How to Write an Impact Letter | Infidelity Recovery

Estimated reading time: 20 minutes

In this article we will take an in-depth look at how to write an impact letter following full disclosure from your spouse about their affair, porn, or sex addiction.

Writing an emotional impact letter to your husband or wife after disclosure is hard. This example from a Marriage & Family Therapist will help.

Link to video: After Full Disclosure

"So God has given both his promise and his oath. These two things are unchangeable because it is impossible for God to lie. Therefore, we who have fled to him for refuge can have great confidence as we hold to the hope that lies before us. This hope is a strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls." ~Hebrews 6: 18-19a

You are in a place you could never have planned for- standing on shaking ground, living through the aftershock of discovering your spouse's infidelity. You're overwhelmed, confused, and emotions overtake you. It doesn't seem possible to both hate and love someone so much at the same time, or to oscillate between them so quickly. If you are reading this, I hope you are working with a counselor and have a support system to come alongside you and bear this burden with you, as it is too much to bear alone. You need a guide to hear you and help you to process through the hurricane of emotions that keep coming, wave after wave, blowing you off course and off center. I hope you are tending to your needs, making space for your thoughts and feelings, and spending time in the peace of the Lord's presence.

If you have made it to this point in the affair recovery process, you have just heard your spouses disclosure, and may be reeling from the impact. The truth does not just hurt in this case, it is excruciating. You are so strong to be here. To be listening to those words, to be reading these ones. You are resilient and keep putting one foot in front of the other, no matter how slowly.

What is an Impact Letter and Why You Are Writing It

In this next step of the affair recovery process, you will write your "Impact Letter." This intentionally happens after your partner's "Disclosure Letter" because now you have all the facts and have absorbed the largest blow in this process. We want you to have all the space you need to process, to the extent that it is currently possible, what you have been experiencing. The impact letter is your opportunity to tell your spouse how you have been impacted by his/her actions. Take this as an opportunity to own your voice and your pain. You did not know and therefore did not have a voice as your spouse was committing his/her infidelities, but now you do. You have been hurt in the most grievous way possible and now is your opportunity to put words to that pain. So much has been lost in this process, and this is your opportunity to honor those losses by ensuring that they are known, seen, and felt.

What's Ahead

As I write this, I am enduring yet another hurricane as a native Floridian. While I have the advantage of living through a lifetime of these and knowing all of the appropriate safety measures to take, when one of these enormous storms heads in my general direction, there is no escaping the fear. Year after year we see news coverage of the affected areas and stare at the screen in horror as so many have lost their homes, neighbor-

hoods, and cities. Other times, there is no electricity to turn on the news, and all we need to do is venture outside our front doors to see the trees and power poles toppled down, windows broken, debris scattered, and property destroyed. In the worse case scenario, we don't get the opportunity to wait until the storm has passed to see its effects because the storm came for us. It came inside our homes' ripping off the roof, tearing off our screened enclosures, and sending trees through our windows and ceilings. And this is what infidelity is like. It comes for you where you are most comfortable. In your home, in your marriage, in your love life. So in the steps that follow, we will take a similar process of assessing the impact of your spouse's infidelity.

1. First, you will inventory the impact from a bird's eye view, as if watching it on the news, from a bit of a distance and taking in the totality of the infidelity.
2. Next you will examine the damage done by the infidelity as if seeing your home, neighborhood, and town, looking at how each aspect of life has been affected.
3. In the third step, you will give you emotions as voice, as if walking inside your own home, and feeling through each of the losses.
4. Fourth, you will own your needs, like claiming the damages and resourcing yourself to make the repairs of what is broken and replace what has been lost.
5. Finally, you will put all of these pieces together and let your voice be heard.

This is likely to be an emotionally laden and taxing process. Take care of yourself as you engage it, and walk away from it and come back as often as you need to. Breathe deeply, cry when you need to, exercise the stress out, talk to your therapist, hug a trusted friend, and pray to the God who sees you. Let's get started.

Step One- Inventory the Impact

First, you will create a list of all of the areas of your life that have been affected by your spouse's infidelity. You might call your focus for this step WHAT has been impacted. This portion of writing the letter is similar to brainstorming, and is intended to help you take in the landscape of the impact from a bird's eye view. This step may be an overwhelming one, as you allow yourself to touch all the places in your life that have been impacted, so please take your time with this. Below is a list of some areas of life along with definitions for each. This list is not exhaustive, so please add your own if or when more come to mind.

