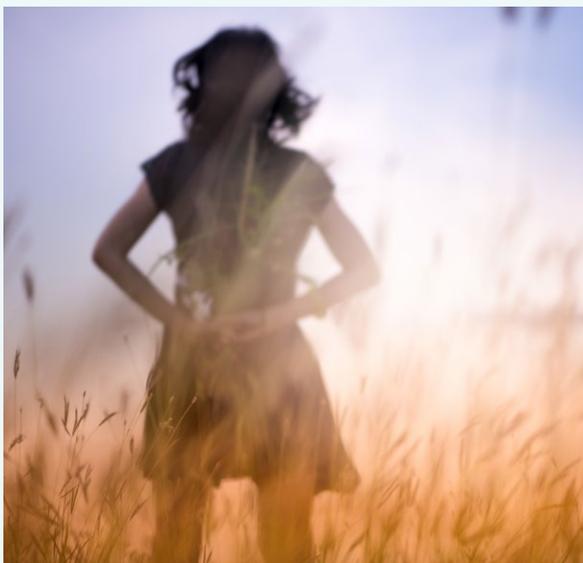
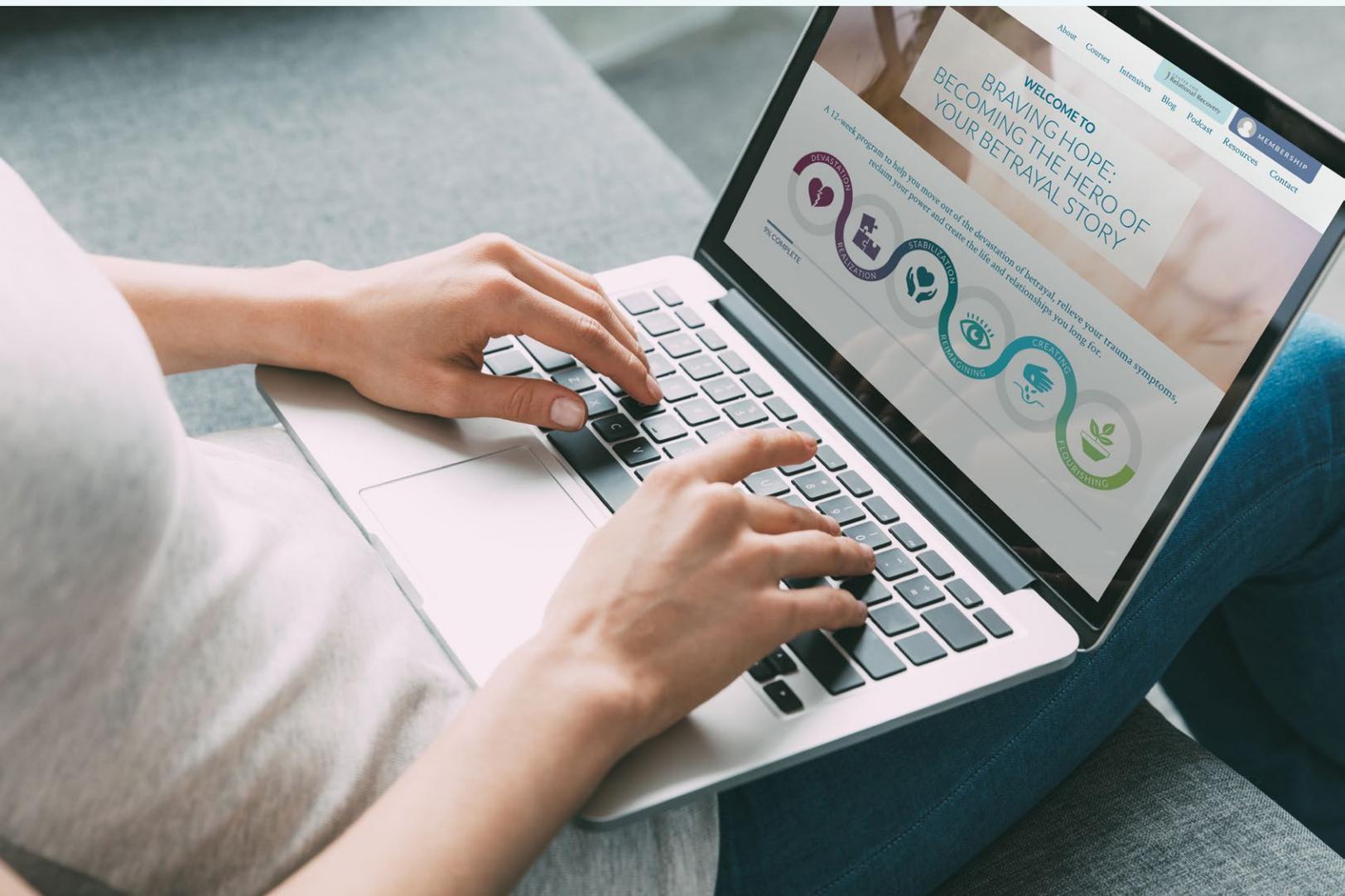
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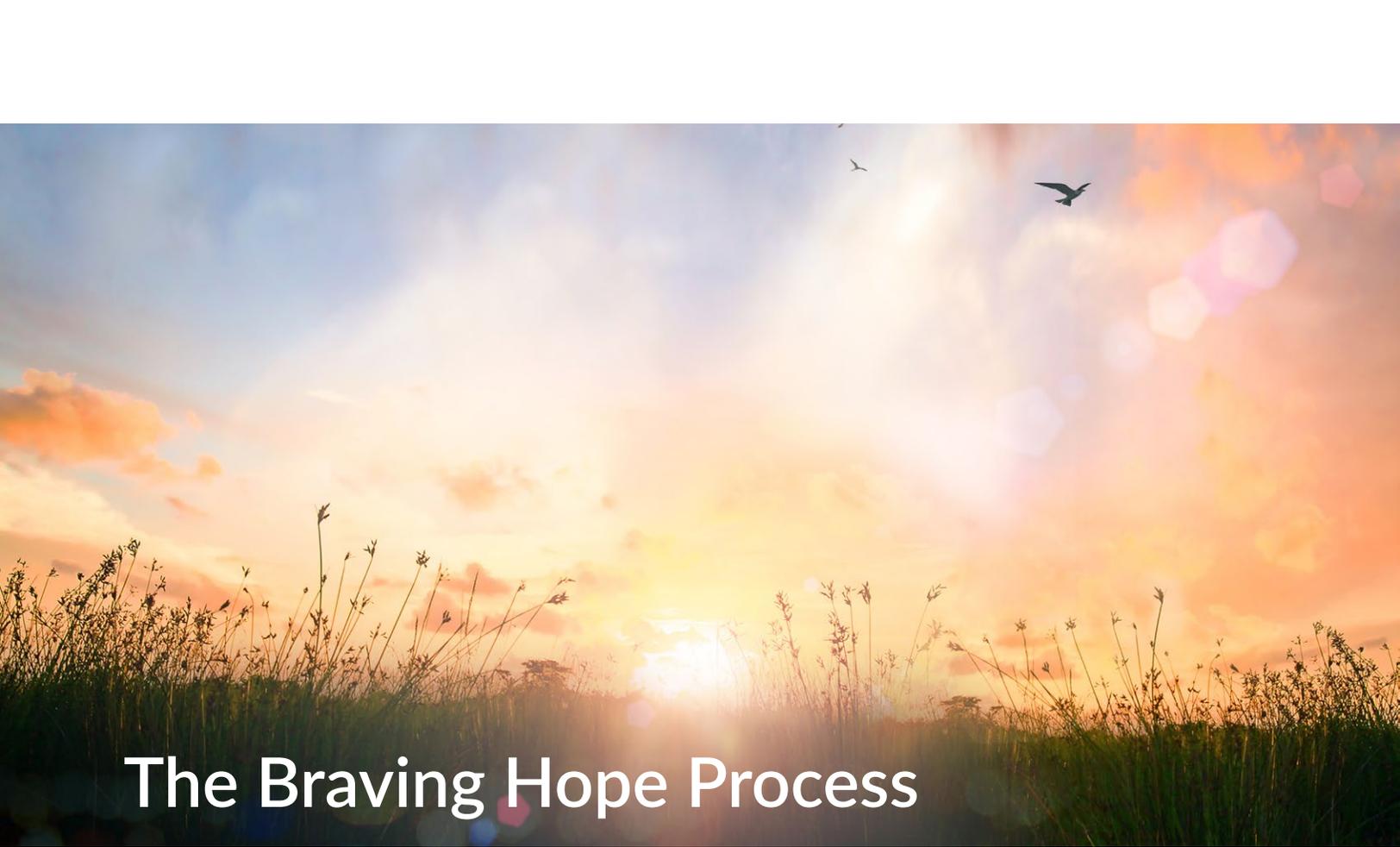
BRAVING HOPE:

