

## Shattering and Mending

When a woman learns that the man she thought was her exclusive intimate partner has cheated, the responses follow a predictable but incredibly painful pattern, which may be unavoidable, but definitely needs plenty of antagonistic pushback lest we find ourselves locked in these phases endlessly.

### The Shattering:

Self-esteem, self-image, and body confidence shatter quickly and explosively, like finest crystal thrown hard at a cinder block wall. The shards fly, and we might stumble across tiny fragments glinting in unexpected corners long afterwards--even when we think ourselves wholly healed.

We worry that we are somehow fundamentally unlovable, as though some deep flaw beyond our control or understanding might magically have caused our lovers to skulk around tasting other lips, exploring other bodies. And we worry endlessly about our own bodies. Is there something not quite beautiful or perfect enough about our breasts, our asses, our thighs, our arms, our eyes, our lips, our hair, our ankles, our toes? Could it be the imperfect eyebrow or the nose we've always suspected of being just shy of cute that sent him exploring? Or maybe it's that we're too dull, too outgoing, too bitchy, or not bitchy enough. Hard to say, but the one thing we feel certain of is that it must be us. We didn't measure up. We failed, somehow. Exactly what that failure might consist of is a deep mystery we can't quite solve, but we just know it's us.

At this point, some of us will undertake an overhaul, heading to the gym, changing our hair, going on a crash diet, and attempting (generally to no avail, since we can ultimately only be whoever we fundamentally are) to transform our personalities. Accused of being a dull homebody? Let the whirl of parties commence. Called a prude? Watch the skirts get shorter and the necklines plunge deeper. Criticized for jealousy? Check those Facebook photos featuring the supposedly jealous, insecure girl kicking it up with friends at the local breastaurant or gentleman's club. Informed that our bodies and ourselves will never spark anyone's desire? Here comes the flurry of sexy selfies, alone and in fun, attractive-looking groups, all posted to social media in an attempt to prove the point.

### Countering the Shattering:

Well, yes. Every single human being on this planet, including every female, is imperfect. We sweat, we get zits, we have bad hair days, we get impatient or angry, we have that one weird cowlick that never

Details	
Words	3,715
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quite behaves, we have ideas of our own, and we are pretty much nothing like the endless menu of females continuously available to every male on his phone, his tablet, his laptop.

We err when we deliberately make ourselves part of that menu, primping, powdering, and otherwise priming and positioning ourselves to look like the most appealing item on the menu.

Indeed, the reactive surface moves we so often make to counter the cruel messages that shattered our sense of beauty, worth, and agency tend to be exactly the wrong steps to take, down a path that leads nowhere good.

Nobody can win Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, and the like. No matter how utterly beautiful and special you are in the deep and meaningful ways that most matter, there will always be someone younger, fitter, sexier, sassier, or more appealingly demure than you. There will always be someone blonder or more brunette. There will always be the redhead that is neither of those common things. There will always be someone longer-legged and someone more petite. There will be always be someone else, someone other.

Don't enter unwinnable competitions, then make winning essential to your self-esteem. As soon as you step onto that playing field, you have consented to abide by the rules of the cheater's game: he will always search for someone better, and your job will be to devote yourself endlessly to being the best pick, which is an exhausting prospect, and an impossible state to achieve. Further, it places the male entirely in the position of consumer, and it makes you a product. He will eternally shop for the most appealing female, and you must then continuously attempt to be whatever he might want at the moment. Can't be done, so please don't waste your one precious life trying to be the best piece of meat in the market. If he is one of the many men who has already lost himself in the world of infinite digital images of females, it's best to step away and leave him to it.

Here are some realities: You are one woman. You are many things--as brilliantly faceted as the rarest of jewels--but ultimately there is only one of you. So, if your partner is hungering after many women, that's an appetite you can never satisfy for him. Don't lose yourself trying. A good and faithful man will keep his eyes, his heart, and his spirit focused on you. One of the many dangers of the digital age is that it disrupts that healthy focus, leading far too many men and women, both, to develop a kind of addiction to images and disembodied chatter, and a concomitant attention deficit disorder when it comes to the actual partners who are materially present in their lives. It is highly unlikely that you will ever talk or reason anyone out of that addiction or that sexual and relational ADD. You can fritter away your life in the attempt, or you can move along, choosing to invest your time only in those who see you fully, and prefer your physical and spiritual presence to anything the digital world can deliver.

