

## I think my boyfriend's cheating on me. Is there any hope for us?

### ▶ DEAR JOE

I've been with my boyfriend for just over a year now. There have been the usual ups and downs but I thought things were going well, until I accidentally saw a weird text pop on his phone. I went through it and discovered he has been texting a guy, and it's clear he has sexual and romantic feelings toward him. I confronted him but he denied it and it was only when I told him I'd seen the texts that he admitted it. He says it was nothing more than texts and that he never met the guy and he's promised to stop. He keeps telling me I'm being paranoid and that he's being honest with me and that I should trust him, but ever since I've been sneaking onto his phone and computer, and even followed him to the gym. I can't sleep and am constantly worrying about where he is and what he is doing. What should I do?

LEON, LONDON

### ▶ HI LEON

First of all, I want to tell you that your feelings are reasonable and they are justified. Your boyfriend has hidden from you a major part of his life and come clean only after being caught out.

You have every right to question him and be suspicious – any partner would be in this type of situation. You are experiencing a normative response to being betrayed. It is normal to feel angry, scared, mortified, and sad. Your world has turned upside down and it makes sense that you don't know what to do.

The fact that your boyfriend is denying your reality and making you feel crazy is called 'gaslighting.' The term comes from a movie, *Gas Light*, where a husband tries to drive his wife insane by manipulating and denying what's going on around her. Betrayed partners need to know the term "gaslight," so they can understand that it's not their fault they feel suspicious and crazy. He needs to come clean and stop telling you that your reality is wrong. He needs accountability for the tremendous psychological harm he has caused you by doing this.

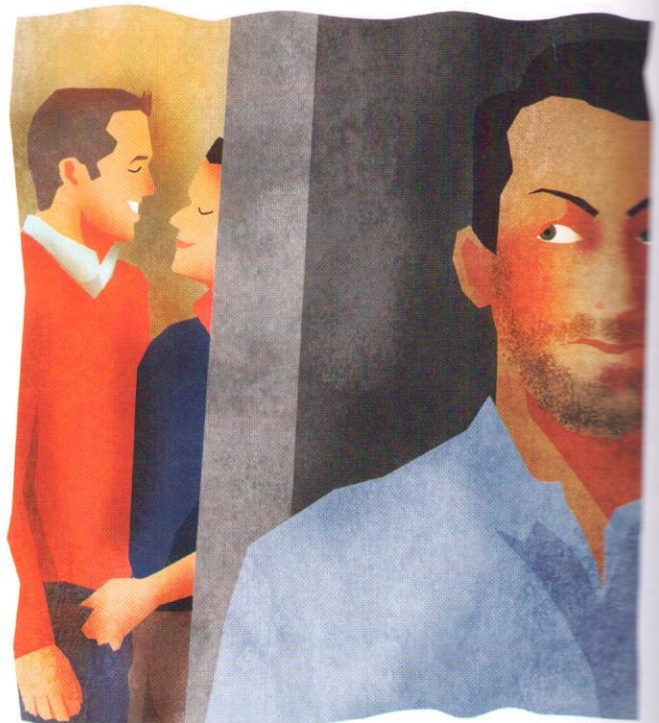
It is a normal response for people who have been betrayed to experience loss of trust, feelings of betrayal, shock at unimagined secrets and deceit. Many report being unable to sleep and ruminating over what happened in the affair, experiencing "betrayal flashbacks". These are all signs and symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, which is a common response to infidelity.

Betrayed partners often become junior detectives and start going through their partner's phones and email. Insecurity sets in now that you can no longer feel safe and trusting. You are in crisis.

The recommended protocol in infidelity recovery is for your partner to be completely transparent. He has been caught in a transgression and needs to be accountable. Your relationship needs to go from assumed trust to earned trust now meaning that he has to prove to you he is trustworthy.

I usually recommend that the cheating partner be willing to show his phone to his partner whenever it is requested, remove passcodes for easy access to his phone and emails and be one hundred percent transparent. This begins the process of showing he is trustworthy.

I also tell couples going through this that there needs to be regular times for the betrayed partner to ask questions and talk about their feelings. Usually the cheating partner doesn't want to talk about it: For them it is over, they feel guilty and they just want it all to go away. The betrayed partner wants it all to go away too but they can't force their feelings and suspicions to stop so they need an ongoing regular outlet to



talk it over.

You need to let him hear how what he's done has affected you. He's hurt you. He's broken your heart. You may feel you'll never be the same. You may feel you'll never be able to trust again. And he needs to hear how you feel about all that. He needs to listen to your pain and heartache. Nothing healing can happen in your relationship until he hears the truth from you. You deserve to be listened to and have your feelings witnessed and validated.

The main thing also is to avoid taking this personally. It is normal to think that he cheated because of something about you. It may be true that he has unexpressed feelings and that you contributed in some way to the problems in the relationship, but he is completely responsible for why he chose to act on his desire to venture outside the relationship.

Often those who cheat do so for many reasons that have nothing to do with the relationship. It can be helpful for the two of you to seek counselling so that he can identify what prompted the cheating and put his feelings into words rather than act them out.

And finally, the cheating partner needs to express sincere remorse and empathy. Research shows that for the relationship to repair the partner who betrayed needs to hear all the hurt and sadness and be able to validate and empathize and truly understand the pain he has caused. This helps the betrayed partner to be able to move on more quickly.

You need to accept that your old relationship is gone. Your relationship will not 'go back' to being what it was. Your boyfriend will not go back to the man you thought he was and you will not go back to who you were. But a stronger relationship can often be built on the ruins of the old.

The full healing process for infidelity recovery is often three to five years. Over that time things get better, and believe it or not you might find yourself in a much better relationship with him than you could have ever imagined.



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