Becoming the Hero of Your Betrayal Story

A 12-week program to help you move out of the devastation of betrayal, relieve your trauma symptoms, reclaim your power and create the life and relationships you long for.

To learn more, schedule a call with us at partnerhope.com/schedule-now/

PartnerHope
Braving HOPE after betrayal



The Braving Hope Process

ONE OF MY FAVORITE MOMENTS AS A THERAPIST IS

when new clients come into my office and tell me their story. As I listen, I begin to see in my mind's eye the ways in which their lives will change, the freedom they will encounter, how much better their relationships will be, and how comfortable they will feel in their own skin if they enter fully into the transformation process. I start to glimpse a vision of what is possible for them, and that is an exciting and hopeful image.

The clients, however, are usually having a very different experience. They are entirely focused on the crisis or problem that has brought them to my office. For them, there is no vision and very little hope, as they are mired in their troubles and struggling without success to find a way out. For those dealing with betrayal trauma, the shock, pain, and anger tend to overwhelm everything else, making even the possibility of hope seem doubtful and unlikely.

Nevertheless, what I and many others know is that there is an enormous amount of hope for betrayed partners. Hope for them. Hope for their partner. Hope for their relationship. Sometimes not all three, but always at a minimum the first one.

This hope is not just a Hail Mary, either. It is grounded in the fact that there is a process available for healing from betrayal. There are steps and tasks and tools and information to guide them from the initial chaos and devastation of betrayal to a place where they are actually...dare I say it...flourishing.

At PartnerHope, we have delineated six phases in this journey, breaking the process of healing from betrayal trauma into key steps and providing clients with hope for each stage of the process. These phases are: *devastation*, *realization*, *stabilization*, *re-imagining*, *creating*, and *flourishing*. We call this the Braving Hope Process.



Braving hope is being willing to risk after failure, disappointment or heartbreak. It is being willing to embrace optimism and look for the good even after experiencing difficult challenges. Braving hope taps into the part of you that is resilient and willing to continue believing and trying even though you've encountered setbacks and hurdles. Braving hope means allowing yourself to continue to operate out of hope even when it feels risky and vulnerable to do so. That is why it is called braving hope. It takes courage and resiliency to do it.

The Braving Hope Process is grounded in the following core beliefs about what creates true authentic hope and possibility in our lives.

- **Our ability to choose our response to any situation is where our true power as human beings lies.** We do not always get to choose our circumstances. We are all in the midst of life and experiencing the joys and tragedies of being human. However, no matter our circumstances, we can hold on to the true center of our being and choose how we respond to what is happening to us.
- **We must always stay connected to our reality, even when our reality is painful and distressing.** The reality of betrayal is challenging, thrusting us into unwelcome and unchosen circumstances. Avoiding, denying, and distorting reality are normal human responses to traumatic events. However, working to stay grounded in the reality that is unfolding so we can stay in awareness, be present, and make good choices is vital to the process of healing.
- **Deep, long-lasting personal and relational transformation is possible.** It is possible to change your life (your core beliefs about yourself, others, and God, and

the resulting behaviors and relational patterns that come out of these beliefs) in significant and permanent ways. Transformation is possible and ongoing if you allow life to be your teacher, and you allow yourself to be stretched and grown through each challenge and joy presented, including the challenge of being betrayed.

- **Change that arises out of connection to our heart's longings and desires is more transformative and longer-lasting than change that comes as a result of pain and suffering.** Pain and suffering will always challenge us to grow. However, we grow in more meaningful ways when we connect to the deepest desires of our hearts and allow those longings to stir us to action. Our inner longings tell us the truth much more than pain and suffering do. If we create space for what we long for and listen closely to it, it will guide us into a new and better way of living.

The phases of the Braving Hope Process are both linear and non-linear. Most betrayed partners tend to experience a progression through the phases. At times, however, you may find yourself experiencing more than one phase simultaneously or doubling back and revisiting previous phases as you go along. It is not unusual to experience more and more flourishing (the last phase) while still occasionally feeling the pain of devastation (the first phase).

With this in mind, I will tell you that however you experience these six phases, you are normal. Do not judge yourself about where you are in the process or how your journey is unfolding. While the phases are similar for everyone, each person's journey through them is unique.

Below are descriptions of the phases of the Braving Hope Process. Please read through them with patience, kindness, and curiosity. Give yourself plenty of space and time to be where you are in the process while still being open to and curious about what lies ahead as your healing journey progresses.



Phase 1: Devastation

LEARNING ABOUT BETRAYAL SHATTERS YOUR WORLD.

In a single moment, everything you thought you knew and could count on changes. The person closest to you switches from being your deepest source of safety and connection to a wellspring of pain, fear, and emotional danger. In the aftermath of betrayal, you are likely to experience at least a few (and probably all) of the following hallmarks of devastation:

- High levels of anxiety, fear, anger, confusion, and pain.
- Reduced functioning and an inability to focus or concentrate.
- Loss of security and safety in the relationship.
- Feelings of shame, self-blame, isolation, and grief.
- Trauma symptoms and coping behaviors.
- Desperate searching for helpful information.
- Intense need for relief from emotional pain.
- Deep mistrust of spouse, others, Higher Power, and self.
- Burning need/desire to know the full scope of the betrayal.