Further, you are always entirely more beautiful than you know. Once in awhile, I look back on photographs of myself at sixteen, twenty-one, twenty-five, thirty-five, and I am always stunned. Like far too many women, I often felt quite less than beautiful at all of those ages: my hair was too frizzy, my thighs too thick, my nose a little too Grecian for comfort, my tummy less than perfectly flat and taut. But there I am in those photos being far more beautiful than I ever knew, and those were taken long before the age of the endless selfie. If I found myself wanting in comparison to the ever shifting standard of the moment way back then, how much more difficult is it for women today to hang on to a healthy and

realistic sense of their own charms amidst the permanent flurry of filtered and edited images landing on their phones all day long?

Don't get me wrong--there is much to love about our digital era of connection and communication, but be aware of and, in some cases, be outright wary of the complications and challenges it brings to our psyches and our interpersonal relationships.

Cheating on a romantic partner doesn't require much in the way of creative skullduggery anymore. In virtually every pocket is the path toward connecting with others in ways that are easily hidden and spell the death of true and healthy intimacy. To text a secret lover while at the very dinner table with one's partner (even one's entire family) is all too easy, and apparently all too thrillingly sneaky for some. More than one spouse on the planet has celebrated an anniversary, a birthday, or a holiday with the nominal partner, and then slipped into the bathroom to exchange steamy selfies with the current crush. Because that is the inescapable reality we live in, a wise woman now will not only pay attention to how a prospective partner relates to his phone (does he hide it, keep it terribly close always, seem reluctant to let anyone else see or touch it?), but also tend to her own digital habits. Firing off a stream of cute selfies and flirty texts to every guy of passing interest? Think hard about whether that serves you (and your fellow females, not to mention your fellow humans) well. If you care about things like authenticity, privacy, loyalty, and true love, then it makes sense not to engage in activities that undermine those.

### **The Relationship Post-Mortem:**

In the wake of cheating, whenever we aren't ruthlessly examining our every flaw, we're likely pondering the flaws in the relationship itself, often finding ourselves at fault for those, as well, particularly if our former partners are keen on blaming us, too, which cheaters—great fans of the “but she drove me to it after perfect ages of silent suffering on my part” narrative—so often are.

We worry that we failed to make them happy, that we weren't good enough at sex, or that we wanted too much (yup, that happens!) or too little of it. We wonder if we should have spoken up more or less about the things that bothered us. We reexamine every argument. We unthinkingly buy into the cultural notion that the victim of cheating is at fault: if only she would have been prettier, thinner, sweeter, sexier, smarter, or far less assertively smart, then he would never have been forced to stray, poor thing.

### **Countering the Relationship Post-Mortem:**

You were in the exact same relationship as your cheater. He strayed; you didn't. Why?

The main lesson here is that cheating is not a relationship issue, it's a character issue. Your partner had no qualms about deceiving you, and none about using you, either. He kept you around while he explored others, because you might not have been quite valuable enough to him to inspire loyalty, but you were a decent enough backup plan, and a useful person to have around until he settled on someone else for awhile. His cheating required countless lies, large and small, and all continuously delivered. Without your knowledge or consent, he was intimate with others during the same time period that he was intimate with you. As he descended deeper into his secret world, he likely treated you worse and worse, leaving you both hurt and confused. He might have chosen to be honest at any point. He didn't.

Nothing about the relationship itself caused those acts of betrayal. That was his character at work. As much as it hurts, it's good to know what a partner's character is really like, and important to understand

that while changing one's character is not an impossibility, it is highly unlikely, for it takes not only recognition of and remorse about the fault, but tireless willingness to change it.

You did not cheat and lie because you are not basically a cheater and a liar. Further, it's not as if you were without opportunities to cheat and lie if that were your nature. However, unlike your partner, you defaulted to, "No, thanks. I have a boyfriend/partner/husband." Like you, your partner knew that your intimate relationship involved a reasonable expectation of faithfulness. He pretended to fulfill that expectation when it suited him. You really fulfilled it all the time, and likely didn't find that the least bit burdensome. It was simply the right thing to do, and what you are so wonderfully wired to do.

