

Who Should I Tell? – A Guide for Betrayed Women

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The discovery of your partner's secret life creates a horrible dilemma of wanting to scream out for help and simultaneously wanting to hide from the world. Unfortunately, for most women, betrayal trauma pushes them toward deep isolation that makes it difficult to say anything, even though they desperately want to share their pain with someone.

Trauma creates chaos, so it's good to be aware of a few reactions that can surface. First, many women also feel worried about exposing their partner's behavior to others. They struggle to protect his reputation, even though they're terribly hurt by his actions. This is not an easy decision for betrayed women. They not only worry about how others will see their partner, but also how others might see them for being in a relationship with someone who acts out sexually. This fear usually keeps women silent and hiding in shame.

Second, some women want to share their story so they can get back at their partner for hurting them so bad. They will post direct or indirect comments on social media, confide in people close to him, or tell anyone who will listen. This can backfire down the road if you choose to reconcile with your partner. Remember to carefully consider your motivations for wanting to share. Are you seeking support for yourself or are you trying to get even with your partner?

Third, please recognize that in your vulnerable state, it's easy to form unhealthy relationships and emotional bonds with others. You can end up in a romantic relationship even though you have intentions of sharing your pain with a co-worker, a neighbor, or acquaintance. These vulnerable feelings drive injured people to seek soothing and relief. You don't want to heap betrayal upon betrayal.

The first thing a woman can do to begin healing from betrayal trauma is to fight the pull of isolation and begin talking and sharing her story with a safe and healthy person. She needs a witness to her pain so she can know that she's heard and seen. She needs to know that she is a human worthy of love and belonging. She needs to know that her pain matters to someone else. Ultimately, she needs to know she won't have to do this alone.

Naturally, the fear of being judged, criticized, misunderstood, blamed, and dismissed keeps traumatized women silent. The risk of negative fallout keeps betrayed women in the dark, which is why there needs to be a discussion of how to minimize the potential for a poor outcome.

Sharing with anyone who will listen is a really bad idea. You don't want to spend anytime worrying about what happens to your information in the vulnerable early stages of discovery. You don't need additional betrayals of people gossiping and criticizing.

Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend wrote a book called "Safe People" that outlines the characteristics of people who are more likely to protect you and your story. They identify safe people by the following characteristics:

- They value love and connection
- They have the ability to trust others
- They value responsibility and aren't overly dependent on others or allow others to be overly dependent on them
- They are honest and transparent with their lives
- They work on their own issues
- They have good track record and have respectfully deal with yours or other people's private information.
- They encourage you to grow individually and in your relationships with other people.

I will also add some qualities I've observed in safe and healthy people:

- They are well acquainted with suffering and have graciously learned important lessons from their trials
- They are good listeners and don't interrupt
- They don't gossip about other people to you
- They are fair and work to see the big picture
- They keep their promises
- They don't jump to conclusions

It's likely there aren't many people in your life that fit these criteria. It takes time and experience to find safe relationships. You don't need to have more than one person in your life that fits this description. Even though it's good to have multiple people in your life that can support you, recognize that when you are working through the messy and vulnerable early stages of discovery and trauma, it's not a good idea to broadcast your situation to multiple people. This will leave you feeling more exposed, scattered, and anxious about having to keep everyone updated and in the loop, as things can change quickly.

While there is a natural reflex to turn toward parents or siblings after the crisis of discovery, this may not always be a good idea. Once you unload all of your trauma on your parents and siblings (who are naturally going to take your side), they may have difficulty supporting your marriage down the road if you choose to reconcile. You don't

want to spend the rest of your marriage trying to defend your decision to get back together.

However, many families are healthy and provide the best kind of support. Healthy family members know you, care about your marriage, and will give you a permanent shoulder to cry on when you're struggling to put together the shattered pieces of a betrayed life. Just make sure your family is healthy and won't, as Brene Brown once put it, "become another piece of debris in your tornado."

Recognize that it's common in the early days of discovery for word to get out that there has been a crisis in your marriage. Curious people may approach you to find out more details. You DO NOT owe anyone an explanation of any details just because they ask. And, you certainly don't need to apologize for not sharing your story with them. You can simply tell them that you appreciate their concern, but you already have the support you need.

It's critical to take a little time to carefully select someone who will hold your story with respect and compassion. Brene Brown once said that we should only share our shame story with someone who has earned the right to know that story. Trust is earned. It's not something you give someone just because they're family, you attend church with them, or you roomed with them in college. Safe people have passed multiple relationship tests and continue to provide you with the steady reassurance that they can handle your reality.

Instead, start by identifying the safest person you can think of and start sharing with them. I don't recommend you do this by text message or email. Sometimes phone is the only option you have, but if it's possible, face-to-face is best. You need the nonverbal reassurance that you're not crazy, to see them reflect your pain, and to know that you can be physically held and soothed by someone who cares deeply about you. Even if it's a tremendous sacrifice to get with this person face to face, I promise you it's worth it. Perhaps they might even come to you if you ask them.

If you can't identify anyone in your natural support system that meets the criteria for a safe person, then don't settle for the next best person. It's better to find a therapist or a church leader (male or female) who can hear your messy story and provide you with a secure space to share. Then, after you feel more grounded and clear about your situation, you can take the time to find other people who are safe.

Don't worry about how your story is shared. If they're a safe person, you won't have to edit your information in a way that makes it easy for them to hear. Just share and talk and cry and release and cry and let it go where it needs to go. A safe person will track you and stay with you and let you know you can say whatever you need to. This is not a time to worry about protecting them. It's a time for you to organize your shattered

reality. So, put all the pieces out there in whatever order they appear and trust that over time it will all come together.

After you spend time sharing your story with this safe person, you will feel a bit more organized and clear. As you move forward in your life, continue to share with them as things become clearer. At this point, it's common to feel a desire to begin expanding your circle of support. I encourage you to continue searching for safe people with whom you can open up. By this time, you may have met other women in support groups who feel safe enough to risk sharing your story again. I encourage you to take the risk and open up again. The experience of sharing your story with safe people allows you to reaffirm your worth, see your progress, and even open up more support to others who are struggling. Everyone wins when sharing is done in a respectful, compassionate, and safe environment.

Discussion Questions

1. How do you decide if a person is safe?
2. Do you have any healthy examples of what safe people have done to help you process your story or offer support?
3. What changed for you as you came out of isolation and shared your story in a supportive environment?

The author would like to thank Amy Cluff, LCSW and Jeff Ford, LMFT, for their helpful feedback and suggestions to this article

About the Author

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