

Do You Trust Your Mate? & How Do You Rebuild Trust?

Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-1776) told the imaginary story of two farmers who distrusted each other. The question was, would the farmers help each other during harvest season? The 1st farmer was concerned that if he ignored his crops while helping the other farmer, the 2nd farmer would not reciprocate. His trust would not only cost him dearly for the time spent away from harvesting his own crops, but make him look like a fool.



The story ends with neither farmer helping the other. Instead of increasing their individual wealth through cooperation, both suffered loss because of their lack of trust.

This tale illustrates how two people failed to break out of their isolated existences and cooperate with each other. The benefit of working together was clear, but the fear of being taken advantage of outweighed the likely gains. Rather than reaping the rewards of joining their efforts and finding a way to ensure compliance by the 2nd farmer, each of their harvests ended in disappointment.



By contrast, see what happened to a New York city hot dog vendor city when he trusted his customers. <https://vimeo.com/360579206>



Exercise

Make believe you and your spouse are the two farmers. Can you develop a mutually acceptable plan that would allow you to trust and work with each other?

When you finish, answer this question: “How easy or hard was that for you to do?” Assuming you were successful, how might you apply this same approach to areas in your life today, especially if there is mistrust in your relationship?

The Five Components of Being Trustworthy¹

Read through each of the following components of being trustworthy. As you read them, answer the true / false questions associated with each component. The goal is to help you each become more trustworthy in the eyes of your mate.

1. Be Honest

This means you tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. You do not lie or deceive.

True / False

- 1. Sometimes I withhold information from my spouse.
- 2. Sometimes I leave a false impression.
- 3. Sometimes I've made commitments to change my behavior but did not do so.

2. Be Transparent

This means you don't keep aspects of your life separate or hidden from your spouse. If your spouse asks you a question, you don't keep secrets. You give the full story.

True / False

- 4. When necessary, I will lie and cover up wrongdoing rather than come clean and acknowledge it.
- 5. I would object if my spouse wanted to verify what I say is true.

3. Be Accountable

This means you take ownership of your promises, obligations, choices, & actions. You take responsibility instead of blaming others when things under your control go wrong.

True / False

- 6. I don't feel obligated to be accountable to my spouse for my behavior.
- 7. It is difficult for me to acknowledge that my partner may be right, or that there is information out there that may prove me wrong.

8. I am not open to my spouse's feedback to learn from my mistakes as s/he sees them.

4. Be Loyal

This means you are someone your spouse can rely on unreservedly to be there for him/her when s/he needs your support. Loyalty means you continually promote your spouse's good. You remain emotionally and sexually faithful. You protect his or her reputation with others.

True / False

9. I don't always treat my spouse with respect.
10. I don't always have my partner's best interests at heart.
11. Occasionally, I talk negatively about my spouse behind his/her back.
12. I have not made much of an effort to improve my knowledge or skills that would make me a better partner.

5. Be Ethical

This means you & your spouse agree on the difference between right and wrong and you commit or re-commit to engage in what is right.

True / False

13. I don't tend to apologize or make things right when I am in the wrong.
14. Sometimes the way I treat my partner falls short of my own beliefs or values.



Discuss

- (1) Identify each of the above 5 components area(s) that have been a problem for you.
- (2) Go into more detail by discussing each line you marked “true” with your spouse.
- (3) Why do you think these areas have been a challenge?
- (4) What would make you less resistant to being trustworthy in the future?
- (5) What support do you need from your spouse to help you in this area?

How Do You Rebuild Trust?

An Extended Illustration
Applicable to Marriage

Introduction

Today, most parents take unrestricted visitation of their hospitalized children for granted. Many hospitals make provisions for a parent to sleep in the same room as their child. In a 2008 New York Times article, Dr. Howard Market observed, “at every children’s hospital across the nation, at just about any time of day or night, you are likely to see at least as many parents as patients.”

However, this was anything but the case throughout the 20th century until the 1960s in the United States, England, and other Western countries. Note the sign from Perth Children's Hospital in Australia and limited visiting hours.