In the devastation phase, betrayed partners typically ask two burning questions:

- What is happening to me?
- What do I do?

These aren't the only questions posed by betrayed partners, but they are without doubt two of the first to surface. Let's begin by focusing on the first question: What is happening to me?

Betrayal immediately alters your reality, sweeping away everything you thought you knew and understood about your partner and your relationship, replacing that with confusion, uncertainty, and chaos.

In this chaos, a natural and primary way to feel like you are regaining some control is to try to fully understand what is happening. To this end, betrayed partners can become amazing researchers. Motivated by their desire to make sense of the unfathomable they become Google masters, gathering and reading information about infidelity, sexual addiction, relationship issues, betrayal trauma, and more, all in an attempt to understand their new reality.

The instinctual need for information that drives you to the computer is a wise coping mechanism. When you experience trauma, the events and emotions feel uncontained and overwhelming. When you are provided with language, definitions, and concepts that explain the situation in which you find yourself, you immediately feel better. The words and explanations help you begin to contain your experience. It gives it edges and helps you wrap your mind around what has happened.

In the devastation phase, information is critical. Information about what you are dealing with (there is a difference between infidelity and sexual addiction) and language to help you begin to name and understand your emotional experience are essential as you move toward healing. This information is what helps you begin the process of understanding and integrating what has happened into the narrative of your life.

Now let's focus on the second question: What do I do?

Recently, I asked a group of betrayed partners who have survived the devastation phase and progressed in their healing journey to phases 5 and 6, the creating and flourishing phases, what their best advice would be to partners currently experiencing devastation. It was amazing how similar their lists were when I gathered and compared the data. Mostly I found that a key ingredient to managing the devastation phase is receiving useful and empathetic direction about how to deal with your new reality.

Here are the top ten pieces of advice these partners gave for surviving and moving through the devastation phase toward healing:

- 1 Get expert help and support from professionals who are trained to deal with infidelity, sexual addiction, and betrayal trauma.
- 2 Reach out for support from trusted and safe friends, family members, clergy members, 12-Step groups, support groups, etc.

- 3 Educate yourself about betrayal trauma, infidelity, sexual addiction, etc.
- 4 Protect your physical and sexual health.
- 5 Know what to expect from your cheating partner as you enter the process of recovery (whether together or individually).
- 6 Give yourself permission to not make any decisions about your relationship for a while as you sort through your options.
- 7 Know what you have a right to know about your partner's recovery process, and ask for this information.
- 8 Ask to receive full disclosure about the cheating with the help of professionals and in a manner that does not cause you further trauma.
- 9 Give yourself space and permission to cry, feel your feelings, and mourn the loss of the relationship you thought you had. Let yourself be exactly where you are in the moment, even if that feels uncomfortable.
- 10 Set realistic expectations for yourself. You won't be able to function at your previous level for a while, and that is okay.

Below is a graphic showing you steps on the path and hopes for the journey for the devastation phase. Each phase of the Braving Hope Process has its own steps and hopes. My expectation is that these steps and hopes will provide you with a sense that there is a clear path to healing from betrayal trauma—that there are specific skills, tools, and relational abilities that, when developed, will move you out of pain and confusion into a place of feeling empowered, grounded, and whole again.

STEPS ON THE PATH

Learn to recognize betrayal trauma.

Develop an understanding of and language for describing your experience of betrayal trauma.

Learn what to do (and not do) to cope with the betrayal.

Identify where and how to get help and support for yourself.

Get help managing your immediate crisis issues.

HOPE FOR THE JOURNEY

Recognize that you are normal. The range of reactions and emotions you are experiencing is to be expected.

Begin to know that you did not cause the betrayal. It is not your fault.

Understand that you are not alone. Others have been where you are and are available to walk beside you and support you.

Begin to develop tools to calm, comfort, and soothe yourself.

Be assured that it will not always feel big and awful like it does today. It will get better.



Phase 2: Realization

THE SECOND PHASE OF HEALING IS REALIZATION.

The realization phase is when the initial shock of discovery begins to wear off and you start to more fully realize the scope and depth of the betrayal and what it means for you and your relationship. During this phase, there are several key realizations that you will recognize and likely need to grapple with and process.

Realization #1: The problem is bigger than I thought.

For most betrayed partners, the initial discovery of the cheating reveals only a portion of the full story. In your relationship, you may have initially discovered a single affair, or an emotional affair that your significant other swears never turned physical, or a pornography issue, or any of a million other possibilities. And this initial discovery was without doubt terribly painful.

Unfortunately, most of the time the initial discovery is only part of the story. Often, over time, more discoveries are made, and the truth slowly trickles out in a death-by-paper-cut vortex of ever-deepening betrayals. Sometimes what is revealed over time is a sexual addiction that requires serious and intense treatment. Sometimes what is revealed over time is infidelity that is broader in scope than first anticipated. Other times, what you discover initially really is the whole story. In that case, what is revealed over time is the level of damage this has caused to your relationship. Whatever the case, there is a deepening understanding of the significance of the problem being faced. Which leads us to the next realization...

Realization #2: This is not something I/we can just get over and move on from.

After initial discovery, most partners go through a phase where they hope the relational breach can be patched up and worked through relatively quickly. They desperately want to escape the pain of the betrayal, so they look for a way to quickly repair the damage and get the relationship back on stable ground. Usually, cheating partners also want to move the relationship out of crisis. To this end, they will apologize and make heroic promises for change.

However, when more lies and betrayals come to light, or the significance of the lies and cheating becomes clearer, the hope for a quick resolution fades and betrayed partners begin to realize they are not going to be able to easily move on from what has happened. At this point, there is a deepening awareness of the level of damage that has been done, and that serious work and effort are going to be required to heal. Sometimes there is the possibility of repairing the relationship and moving on together. Sometimes there is the unwanted realization that your relationship must end. Which leads to realization number three...

Realization #3: Healing from betrayal trauma is a process that takes time.

As betrayed partners develop a fuller understanding of the scope and depth of the issues confronting them and their relationship, they begin to recognize that the quick fix they were hoping for is not going to happen. They start to understand that healing from betrayal trauma is a longer-term process of learning about and repairing the wounds that have occurred.

This realization is a big one because it requires betrayed partners to reorient themselves and adjust their expectations. It asks them to take the long-view about what has happened and the type of healing that might be possible. It changes the lens from a close-in immediate view of the situation to a bigger-picture examination of what might be possible over time. It asks them to accept that their individual healing and the potential healing of their relationship are processes that must unfold over time.

The realization phase is a pivot point for many betrayed partners. It is the phase where, after having the three realizations discussed above, many partners make the decision to seek out help and fully enter a healing process. They adjust their expectations from hoping for a quick fix to understanding that a deeper level of healing and restoration is needed for themselves and potentially for their relationship.

In the realization phase, as the initial overwhelm of discovery starts to lessen, partners begin to absorb new information and recognize the ways in which their sense of reality has been altered by betrayal. As this occurs, the following questions often surface:

- Do I stay, or do I leave my relationship?
- How do I know if he/she is still lying or cheating?
- What is sex addiction? How do I know if he/she is a sex addict? What does recovery involve?