- Your trust/security– the sense of believing your partner's words and knowing who your partner is which creates the foundation the rest of your relationship is built on.
- Your marital connection/bond/communication– the space between you and your partner; the connection you feel to your spouse; the ways that you engage one another both verbally and nonverbally.
- Your emotional & mental health– the sense of emotional stability and balance & having consciousness and control of your thought life.
- Your self-worth- the value you place on yourself as an image-bearer of God with gifts, talents, and abilities unique to you.
- Your body/safety- the way you view your physical body and feel at home in your own skin, despite external circumstances; a pervading sense of peace and calm within yourself.
- Your spirituality/relationship with God– how you view God and your sense of connection to Him; your identity in Christ.
- Your children– how have your children (include all if in a blended family) are affected including academic, relational, behavioral, and emotional aspects of their lives.
- Your work/career life- how present and effective you are able to be in your profession.
- Your family- relationships with your own family of origin and your spouse's, both immediate and extended.
- Your friendships– relationships with others from church, school, work, etc. which are resources to you.
- Your sexuality/intimacy- your ability to pursue and enjoy sexual excitement with your partner.
- Your vulnerability– your ability to be transparent, honest, and open about the softer, wounded parts of you and any unmet needs.
- Your life story/narrative- the autobiographical story of your life from childhood to present, with all it's

complexities, wounds, wanderings, and meaning.
- Your witness/testimony– the God-story of your life which details your unique narrative of your ""Fall" into sin, Jesus' redemption of you, and your life and purpose in him as a sanctified and equipped man or woman of God.

Step Two- Examine the Damage

Once you have completed the list of areas of your life which have been impacted by your partner's infidelity, you will next explain HOW each of these areas have been affected. We are no longer looking at the totality of the landscape from a bird's eye view, but are now taking in the wreckage from the ground. Often times, these areas of life will affect and intertwine with each other, and that is okay. A few examples are provided below with the areas from Step 1 in bold for your reference:

- First and foremost, my trust has been broken by your unfaithfulness. I can no longer believe that what you are saying is true. Everything from you telling me that you love me, to telling me where you are going and who you are with are affected. You deceived me so much, I don't know what to believe anymore. Part of me wants to trust you, it would be easier if I could. But there is always this nagging voice in the back of my mind reminding me of what you did and all the lies you told me. You were so convincing with your stories and cover-ups, that I don't trust myself to trust you. Every time you pause or hesitate, I think you are lying all over again, because that's exactly what you did when I questioned you before. I live with the constant feeling that you are lying and I will never actually know if what you are saying is the truth. I do not feel secure in being your wife, partner, or friend. In fact, I would say that the best I can do most days is to distract myself from the insecurity of this relationship.
- As a result of this, our connection has been severed. When I am close to you, I still feel distant from you, and I can't seem to make that feeling go away. My body is tense and I can't make it relax. I have had to learn deep breathing and have to exercise and stretch every day just to get my anxiety (emotional/mental health) to a level where I can manage my daily responsibilities. You used to be the place I would go for comfort, my best friend who I shared everything with; the one place I felt accepted and loved, but now there is only a wall between us and I'm afraid. Every conversation feels forced and awkward at best, and I feel irritated and full of rage at worst. I find myself always assuming the worst as I read you, never giving you the benefit of the doubt as I once did.
- Perhaps the worst part of all this has been the way my story, our story, and God's story of our lives will never be the same after this. All I wanted growing up was to have a loving family, a secure job that I loved, and contentment in a life that would glorify God. When I found you, I thought I found the person I could build that life with. I always hoped that our story would be one that God was pleased with, one He could use to tell the story of His love and goodness to the world. Slowly but surely I could feel that slipping away. I couldn't put my finger on how or why, but when it all came out, it made so much sense. This is why you always seemed to be busy on Sunday mornings and could never make it to church. And now this story has been marred with the scarlet letter and I'm not sure how God can redeem it. I never wanted this to be our story.