A 1954 New York City survey similarly revealed city hospitals restricted most children to only two or three visits a week, each lasting an hour. For children under five, this was devastating.

To get a bird's-eye view of just how damaging such separation was, psychiatric social worker, James Robertson gathered the first-hand accounts of British mothers who lived through this period.² Here are some words they used to describe what became a gut-wrenching experience for their children:

Heartless, ruthless, torture, cruelty, terrible, brutal unhappiness, agony, dreadful, untold damage, disgusting, horrible, utter misery, heartbreaking, tragic, wrong.

Here are three in-hospital snapshots.³

We were still visiting about 30 minutes daily and the child, normally a happy, carefree, confident boy was becoming a nervous wreck. As soon as we appeared he would start clutching us, hanging on to us, beseeching us not to leave him, to take him home, etc., and when we left he looked wild and terrified.... His screams followed us the length of the corridor.



As we prepared to leave she would stand at the end of the bed, desperately trying to climb out... purple with rage and screaming with grief. We left her like that every day.

Four days in hospital, no visiting permitted: *I could hardly believe it was the same wee darling boy. He had lost so much weight, his face was pinched and haggard as if he'd been so miserable, and he could do nothing but hang on to me and hug me tight. I'll never forget his first words to me –*

“Mommy, I thought you were never coming back for me.”

The rationale for these brief encounters was that parental visits only upset the child. These visits became associated with the young child’s screaming and crying when the parent was getting ready to leave. Therefore, hospital staff discouraged such interactions because the child seemed to “settle in” when the parents were not present.

But research published in the 1950s and early 1960s demonstrated just the opposite. Parental visits didn’t cause the child’s unhappiness. They revealed the depths of the child’s pent-up misery caused by the separation. According to Robertson, “At visiting times, the facade [of being content] broke through to show that the small child needed *more* contact with his parents, not less.” This research was the turning point when parents staying with their children in the hospital became the norm.

Betrayal of Trust

The result of tearing children away from their mother and putting them into the hands of strangers in a sterile and strange environment was traumatic. One mother described this experience from the child’s perspective as a **“betrayal.”** And indeed, many children

returned home having lost trust in their parents, particularly their mothers.⁴

Right after coming home from the hospital, the children exhibited a consistent behavior: they craved constant contact with their mother. Here is a sampling of what different moms wrote.⁵

Since he has been home he won't leave me...

When she came home (only after 5 days) I thought all would be well, instead she wouldn't let me put her down to do anything, she wouldn't go to anyone (not even her father), she was terrified I was going to leave her.

On coming home with him, he was very mistrustful of me leaving him even to go into the next room.

After a week, she turned against me, would scream at the sight of me and yet if I left the room, would scream harder until I returned.

After 2 months she didn't let me out of her sight. She wouldn't stay with anyone, even my parents.

She is always afraid of me leaving her with anyone again... Even if I go upstairs she always calls out to me or follows me. In her bed at night it is always 'Hold my hand,

Mummy.’ I can never convince her that I won’t leave her again.

She was delighted to come home with me, but would not let me leave her alone for a minute for some days, and only gradually allowed me to go out of the room for a short time.

Only lately [after 5 months] has she played with other children without coming back every few minutes to make sure we are still here.

She couldn’t bear me out of her sight and kept asking if I loved her.... I had to stay with her every night till she fell asleep – a thing I’d never done before – and even now, 2 years later, she doesn’t like to be left in bed in a room by herself. She hated me even to speak to anyone else at first, and wanted my whole attention the whole time – which I gave her. Gradually she relaxed but it took a long, long time before she seemed secure again.

Now a year later I can say that we are quite normal again”⁶

Observations

One of the insights we can glean from the trauma these children experienced is the deep need for human attachment. When the bond broke, the drive to reestablish the connection became the child’s exclusive focus. Mothers

needed to intensify how much time they spent with their son or daughter to compensate for the lost trust. They needed to stay in close proximity for a sustained period until peace and stability became the norm again.