- What is betrayal trauma and is it possible to heal?
- How will I ever deal with all that I've lost?
- Is there hope for me? For my relationship?
- Where can I get the help that I/we need?

In addition to these burning questions, there are common experiences that betrayed partners tend to have during this phase. These experiences mark the partner's movement from the devastation phase into the realization phase:

- Intense feelings of loss, uncertainty, anger, and pain washing through in waves as the reality of what has happened becomes clearer and is further absorbed and processed.
- A high level of need for information about betrayal trauma, sex addiction, infidelity, and the process of recovery.
- Assessment of options, such as staying in the relationship, leaving the relationship, therapeutic separation, and the potential for healing.
- Recognition of a personal need for help and support to heal from the betrayal and the trauma symptoms that are being experienced.
- Attempts to cope with trauma symptoms, leading to both healthy (talking to empathetic others) and unhealthy (binge eating, compulsive spending, drinking, etc.) coping behaviors engaged in to manage uncertainty, fear, and other uncomfortable emotions.
- Recognition of the need for outside expert help and support in navigating recovery, dealing with relational fallout, and healing from betrayal trauma.
- A high level of need for full disclosure of the entire scope and extent of the cheating behaviors and dishonesty.
- Increasing identification of the lies and misinformation the cheating partner has told to cover up his or her behavior. Connecting the dots and seeing much more clearly the degree of lying and manipulation that has accompanied the cheating.

As you can see from this list of common experiences, the realization phase is marked by increasing awareness and understanding of both the problem itself and what it will take to deal with and repair the damage done. As your new reality begins to sink in and you begin to process different parts of your experience and new facets of your altered reality, you can expect to ride a roller-coaster of quickly changing moods and emotions.

There are two other common experiences that occur for betrayed partners during the realization phase. I want to focus on these separately because these two experiences form a danger point for partners. They are a place where partners can veer off the path of healing, returning to continued chaos and deepening betrayal. They are:

- The temptation to try quick fixes.
- The danger of exiting the healing process and moving into denial due to fear and overwhelm.

Intimate betrayal is a difficult challenge to face, and sometimes partners choose to not face it. When betrayed partners are presented with the severity of their situation, they sometimes give in to the temptation to avoid fully looking at what has happened. This is called betrayal blindness, and it happens because it feels too scary and threatening to your relationship and your life as you know it to let yourself know and experience the full truth.

Partners who experience betrayal blindness move into a version of denial—ignoring, devaluing, refuting, or minimizing information. When this happens, they are susceptible to believing ongoing lies that the cheating partner may be telling, all because they want to believe that what they have discovered is all there is to deal with. They mistakenly hope that an appointment or two of couple's therapy is all that is needed for healing, or that a few big fights and conversations with their significant other will set things back on track.

The temptation of betrayal blindness is to slap a band-aid on a bigger wound and ignore the fact that it is still seeping around the edges. Sometimes, betrayed partners will actually discourage their significant other from getting help by entering sex addiction treatment or therapy, even though an impartial outside observer would say this treatment is very clearly needed. Once again, partners do this because they are afraid to face the full reality of the problem and what it might mean for their life and their relationship.

This fear is common and very real, and the desire to avoid something so scary and potentially painful is understandable. However, my experience working with betrayed partners tells me that this avoidance usually turns out to just be a detour that brings them back to the same frightening spot and the same potentially painful choices.

If you can be aware of this very real temptation to avoid your new painful reality and go for the quick fix, it will help you stay with the natural and necessary unfolding of the realization phase and to eventually move through it. And this is a very good thing, because after realization comes the stabilization phase.

STEPS ON THE PATH

Deepen your understanding of complex betrayal trauma.

Educate yourself about sex addiction and infidelity.

Identify the toxic tango of staggered discovery and learn how to avoid the further trauma and damage it causes.

Identify your trauma symptoms and develop healthy coping strategies. Establish rituals of self-care.

Learn how to reach out and use your community of support.

HOPE FOR THE JOURNEY

Experience increased clarity about what has happened and your new reality.

Deepen your understanding of the issues facing you and the possibilities for healing.

Become empowered to protect yourself from further damage.

Choose healthy over unhealthy coping strategies and begin to feel better.

Experience empathy, care, and love from your community of support as you learn to receive from others.

AVOIDING GETTING STUCK IN THE MUCK

Before we move to the stabilization phase, I want to talk about a potential pitfall at the junction between devastation/realization and stabilization.

Sadly, it is possible to get stuck in the devastation and realization phases and not move forward into stabilization and the stages that follow. Some betrayed partners learn about betrayal trauma, understand what has happened to them, recognize their trauma symptoms, and then get stuck. They experience devastation and realization and are unable to move forward into stabilization and further healing.

Over the years that I have worked with partners (and when I look back on my own process of recovery), I see one significant element that seems to be the deciding factor in whether partners get stuck in devastation and realization or move forward into stabilization. This factor is the partner's willingness to accept her own need for personal help and healing and to enter fully into her own recovery process.

Almost every partner that I have ever worked with has had to overcome some significant emotional hurdles to get to this place of accepting the need for help and entering the process of healing. And why not? If your partner commits a crime, you are not asked to go sit beside them in prison while they serve their sentence. But when your partner commits the emotional crime of betrayal, you must enter treatment either with them or on your own, even though you are not the offending party.

For most partners this feels wildly unfair, and the mere thought creates enormous anger and resentment. As a result, most partners will, for a period, rebel against this. Sometimes they refuse to even consider treatment for themselves.

Here are some of the things that I hear partners say during this refusal timeframe:

- It's not fair.
- I didn't do anything wrong.
- Why should I have to spend all my time, money, and energy when I'm not the one who cheated?
- It is my cheating partner's problem, and he's the one that needs to fix it.
- This doesn't have anything to do with me.
- I'll be blamed in some way for the infidelity.
- My cheating partner won't be held responsible.
- It will let the cheater off the hook.

These are all normal fears and concerns, and if you have had these or similar thoughts, you are in good company. Most betrayed partners do. However, at some point you'll need to move through these emotional blocks. Because that is what they are. They are blocks, and they are blocking you from wholeness and health. Partners who get stuck in the devastation and realization cycles end up allowing their thoughts and fears to keep them from the help and support they need.

To move forward into the stabilization phase, you must move these emotional blocks out of your way. The best way for you to do that is by focusing on yourself and what you need. You did not cause the bus crash of betrayal. But the bus did hit you. And now you must decide if you are going to let that event cripple you, or if you are going to do everything in your power to become strong, well, and whole again.

This choice can only be made by you. No one else can do it for you. Your cheating partner's recovery can potentially help to heal your broken relationship, and it will lead them to make amends to you for the damage caused by their betrayal. But their recovery cannot heal you. Only your recovery can do that.

To move out of devastation and realization and into stabilization, you must embrace your need for healing and become willing to learn new ways of thinking, behaving, and coping with your emotions. This is the key to moving forward through the rest of the phases and eventually finding that against all odds you are once again flourishing.