When someone shows you who he truly is, you simply must believe him. No matter what you thought, believed, or hoped, the truth is that your partner does not value trust and intimacy in the way you so beautifully do. That is not because he did not love you or because you are bad at relationships or because you are inherently unlovable. Your superpower is not driving your lover into the arms of another. You did not trip him and cause him to fall onto someone else in slow, irrevocable motion.

Nope. It's totally a character issue. He defines love and intimacy in shallow, self-serving ways. He sees them as fleeting states to be enjoyed until something newer entices. Hard to learn, but good to know.

### **The All Men Suck Defense:**

If you have been the cheatee in a relationship--and especially if you have been the cheatee in more than one of them--you have probably indulged in the "all men suck" defense at some point or another. Most of us do! This is a perfectly understandable phase of licking your wounds, reconsidering what you want from a relationship and how you go about forming one, and examining the assorted red flags that you intend to notice and heed next time around.

For awhile, you will find red flags everywhere. You'll be entirely intolerant of any whiff of dishonesty, flirtation, phone addiction, or sexual ADD. You might even persuade yourself that all men are so hopelessly brain-damaged that your only option is to throw in the towel, accept the fact that long-term intimacy and faithfulness are impossible, and decide that you must now choose between proclaiming lifelong celibacy or to throwing yourself reluctantly into the hook-up culture that is no match for your true heart.

Indulging in gallows humor about the infinite stupidity of boys might even make you feel better for a little while, so have at it.

But is it the best long-term plan?

### **Countering the All Men Suck Defense:**

Keep the best of this response, which is your determination not to ignore warning signs in the future, but unless you really feel a calling to be a nun or can realistically say that hook-up culture suits you, face the fact that you actually do rather like those maddening men, and kind of want them around, but on terms that reasonably match your moral and ethical system.

So what to do? One thing is to spend time observing the good guys that you know. Identify the positive men in your life. Study them. What are their tells? What are the things about how they move through

the world that most reveal their steadiness of character? How can you tell that they own and routinely operate a moral compass in good working order?

Even in those good men, you will find things that make you roll your eyes in exasperation, but it is very much worthwhile to sort the merely annoying trait or flaw from the deal-breaking problem of character. How does he speak to and about his girlfriend, his wife, or his children? How does he look at them? Does he set their needs above his desires? What kinds of relationships does he have with women who are not his partner or wife? How does he use his words and his gaze? How closely does his behavior match what he says?

The truth is that many people, male and female, are not loyal or faithful by choice or by nature. Many people choose paths of using or exploiting others for their own satisfaction or gain. But not everyone is like that, so if a monogamous intimate romantic and sexual relationship is a priority for you, there are some things to do to make that goal more probable.

No guarantees, of course, but here are some things to consider doing:

--Develop in yourself the traits you seek in others. If you want honesty and loyalty, think about how best to live those out in your own life. If you want a partner who is not forever swallowed up by his phone, don't be swallowed up by your own. If you want a partner who is not solely interested in your physical appearance, then don't make your physical appearance your main focus, or present it as the most notable thing about you. If you want a partner who is smart and deep, then never be afraid to reveal your own intelligence. If you want a partner who respects your privacy, then respect the privacy of others, never discussing your intimate experiences with the world at large, or playing them for their entertainment value or for sympathetic attention. If you want a partner who is self-sufficient, then be autonomous yourself. If you want a partner who sees beyond your flaws and imperfections, then see beyond those in yourself, and forgive or choose to see the charm in the non deal breaking flaws in others.