Though none of the letters revealed the consequences of not making such an effort, one can only imagine the long-term damage that would have occurred to a child's ability to trust again. In these cases, the parent needed to continually reassure the child that they were present and there for them.

How Does This Pertain to Marriage?

The need to bond is not something we grow out of when we become adults. It is a fundamental characteristic of all humans, from birth to death.

Hence, when trust is shattered, the responsible spouse must persist in trying to reestablish the connection of love and security with their mate. *As with children, so with adults.* In practice this means, if you are the betrayer of trust, you must:

1. acknowledge the pain your mate is experiencing.
2. give your spouse extra attention, care, support, and time to process the pain.
3. be responsive to your spouse's emotional needs.
4. be patient as healing takes time.



Discuss

1. When there are “attachment injuries” in your relationship, such as with hospitalized children mentioned above, what do their reactions say about human nature, that is, about us?
2. Although the separation between parent and child was relatively short, its impact lasted far longer. Given this reality, when trust breaks in a marriage, what do you think of the cliché, “just get over it”?
3. Psychologist and relationship expert, Dr. Susan Johnson, wrote,

*“After all these years of working with couples, I now understand that the heart of the matter, the central issue in the marriage, rarely concerns the content of a couple’s arguments, but almost always concerns the strength and responsiveness of the attachment relationship they have. The bottom-line test of that relationship is in the answer to a fundamental question each is, in essence, asking the other: **Are you really there for me...?**”⁷*

Questions

(a) If there is a serious breach of trust in your relationship, what specific actions does the partner who betrayed the trust need to take?

(b) Going forward, how can the question, *Are you there for me?* be answered in the affirmative? Review the 5 components of trust highlighted in the beginning of the chapter.

What About When There's Been Adultery?



Although infidelity is a cause for divorce, it doesn't have to be. Infidelity also indicates the need for a big correction in the marriage. If both parties are willing, the affair can become the impetus for a major turnaround in the relationship. Getting there is the challenging part.

There is a large amount of literature written on this subject. Rather than be redundant and repeat sound advice, I am simply going to point

you to a Reader's Digest article⁸ that suggests the steps the betrayed spouse and the unfaithful spouse each need to take. Here is the bare bones outline.

6 Steps for the Unfaithful Spouse

1. Promise to stop the affair.
2. Answer all questions.
3. Show your spouse empathy, no matter what.
4. Keep talking and listening, no matter how long it takes.
5. Take responsibility.
6. Don't expect quick or easy forgiveness.

9 Steps for the Betrayed Spouse

1. Ask lots of questions.
2. Balance your rage with your need for information.
3. Set a time limit on affair talk.
4. Expect curveballs.
5. Talk about how the affair has affected you.
6. Don't forgive quickly or easily.
7. Find support.
8. Spend time together without talking about the affair.
9. Forgive only when you're ready.

Of course, if the affair is too difficult to process on your own, this may be an area where you need professional help.

Endnotes

¹ Adapted from “The Science of Trust” by John Gottman and “The Speed of Trust” by Stephen M. R. Covey

² James Robertson. *Hospitals and Children: A Parent's Eye View*. International Universities Press, 1962.

³ cases 92, 73, 46.

⁴ cases 32, 30, 35.

⁵ cases 42, 33, 30, 31, 47, 44, 36, 48, 40, 35.

⁶ It should be noted that the children whose parents were allowed unrestricted visitation in those relatively few hospitals that, at the time, allowed it did not experience the negative reactions described above.

⁷ <https://www.psychotherapynetworker.org/article/are-you-there-me>

⁸ Go to: <https://www.rd.com/article/15-steps-to-surviving-an-affair/> for a fuller description. (Ignore the distracting links embedded into the article). This online article is excerpted from the book, *7 States of Marriage*, by Harrar and Demaria.

Two other resources I recommend are, “Not “Just Friends”: Rebuilding Trust and Recovering Your Sanity After Infidelity,” by Shirley P. Glass, and the shorter book, “How to Help Your Spouse Heal From Your Affair: A Compact Manual for the Unfaithful,” by Linda J. MacDonald.

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