The best way to avoid getting stuck in devastation and realization is to get expert help and support from a professional who is trained in dealing with betrayal trauma, understands the progression of events, feelings, and symptoms that partners experience, and can guide you through devastation and realization into the stabilization phase where you can start to learn the skills and tools that will help you cope and heal.

If you feel like you have gotten stuck in the first two phases, or if you are just still naturally in the devastation and realization phases, take some time to do some journaling about your potential sticking points. Are your anger and resentment holding you captive? Are "it's not fair" thoughts blocking your progress and healing? If so, how can you move these blocks out of your way? How can you begin to focus on yourself and what you need to recover and heal?



Phase 3: Stabilization

MANY PARTNERS REPORT THAT THE STABILIZATION phase is the longest phase, in terms of time, on their healing journey. Sometimes they feel like they stay in this phase even as they move forward into the later stages of healing. Remember, the phases do not always happen in the order they are being presented, and most partners tend to experience multiple phases at one time, often doubling back to devastation or having a new layer of realization occur. So, the process of healing from betrayal trauma is both linear and non-linear all at once.

One sign that you are entering the stabilization phase is that you start to feel like you have a little more emotional space inside of you. Instead of feeling pushed to the emotional wall, you find that you are not quite as short-tempered or exhausted or prone to teary outbursts as you have been. The painful feelings do not completely go away, of course. You are still going to catch yourself asking, “How did this become my life?” But as you start to wrap your mind around what has happened and to understand your experience, the most severe symptoms of shock—emotional and mental fragmentation, difficulty concentrating, and impaired functioning—begin to recede and improve.

You also start to ask different questions. In the devastation and realization phases, your questions were about how to survive and what to do in the moment to manage your overwhelm. In the stabilization phase, your attention turns to deeper matters: to your future, and to the future of your relationship. Questions that are hallmarks of the stabilization phase include:

- How do I navigate my relationship right now?
- What boundaries do I need in my relationship?
- What are my bottom lines, and how do I communicate them?
- What is it OK to ask for in my relationship (and from others in my life)?
- What if my partner relapses or cheats again?
- How do I find my voice and communicate better?
- How do I heal from the trauma I have experienced?
- My relationship is ending. Now what?

To heal from betrayal trauma, it is imperative that you answer all these questions and answer them well (except the last one if your relationship is not ending). To fully answer these questions, you must learn new concepts and new skills. You must also develop a different understanding of what healthy relationships look like. This requires enormous growth and change on your part, which is why the stabilization phase is often the longest phase of healing.

For example, you may feel like you use your voice a lot in your relationship, so working on finding and using your voice seems unnecessary. However, you may be doing a lot of communicating, but ineffectively, in ways that allow what you say to be easily dismissed or ignored. Communicating effectively from your personal power center is a whole different beast. Establishing this new way of communicating involves learning and practice.

As you explore new tools and learn new skills, the experience of betrayal begins to change. Some characteristics of the previous two phases remain, but new needs and feelings arise as the initial devastation begins to settle down and you start to feel more equipped to handle what is happening. Common experiences of the stabilization phase include:

- Strong desire to feel safe.
- Growing ability to healthfully manage trauma symptoms.
- Desire for better communication skills.
- Continued pain, anger, and fear.
- Decreasing confusion.
- Increasing ability to function.
- Making decisions about whether to stay or leave the relationship.
- Need for a restored sense of self.
- Continued need for information and support regarding healing from betrayal trauma.

As you can see, this phase is where you start to make decisions, ask for change, use your voice, and set boundaries. All of these things help you to make one of the most significant shifts in the healing process: the shift from powerlessness to empowerment.

Betrayal takes away your sense of choice and leaves you feeling powerless. Because of the decisions your partner made, your world spun out of control. You did not have a say in the

cheating and you didn't have a say in the pain and confusion that followed. It is unbearable to feel so impotent and helpless in the face of something so life-changing and big.

In the stabilization phase, you move out of this powerless 'one-down' position by learning to operate from your personal power center. Your personal power center is your core truth about what you need, what you want, what you value, what is important to you, what you are willing to sacrifice for, and what is truly meaningful in your life. It is your belief in your inherent worth and your acceptance of your human imperfections and character defects. You operate from this place by learning to listen to yourself, to trust yourself, and to use your voice effectively to communicate with your partner and others.

STEPS ON THE PATH

Develop your ability to effectively set and maintain boundaries and bottom lines.

Begin the process of releasing shame and increasing your sense of self-worth.

Learn about and plan for the process of full disclosure.

Recognize and overcome betrayal blindness, building the strength and resilience to handle your new reality.

Create a plan for handling relapses or slips that may occur.

HOPE FOR THE JOURNEY

Experience positive changes in all your relationships.

Experience relief from the burden of betrayal-driven shame.

Feel confident in your ability to learn the whole truth about the betrayal while limiting your experience of further trauma.

Experience increased ability to be grounded in reality and to make healthy decisions for yourself.

Feel empowered to handle any slips or relapses that occur with self-care, self-compassion, and appropriate boundaries and bottom lines.



Phase 4: Re-imagining

THE FIRST THREE PHASES OF THE BRAVING HOPE PROCESS

center around understanding and coping with the immediate personal and relational impacts of your partner's betrayal. Phase four, re-imagining, marks a shift in the process—a transition into looking forward toward the future and starting to think about life after the betrayal and the possibilities that healing might hold for you.

Phase four is called re-imagining because in this phase your energy is focused less on what your partner did and how it has impacted you, and more on understanding how you got to where you are, including the ways in which your past story has shaped your present story, and on imagining a new and different story as you move forward. The key questions that shape this phase include:

- How did I get here?
- Where am I going?
- Who do I want as part of my life?
- Can I trust again?
- What do I want my life and my relationships to look like?
- Can I live with my partner's addiction long-term?
- How do I become vulnerable and take risks again?
- How do I grow spiritually?

When you experience betrayal trauma, it ruptures your attachment and connection with your partner so thoroughly that there is no going back. You will never again have the

relationship you had with that person pre-discovery—even if you decide to stay with him or her and repair and heal the relationship.

You will also never again be the same person you were pre-discovery. The core of who you are does not change. If you were funny before, you will still be funny. If you were creative or outdoorsy or loved animals or were generous and giving or playful and silly, those parts of your basic self will remain. However, the version of ‘yourself in a relationship’ that you were pre-discovery is gone, and you will never again be the version that had not experienced betrayal trauma.

The first three phases of the process of recovering from betrayal trauma focus on tallying up and understanding the losses that have occurred as a result of the betrayal. Grieving those losses, letting go of hopes and dreams, and accepting the new and very challenging reality that you now find yourself in are key steps along the path of recovery. After taking these important steps, it is vital that you begin to develop a vision for a new, post-betrayal future and life.

The re-imagining phase is exactly what it sounds like. It is the phase where you begin to consider who you are now, what you want for yourself, what you want for your relationship, how you want to craft and live your life going forward, what you want to change, what old baggage from your history needs to be healed so you can be free of it, and what you hope for and want for yourself and those you love.