Step Three- Give Your Emotions a Voice

This step may be the most difficult. Now you are going to assess the damage to your own home – the pain inflicted to your heart – and you are going to give that pain a voice. Sometimes, betrayed spouses "bubble wrap" their emotions, or in other words stay distant from their feelings. You might stay in your head where there is less pain and where you can feel more steady and capable of doing every day life. You might stay numb to feeling altogether and this makes a lot of sense. We therapists often say that infidelity is relational trauma, and neuroscience shows that the brain processes emotional pain the same way it processes physical pain. No one likes hurting. Naturally, your brain will take you away from feeling the pain, because it likely feels overwhelming, destabilizing, and consuming. But we also know that "you have to feel it to heal it," meaning that unprocessed emotion wreaks havoc on your body and feeling through the emotions experienced in major life events is essential to not being stuck in them for the rest of your life. So as hard as it might be, for just for a moment, I would like you to reconnect with your body, where feelings live, and

let yourself dip your toes into the sea of emotional pain that I know is somewhere inside you. Your partner needs to know your suffering. They need to be able to see the sadness in your eyes and not just the anger, to see the hurt and not just the repulsion, to see the fear and not just the numbness. All of your feelings are welcome, and not one of them is wrong or bad. Emotions are indicators, so let's listen and hear what they have to say. As I mentioned earlier, your pain is honored when it is known, seen, heard, and felt. You deserve this. So next, go through each of the areas and take time to write out what emotions you feel about each of the areas you have been affected in. The examples below are meant to be additions to the three examples above.

- When I think of how my trust in you has been affected by your affair, I'm angry. How could you steal something from me that is so foundational to our marriage? How could you betray me and leave me alone and in the dark as you gave your heart and body to someone else? And I suppose that if I'm honest, and I don't want to be honest with you, I am also sad. So sad and so forgotten. So sad that when I took vows at the altar, I never thought I would have to share you. Our sacred space has been defiled.
- I am plagued by loneliness and want so badly to reach for you, to feel the connection again, and yet I can't let myself do it because I cannot trust you with my heart. Not yet. So I am stuck in this limbo, living between two worlds, riddled by anxiety and fear. Fear. I guess I am afraid; afraid to be alone and afraid to stay. Afraid it will all happen again if I let myself trust you, afraid to let you in again, afraid to start over. And the fear paralyzes me.
- I'm devastated that you stole something from me that I can never get back and that I didn't deserve. I knew what I wanted, and you knew what you were getting when you met me. You were the one who decided that wasn't enough and decided to find more somewhere else. That was not my choice but I am having to live with the consequences of your choices, and I am wrecked by it. My heart is broken and there is a heaviness that won't lift and there are moments when I cannot stand under the weight of it.

Step Four- Own Your Needs

Now that you have done the excruciating work of taking inventory of the impact, examining the damage, and giving your emotions a voice, you now have the opportunity to stake your claim. You have seen and experienced the brokenness and loss, and now you can own what you need to begin to heal and replace what has been lost. I mentioned earlier that feelings are not bad or wrong, but indicators, and what they indicate is what you need. Turn with curiosity and compassion to all those feelings that came up in Step 3, and ask them what they need from your spouse. What is it that you need them to be able to do with what you are sharing? (ie: let themselves be impacted, feel with you, feel into their own emotions, etc). Giving yourself a voice means asking for what you need.

- Example: As I share this with you, I am aware of my fear of sharing this with you. It makes me scared to put myself out there this way, knowing you could hurt me again. So I guess this is my step of faith in you and in us. Right now, I need you to see me. To see my pain and the hurt and weight that I carry with me all day, every day. And I need to know that this affects you and I need to see it in your eyes. All this time I have believed that I don't matter to you. How could I if you could do what you did? So if you really do care, if I do matter, I need to see it, to feel it. I need you to show me. I need you to take responsibility for the pain you have caused me and the responsibility to do what you can do heal it. I need you to be the man I married. He got lost somewhere along the way, if he is still in there, I need to see him. I need to remember what it feels like to be loved and adored, to be put first, to be protected and provided for more than just physically. I need you to fight for us spiritually and see you get right with the Lord.

Step Five- Be Heard

The final step in crafting your Impact Letter is to put all the pieces together into one coherent narrative. This is the letter you will read in session with your therapist and spouse and is your opportunity to allow your wounds to be honored, your needs to be met, and your voice to be heard. Regardless of what your partner chooses to do with this letter, be proud of yourself for coming this far. It was a courageous journey that you endeavored to take inventory of the impact, examine the damage, give your emotions a voice, and own

your needs. These are each enormously heavy tasks and I have no doubt that you have felt the emotional impact of writing this letter. Now you have reached the end of this leg of the journey and will bravely bare your heart to your partner. I am praying for you, and holding you and your pain in my heart as you do.

