

The First 72 Hours

A decision guide for the moment after discovery.

The first 72 hours after discovering a partner's affair or hidden sexual life are the acute phase of a trauma response. What follows is not advice about the marriage. It is operational guidance for getting your nervous system from hour one to hour seventy-three with your primary relationships, your children's stability, and your future options still intact.

THE ONE RULE

Decide nothing in the first 72 hours that cannot wait three days.

Almost every irreversible action taken in the acute phase gets revised or regretted later. Divorce filings, public disclosures, confrontations with the affair partner, social-media posts, calls to employers. These are not decisions; they are reactions under chemical duress. Three exceptions, covered below, involve physical safety, children's immediate safety, and narrow legal-strategy situations.

What's happening to your body

Elevated heart rate. Narrowed vision. A feeling the room is tilting. Abnormal calm, or abnormal agitation, or rapid oscillation between the two. None of this is overreaction. All of it is the expected human response to the sudden collapse of a trusted account of reality. The cognitive impairment the acute phase produces is real and measurable: working memory narrows, impulse control degrades, attention pulls toward short-term threats at the cost of longer time horizons. The decisions that most need wisdom are the decisions that most need to wait.

The first 24 hours: do and don't

DO

- Find one trusted person who can witness without fixing
- Sleep somewhere you can sleep, even if it's not your usual bed
- Document what you know, quietly, once

DON'T

- Confront the affair partner
- Make declarations about the future of the marriage
- File legal papers or sign legal documents

- Contact one trauma-informed therapist for an initial consultation
- Eat on a schedule, even without appetite
- Maintain children's routine if possible

- Post on social media, subpost, or change relationship status
- Tell extended family or wider social networks
- Argue in front of children

Scripts for common situations

When your partner asks what you want

"I don't know yet. I'm not going to make decisions in the first three days. I'm going to sleep, eat, and talk to a therapist. We'll talk about bigger questions after that."

When a child asks what's wrong

"Mom and I are going through something hard and we're getting help. It's not about you. Your job this week is just to go to school and be a kid."

When a friend asks if you're okay

"I'm going through something. I'm not ready to talk about it yet. I'll tell you when I can." (Share more only with the one or two people you have chosen as witnesses.)

When you need to take time off work

"I have a family emergency and need two days. I'll be back Thursday." (Do not elaborate. Do not explain in writing.)

Sleep, food, work

Sleep. Protect it as a clinical priority. Take a sleep aid if appropriate. Sleep somewhere you can actually sleep, even if that means the guest room, a friend's couch, or a hotel for one night. Sleeping next to the unfaithful partner out of a sense of obligation is not noble; it is counterproductive.

Food. Eat on a schedule, even without appetite. Simple meals, available without much decision-making. Acute stress burns through glucose quickly, and running on empty compounds the cognitive

impairment.

Work. Decide in advance whether you are going or not. If you have the option to take two or three days off, take them. If you have to show up, set a narrow story ("family emergency") and stick to it without elaboration. Do not improvise at work during the acute phase.

Children

Adults don't tell children the specifics. Young children especially don't need to know the sexual content, the affair partner's identity, or the details of discovery. If asked, a simple version is adequate: "Mom and I are working through something. We're getting help. It's not about you."

Routine is clinical. School, meals, bedtime, sports practice. Children's nervous systems stabilize around predictability. If you can maintain the routine, do. This isn't performing normalcy; it's protecting the children's baseline regulation while the adults work through the acute phase.

Do not argue in front of them. Whatever needs to be said can be said in a text, behind a closed door, or in a therapist's office. Arguments witnessed during this phase often become memories that persist for decades.

Therapist vs. lawyer

The therapist is for the first 72 hours. A clinician helps stabilize the acute phase and orients you to what is happening. If you do not yet have a therapist, the next 72 hours are when to find one.

The lawyer is for later in the first or second week. Most legal decisions depend on information you do not yet have. Initiating legal action in the acute window almost always produces worse outcomes than initiating in week four or five.

Exceptions for same-day legal consultation: if your partner controls finances in ways you suspect are being actively altered, or if there are protective-order considerations. In those cases, consult counsel today, but do not file anything until the acute phase has passed.

The three exceptions to the 72-hour rule

Physical safety. If you feel physically unsafe, the do-not-decide rule does not apply. Leave. Stay with a trusted person or in a hotel. Call domestic-violence resources if escalation is present.

Children's immediate safety. If the unfaithful partner's behavior poses direct risk to children (substance use around them, exposure to inappropriate material, erratic behavior that frightens them),

act to protect them immediately. This may include separate sleeping arrangements or temporary physical distance.

Narrow legal-strategy exception. Same-day informational consultation with an attorney is appropriate if active asset movement, account access changes, or protective-order considerations are present. The consultation is informational. The filing still waits.

DAY FOUR WORKSHEET

The first decisions that are appropriate to make

Complete this at hour 73 or later. Not before. If you cannot complete it at day four, wait until day seven. These decisions are significantly better for having been delayed.

1. Where will I sleep for the next week?

2. Who are the one or two people I will tell (and specifically who will I not tell yet)?

3. What therapist will I see and when is my first session?

4. What is my plan for talking with my partner this week, and under what conditions?

5. What is my plan for children's routine and communication with them?

6. What questions do I need a lawyer's answer to before the end of the month (not this week)? _____