During the re-imagining phase, as you begin to think bigger picture about your life and relationships, you are likely to:

- Develop a growing acceptance of the new normal.
- Begin to imagine a new future.
- Explore how your history has shaped your present story.
- Alternate between hope and despair as progress is made and issues are dealt with but then resurface.
- Feel an extreme need and desire for a changed relationship.
- Increase your awareness of the long-term nature of addiction and recovery.
- Experience an increase in stability or instability within your relationship.
- Experience changed family dynamics as new ways of relating are learned and practiced.
- Experience fears about risking and becoming vulnerable again in relationships.

The re-imagining process starts with an examination of trauma. Many betrayed partners have experienced what I call multi-layered trauma. What this means is that before they experienced the trauma that results from being cheated on and systematically lied to, they had other experiences of betrayal trauma, either in their childhood or in previous adult relationships.

Betrayal trauma encompasses far more than just the sexual and relational infidelity. Betrayal trauma also includes the traumatic impact of someone you depend upon betraying you through neglect, abandonment, or physical, sexual, emotional, or spiritual abuse—especially during your developmental years. This includes a full range of experiences from what we might typically think of as overt abuse, like being slapped or hit or verbally abused, to more covert experiences, such as not getting your emotional, intellectual, or spiritual needs fully met, or being expected to behave like a little adult instead of a child.

If you experienced betrayal trauma in childhood, that trauma reverberates through you when you encounter fresh betrayal trauma as an adult. New trauma awakens the emotions of your childhood trauma and adds them to the reactions that are being triggered by your current sexual and relational trauma. Suddenly, you're dealing with a double whammy of trauma responses.

For example, if you had a father who was busy being a provider and was often absent or distracted when he was present, you may have wounds from not getting your needs for attention, affirmation, direction, care, and nurturance met by this preoccupied parent. Then, in your adulthood, when you experience your partner as disconnected, withdrawn, preoccupied, or in some way abandoning or rejecting, you are likely to have feelings about that plus feelings from the wounds with your unavailable father. This is the experience of multi-layered trauma with which many betrayed partners must cope.

During the re-imagining phase, attention turns to exploring and beginning to understand and heal not just the current trauma but past traumas. In this phase, most betrayed partners start to identify and connect with the longing they feel for something more. They realize they want and need something more than what they had even before they found out about the cheating and lying. This is a gift that is hidden in the betrayal, and partners come to recognize, over time, that even though they did not choose betrayal and they are still mad as hell that they are dealing with it, the betrayal has opened a doorway leading to the possibility of a much deeper healing and freedom than they had previously imagined.

The re-imagining phase can be a pivot point in reclaiming your sense of self. Your focus shifts from an emphasis on your cheating partner and what he is or isn't doing to understanding more about who you are, what has shaped you, and what your internal and external life could be like as you heal and shed the restrictions created by past and present wounds.

This is a phase that includes intensive work on past and present trauma to reclaim your sense of self and to move out of old patterns that perpetuate harmful behaviors in your life and inhibit you in your relationships—with yourself, with others, and with your Higher Power. Hopefully, this work is done with an understanding that the pathway leading you through your past traumas eventually leads to a changed and happier future.

Below is an outline of the key steps and hopes for your journey through the re-imagining phase.

STEPS ON THE PATH

Understand how your past has shaped and impacted your present.

Begin to operate from inherent worth in your relationship with yourself and others.

Identify your needs and wants and communicate them in a healthy manner.

Begin to re-parent yourself to heal old wounds and change unhelpful patterns.

Increase your conscious connection with your Higher Power.

HOPE FOR THE JOURNEY

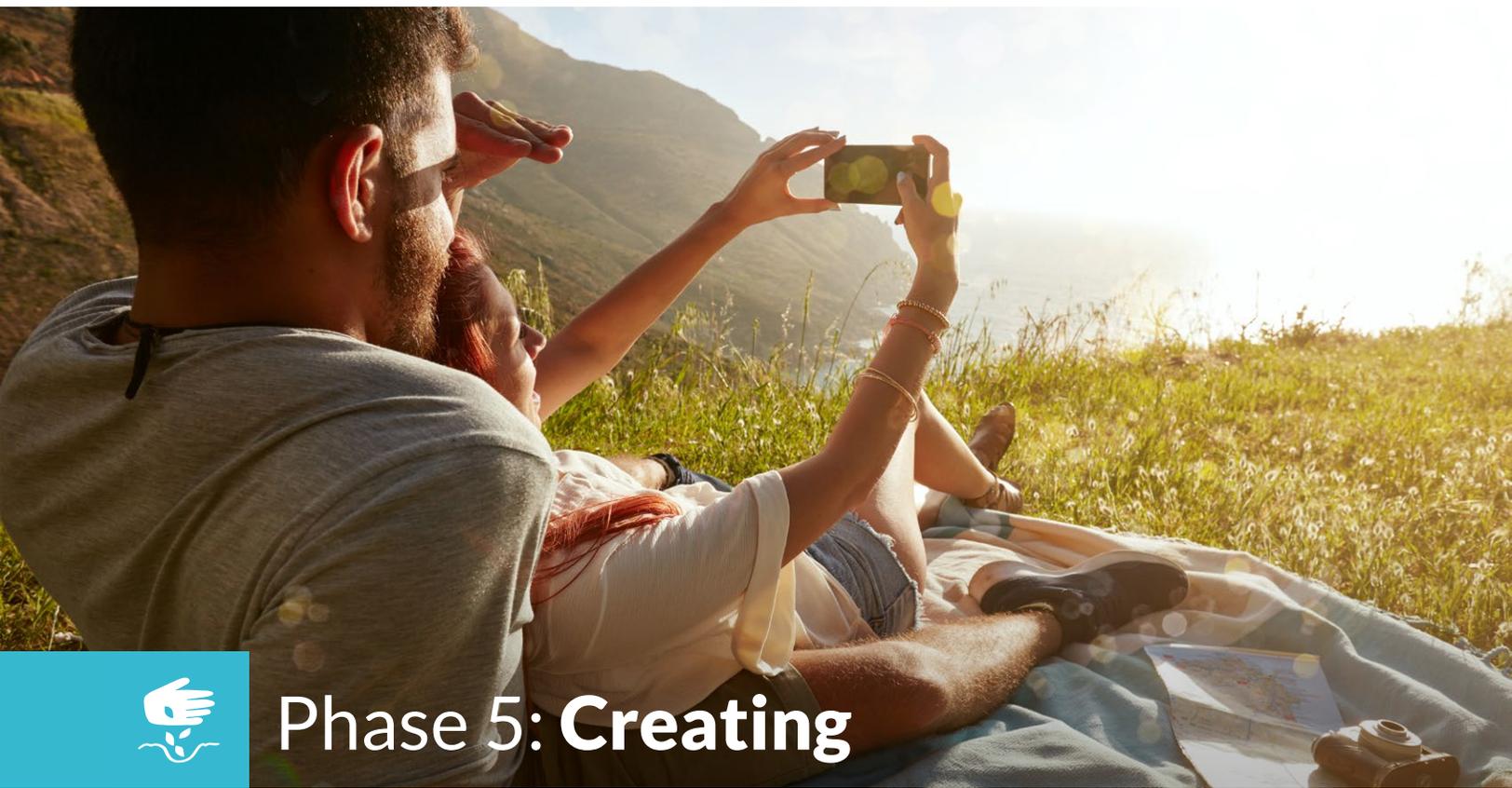
Experience growing compassion, knowledge, and self-love as you better understand your story.