Below is an example letter with all the examples provided above stringed together into a narrative. To do so, I added the emotional impact from Step 3 to the "how" from Step 2 and ended the letter with the needs of Step 4. You can follow this same process, or if you would like, you can add a need to be met (Step 4) for each of the sections of the inventory.

Dear John,
First and foremost, my trust has been broken by your unfaithfulness. I can no longer believe that what you are saying is true. Everything from you telling me that you love me, to telling me where you are going and who you are with is affected. You deceived me so much, I don't know what to believe anymore. Part of me wants to trust you, it would be easier if I could. But there is always this nagging voice in the back of my mind reminding me of what you did and all the lies you told me. You were so convincing with your stories and cover-ups, that I don't trust myself to trust you. Every time you pause or hesitate, I think you are lying all over again, because that's exactly what you did when I questioned you before. I live with the constant feeling that you are lying and I will never actually know if what you are saying is the truth. I do not feel secure in being your wife, partner, or friend. In fact, I would say that the best I can do most days is to distract myself from the insecurity of this relationship. When I think of how my trust in you has been affected by your affair, I'm angry. How could you steal something from me that is so foundational to our marriage? How could you betray me and leave me alone and in the dark as you gave your heart and body to someone else? And I suppose that if I'm honest, and I don't want to be honest with you, I am also sad. So sad and so forgotten. So sad that when I took vows at the altar, I never thought I would have to share you. Our sacred space has been defiled.

As a result of this, our connection has been severed. When I am close to you, I still feel distant from you, and I can't seem to make that feeling go away. My body is tense and I can't make it relax. I have had to learn deep breathing and have to exercise and stretch every day just to get my anxiety (emotional/mental health) to a level where I can manage my daily responsibilities. You used to be the place I would go for comfort, my best friend who I shared everything with; the one place I felt accepted and loved, but now there is only a wall between us and I'm not sure when it will come down. Every conversation feels forced and awkward at best, and I feel irritated and full of rage at worst. I find myself always assuming the worst as I read you, never giving you the benefit of the doubt as I once did. I am plagued by loneliness and want so badly to reach for you, to feel the connection again, and yet I can't let myself do it because I cannot trust you with my heart. Not yet. So I am stuck in this limbo, living between two worlds, riddled by anxiety and fear. Fear. I guess I am afraid; afraid to be alone and afraid to stay. Afraid it will all happen again if I let myself trust you, afraid to let you in again, afraid to start over. And the fear paralyzes me.

Perhaps the worst part of all this has been the way my story, our story, and God's story of our lives will never be the same after this. All I wanted growing up was to have a loving family, a secure job that I loved, and contentment in a life that would glorify God. When I found you, I thought I found the person I could build that life with. I always hoped that our story would be one that God was pleased with, one He could use to tell the story of His love and goodness to the world. Slowly but surely I could feel that slipping away. I couldn't put my finger on how or why, but when it all came out, it made so much sense. This is why you always seemed to be busy on Sunday mornings and could never make it to church. And now this story has been marred with the scarlet letter and I'm not sure that God can redeem it. I'm not sure if this is the end of the chapter, the end of our story, or how our story will end. I'm devastated that you stole something from me that I can never get back and that I didn't deserve. I knew what I wanted, and you knew what you were getting when you met me. You were the one who decided that wasn't enough and decided to find more somewhere else. That was not my choice but I am having to live with the consequences of your choices, and I am wrecked by it. My heart is broken and there is a heaviness that won't lift and there are moments when I cannot stand under the weight of it. Why? I just can't understand why.

As I share this with you, I am aware of my fear of sharing this with you. It makes me scared to put myself out there this way, knowing you could hurt me again. So I guess this is my step of faith in you and in us. Right now, I need you to see me. To see my pain and the hurt and weight that I carry with me all day, every day. And I need to know that this affects you and I need to see it in your eyes. All this time I have believed that I don't matter to you. How could I if you could do what you did? So if you really do care, if I do matter, I need to see it, to feel it. I need you to show me. I need you to take responsibility for the pain you have caused me and the responsibility to do what you can do heal it. I need you to be the man I married. He got lost somewhere along the way, if he is still in there, I need to see him. I need to remember what it feels like to be loved and adored, to be put first, to be protected and provided for more than just physically. I need you to fight for us spiritually and see you get right with the Lord.

With all I have left,
Jane