--Be whole. Too many people are far too desperate to be in a relationship. Without a romantic partner, they feel incomplete. They need a constant stream of attention, admiration, or validation, and without it they feel lonely, frustrated, bereft. Look, we all need love and satisfaction, but the truth is that you must be whole in yourself before you have valuable things to bring to a healthy relationship. You cannot only or mostly bring need and expect things to go well. So chase your passions, learn all there is to know about what fascinates you, cultivate friendships, get comfortable in your own skin, and decline to attempt to be anyone you are not. If you are introverted but social, sassy but poetic, athletic but occasionally lazy, then be that unique set of things without embarrassment or apology. If you aren't a big drinker or partier, don't pretend to be those, and think hard about how content you can really be with someone who is. Cop to your fears and flaws. Work on the ones that bug you, but love yourself anyway. Be entirely absorbed by your life. Never make the mistake of thinking that you only fully exist in a relationship. When you are whole, you will be much more of a magnet for male (and female, for that matter!) attention even than you are already, but you'll also be much wiser about sorting the worthwhile attention from the empty promises and easy flattery. Whole in yourself, you can choose what is best for you rather than accepting less than you deserve.

--Be sharp but not bitter. Oh, how people do love to accuse the one who was cheated on of being eternally bitter. We aren't, though, not really. We're angry and hurt at first, and rightly so given the

intimate betrayal, but ultimately we're just much sharper observers of human nature in the aftermath. That means we will recognize manipulations and lies much more quickly than we did when our innocence and inexperience--and our genuine promises--made us vulnerable to a cheater's ways, but it also means we are much more deeply appreciative of solid character traits, authenticity, and true connection than ever before. So shrug off any residual shame or humiliation associated with having been the unwitting victim of cheating, but treasure the wisdom gained. It's a hard way to learn, to be sure, but the lessons themselves make you not only a sharper person, but also a more deeply compassionate one. Hang onto that. It will serve you well.

### **The Mending:**

Someday, years hence, you might stumble across one of those little glinting shards of self-esteem from what will by then be the long ago moment of shattering.

Think of it as a treasure, a diamond, evidence of your endless sharpness and eternal spark.

For no matter how seemingly complete and even catastrophic the shattering, the truth is that you will heal, and you are already healing.

The mending takes time, and can be hard to see. It's something that happens deep inside, the way a bone slowly mends in its immobilizing cast, far beneath the surface of your warm skin. Nobody--no true heart, at least--makes it through the meandering path of an entire lifetime without at least one shattering, and likely many more than that. But we are designed to heal. Everything in us leans towards and yearns for the fullness of life and love that we are meant for.

Our scars and missing pieces are essential parts of our story. They make us who we are, but we have agency. Every time we are broken, we can choose to heal, or choose to dwell forever amidst the shards, always gingerly tiptoeing, always fearful, forever freshly wounded and bleeding.

Better entirely to let the mending unfold, to trust that quiet process, and to become the sort of person who, with that hard won knowledge fully integrated into a realistic and healthy sense of self, can nurture mending in others, as well—in partners, in children, in friends, and even in groups and institutions.

Ah, you are so full of youthful energy and possibility. Consider this: it stuns me, now that I am on the verge of 56, to realize how often in my life I have handed my lover of the moment the keys to my sense of worth. I remember, for instance, the one who once told me that I was suitably thin but not quite fit enough for his tastes. Now that I am a woman of a certain age, I would decline to allow anyone who offered such a critique in an intimate moment even an instant of further access to me, but back then I absorbed the pain, and attempted to whitewash the motivation: maybe it was meant to be constructive critique, maybe I should accept the compliment and throw away the sting, maybe I was just being overly sensitive or self-conscious, maybe I should hit the gym in a frenzied attempt to fulfill his tastes. But no. Such a thing uttered in such a vulnerable moment is simply abusive. There's no other way to slice it. I know that now, and I hope you will know its truth far faster than I did.

On the other hand, I can similarly look back and savor every gift, such as the time my first true love--my first honest to gosh lover--stood me naked in front of a full-length mirror and invited me to look as he looked, to see myself as he saw me: beautiful, desirable, feminine, real. No matter how old I manage to

get, that moment is forever woven into my capacity to mend, into my belief that we can savor the flawed and beautiful reality of each other without filters or digital mediation, and into my knowledge of how important it is sincerely to offer such lasting treasures to others.

Ultimately, I cannot know whether you or I or any of us will ever find or make true and lasting love with another, but I do know this: you can choose right at this very moment always to embody and enact what you value, and nothing is more pricelessly, breathtakingly beautiful than that. Of such things are worthy lives --often shattered and mended many times over, because such is the plight of mere mortals-- miraculously spun.