Know that you are valuable, worthy, and lovable regardless of external circumstances.

Begin to consistently get more of your needs met.

Become empowered to change old patterns and heal past wounds so they do not determine your future.

Feel supported, loved, and directed through your spiritual relationship.



Phase 5: Creating

IF THE RE-IMAGINING PHASE IS A TURNING POINT FOR

betrayed partners as they start to think about what their post-betrayal future might look like, the creating phase is where the work of building this new future gathers momentum and takes off. The questions asked in this phase are about the deepest, most meaningful parts of life, such as:

- Is it safe to open my heart again?
- What if he/she relapses and hurts me again?
- Who am I sexually? Who are we together sexually?
- Is it safe to allow erotic energy to flow in our relationship?
- What do I/we want our future to be?
- Who do I want with me on my journey through life?
- How can I/we create a new and better relationship?

Even as a new vision for the future unfolds, you must continue to grieve and accept the losses that have occurred as a result of the betrayal. Often, one of the most interesting and poignant things about healing from betrayal trauma (or any trauma, for that matter) is that as you come more fully into connection with your emotions, you find that the sadness, grief, and loss lay right next to something else inside of you. Something very surprising. That something else is longing.

Grief awakens not just your sadness about what is lost, but your deeply held inner yearnings and desires. As you count the cost of the betrayal, you also begin to feel the

stirring of your longing for joy, aliveness, connection, intimacy, fulfillment, meaning, purpose, etc. Things you thought were dead and gone slowly awaken, raising their sleepy heads to peer around and see if it might be safe to send out tendrils, dig in, and start to grow and bloom.

There are only two things in life that motivate us to do the hard work of changing. The first is suffering and pain. The second is our longing for something different. Authentic hope is grounded in the belief that the most sustainable, longest-lasting changes are changes that are connected not to your pain, but to your longings.

Nevertheless, for most betrayed partners change starts because of the pain and suffering caused by infidelity. The change is not chosen and is often about surviving and coping with the trauma of betrayal. However, by the time you move into the creating phase, a profound shift in your motivation occurs. Now, instead of being in the process because you had no choice and needed to cope with all the pain and loss and take care of those who depend on you, you are in it for yourself and for the life and relationships that you long for. You continue the work because you see the potential for a life that you never thought was possible. You dig into your learning and healing because you want something more and better than what you previously had.

Each betrayed partner longs for different things. Some want the freedom to live from their authentic self without feeling the need to people-please or experiencing shame attacks when they are seen and known by others. Some want a new and improved relationship with their cheating spouse. They have glimpsed the potential for true honesty, intimacy, and connection, and they want to go for it. Others want a new relationship with someone different. They want to learn how to pick a healthy, available, present partner, and how to be healthy, available, and present for that relationship themselves.

Nearly always, betrayed partners, when they enter the creating phase, move toward dreams that they'd never dared even to acknowledge, let alone pursue. Sometimes they break generational patterns of dysfunction and betrayal in their families, creating a new opportunity for the generations to come. Slowly, step-by-step, they create a new life that is guided by the deep longings and yearnings that are only revealed by the grief and sadness of betrayal.

And there is the mystery: that out of something so awful and life-wrecking could come such powerful and positive life-altering possibility. This is the essence of the Braving Hope Process.

The creating phase is where all that you dreamed of and thought about in the re-imagining phase begins to take shape. In this phase, the changes that you have been making, the new skills that you have been learning, and the self-knowledge that you have gained start to add up to a new way of life and a new way of being in relationship with both yourself and others. Partners in the creating stage often experience:

- Increased emotional safety.
- New intimacy and connection develop as their relational dance is explored and transformed.
- A decision is made to risk again in the relationship, or the relationship stalls due to fear.
- A decision is explored to risk again in a new relationship with an exploration of healthy dating.
- Recovery becomes a shared endeavor with the cheating partner.
- Constructive discussions around fears about addiction and infidelity are more common.
- Personal and relational sexual growth and healing occur.
- More meaningful connection develops to self, others, and Higher Power.

This is also the phase where some of your deepest healing happens. In this phase, sexual and relational wounds are emotionally engaged in a way that allows transformation of not just the mind but the heart.

If you are a betrayed partner who has stayed in your relationship and entered recovery as part of a couple, you know that the efforts your significant other has made to repair things have fallen short. This assessment does not discount the tremendous effort that your partner has likely made. He may have started to attend weekly therapy, group therapy, and 12-Step meetings, done homework, made phone calls, attended classes, and put all that he is learning into practice. But that is not enough. Certainly all of this work is vital to the healing process, and betrayed partners whose significant others do these things experience much greater hope and earlier stability in their relationships. But in some important ways these efforts inevitably fall short.

If you're like most betrayed partners, you have watched and participated in this journey and wondered why, when your spouse is obviously trying so hard, his efforts aren't resolving the core pain that you still feel. Well, here is the reason: To truly heal betrayal at the heart level, emotional connection, empathy, compassion, regret, remorse, and guilt must be felt and experienced together, simultaneously by you and your partner, in a meaningful and intentional way. Your partner must be willing to hold your pain while feeling his own pain over causing your pain. Your partner must be willing to feel his guilt and remorse and share it with you with vulnerability. At the same time, you must be willing to let down your guard and talk about the rawest places in your heart, taking the risk of opening yourself and being vulnerable with the one who hurt you.

You may be saying to yourself, "But I have done that. I've talked about how much he hurt me until I had no words left, and it didn't help." If so, you're not alone. Most partners have talked about their pain at length with their cheating partner (and others). However, this typically happens early in the healing process, shortly after discovery when emotions are running high and the cheating partner is defensive.

What I am talking about here is a different and deeper level of communication about these issues. And that typically cannot happen until this later stage of the recovery process, when both of you have done some individual healing, learned to connect to your emotional selves, worked through defenses that come up, and can stay present with one another in the face of conflict. These are the tasks that pave the way for the possibility of true repair, restoration, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

If you have arrived at the creating phase as a newly single person who has had to make the hard choice to leave your relationship, you may be wondering what this phase holds for you. It holds the same gifts, but experienced in different ways. If you have divorced or are in the process of divorcing, you still must do the deep heart work of forgiving your cheating partner and letting go so you can move on to a better life. Forgiveness sets you free and releases you from lingering emotional ties to your partner that might rob you of your power and serenity. You also receive the gifts of vulnerability as you learn to open your heart and take risks in relationships again.

Below is an outline of the key steps on the path and hopes for the journey that you are likely to experience as you move through the creating phase.

STEPS ON THE PATH

Identify your relational dance and use vulnerability to change the dance.

Develop a deeper understanding of healthy sex for yourself, your current relationship, or a future relationship.

Repair sexual wounds and create a healthy sex plan for yourself and your relationship.

Engage in the process of forgiveness.

Learn how to keep your heart alive after betrayal.

HOPE FOR THE JOURNEY

Develop confidence in your ability to dance a new emotional dance in your relationships.

Embrace your sexual self and grow in your ability to express sexual health in your life.

Open your heart while appropriately protecting it.

Transform fear, anger, and bitterness into healthy connection through a deeply personal experience of forgiveness.

Start to trust, to be vulnerable, and to connect again.



Phase 6: Flourishing

WHILE FLOURISHING IS THE FINAL PHASE OF THE HEALING

process, it is by no means the end of the journey. As we have discussed, the journey of healing from betrayal trauma is not a linear path. It is a road that winds around, revisiting familiar territory, sometimes going slow and then speeding up and then slowing down again.

So, do not look at the flourishing phase as a place you arrive at, never to return to the earlier phases. Rather, it is a place you arrive at while still experiencing and occasionally returning to other stages of the healing process. Over time, you will find yourself spending more and more time in the flourishing phase, and eventually it will become your new normal.

The flourishing phase is where you begin to live beyond the trauma of the betrayal you have experienced. The changes that you have made, the new relationship with yourself, the new connections with others, and the new ways of being have become your new normal. The questions that betrayed partners ask during this phase are generally related to maintaining their progress and continued growth. These questions include:

- What do I/we need to do to maintain progress and keep growing?
- How can I share with others the healing I have experienced?
- How will I/we set a better example for our children and their children?
- How will I/we handle bumps in the road?
- What if it all goes sideways again?

When healing from betrayal trauma, one of the most significant challenges that partners must wrestle with is the profoundly negative stories that betrayal tells them about themselves, others, and their Higher Power. Betrayal tells stories of shame (I am not worthy of faithfulness or honesty); stories of fear and terror (I will never feel safe again); stories of powerlessness (I am helpless to change my situation); and stories of despair (this is all I can expect). These stories hold partners in a suffocating grip, slowly squeezing the life out of them.

The key to healing from betrayal trauma is learning how to loosen the grasp of these stories (by noticing how all the stories are built on lies) and learning to live in ways that create a new story—a story that is rooted in authentic hope.

As you move through the phases of the Braving Hope Process, you learn new skills, new tools, new practices. What each of these different skills, tools, and practices has in common is that they work to change the story that betrayal has been telling you. Your ability to do life in new ways results in restructuring your relationship with yourself, others, and your Higher Power. When this happens, you start to tell and live a new story.

Here is a summary of the new skills and tools that, by the time you reach the flourishing phase, will be part of your new approach to life and relationships:

- Self-care is standard practice.
- Living with an integrated mind, emotions, and body becomes a way of life.
- You have an increasing ability to care for your emotional self and to handle triggers, challenges, and difficulties.
- You have a stronger connection to your Higher Power.
- Life is lived in community and consultation with others.
- Safety and trust are restored (with yourself and others), and relational disconnects are repaired more easily.
- Eroticism and healthy sexual expression are restored.

One of the most amazing things about dealing with betrayal trauma is that the healing process includes all kinds of hidden gifts. The skills that you learn, the new understanding of yourself that you gain, the relationships that you develop, and the new levels of intimacy and connection that you are capable of stay with you for the rest of your life.

If you have wholeheartedly committed yourself to the process of healing from betrayal trauma, digging deep and doing the work, then you are engaged in what is called ‘second order change.’ First order change is when you tinker with the existing structures in your life and relationships. You tweak things here and there to achieve a better result or to bring your life back into alignment and balance.

Second order change is when you go below the structures and change the foundational beliefs, feelings, and thinking that guide your behaviors. Second order change is deep,

and it is long-lasting. It changes things at the core, and these changes then weave and wind through your life, rising up to create all kinds of additional changes in different areas.

Second order change takes time. It is not a short, quick fix. It's a process that must be slowly and intentionally undertaken with diligence and attention. It requires risk-taking and the willingness to be uncomfortable—because all change requires you to leave your comfort zone to experience something new. And the deeper the change, the more profound your discomfort must be.

Second order change is also experiential. You cannot think yourself into a new state of being. You must live your way to second order change by doing new things and having new experiences that challenge your old beliefs and convince you in your cells and bones that something new is possible.

When you get to the flourishing phase, all the second order change that you have been working toward begins to feel comfortable. You are well on your way to creating a new normal for yourself through hard work and metamorphosis, and you can now start to experience the joy of living in this new normal.

Below is a brief look at the steps on the path and hopes for the journey that often become the new normal and are hallmarks of the flourishing phase.

STEPS ON THE PATH

Maintain connection and interdependence with your community of support.

Establish long-term spiritual practices and rituals that sustain you.

Maintain long-term self-care priorities, rituals, and practices.

Increase intimacy with your partner and more easily repair relational breaches.

Engage in life and relationships with a new sense of purpose, clarity, and joy.

HOPE FOR THE JOURNEY

Live a life that is enriched by a strong sense of community and relationships.

Gain meaning, purpose, sustenance, and support through spiritual practices.

Engage in self-care that sustains ongoing growth and joy as a way of life.

Restore relational connection with your partner and others after bumps in the road.

Connect to your true self and engage life with authenticity and integrity.



Conclusion

THESE ARE THE SIX PHASES THAT BETRAYED PARTNERS travel through as they heal from complex partner betrayal trauma. These phases – *devastation, realization, stabilization, re-imagining, creating* and *flourishing* – provide a roadmap of hope, leading you out of the darkness that falls when betrayal occurs into the fresh air and sunlight once again.

To help support and guide you on your journey, we have created a 12-week program called **Braving Hope: Becoming the Hero of Your Betrayal Story** to help you move out of the devastation of betrayal, relieve your trauma symptoms, reclaim your power and create the life and relationships you long for.

To learn more about the Braving Hope Program and to find out if it is a good fit for you, schedule a call at partnerhope.com/schedule-now/

About the author



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She is also the founder and Clinical Director of the Center for Relational Recovery, serving individuals and couples struggling with sexual addiction, betrayal trauma, childhood trauma, and relationship issues. She is also the creator of the Relational Recovery Disclosure Prep Model providing training and resources preparing therapists to provide excellent skill and care around facilitating full therapeutic disclosures and is the author of *The Aftermath of Betrayal* and *When It All Breaks Bad: Ten Things to Do (and not do) After Betrayal*.

Michelle is a Certified Sex Addiction Therapist and Supervisor trained under Dr. Patrick Carnes. She is also trained in Post Induction Therapy (for the treatment of relational trauma) by Pia Mellody. She is currently completing her certification in Emotionally Focused Therapy for couples and is a Registered Supervisor with the state of Virginia and is licensed as a Professional Counselor in both Virginia and Washington DC.