

Amends Letter

The last letter in the disclosure process is the Amends letter. By the time you reach this part of the process, you likely have a much better understanding of yourself, your story, your patterns, and how both you and your partner were affected by each of those pieces of the puzzle. You are no longer hiding. You no longer carry the weight and shame of the secrets you held for so long.

Mending something is to make it whole again, to repair it. The whole disclosure process is an “a-mends” process (as in you’re mending your relationship and the pain you’ve caused), and the Amends letter puts all those pieces together. To fully apologize for something we did that hurt someone else, we need to see what we did, understand how we got to a place that those things happened, see how it affected them, do the work so we won’t do it again, and do what we can to repair it.

The first letter helped you to see what you did and share that information with your partner, changing your previous pattern of hiding and deceiving. The second letter helped you see how you got to where you got to and therefore what you can do to change those patterns in the future. The Impact letter helped you understand how your betrayal affected your partner. This last letter helps you show that you have a deeper understanding of what happened, how it happened, how it affected your partner, and helps you share what you have done and plan to continue to do to prevent it happening in the future to change those patterns.

The directions for the Amends letter are adapted with permission from *Amends as the Key to Rebuilding Trust*, a presentation by Dina Hijazi and Daniel Gowan. They divide the amends process into three steps: accountability, empathy, and compassion.

Accountability requires honesty, self-reflection, and courage. It asks the question “Where did I go wrong?” In other words, what did you do that was incongruent with who you are and want to be? What promises (spoken or unspoken) did you break? How did you hurt your partner, others in your life, your relationships, and yourself? Many of the answers to the questions I just listed are in the other two letters you wrote and the Impact letter your partner wrote.

Review your What & How and Why letters, and your partner’s Impact letter if you have a copy of it (if your therapist has a copy, you can review it in their office instead) and consider the above questions. It takes honesty, self-reflection, and courage to take this step. Honesty because you have to lean into looking at what

you've done without excusing it, justifying it, or minimizing it or the effect it had on others. Self-reflection because you need to be willing to look at yourself, what you've done, and how you got there. Courage because it is often painful and scary to look at the things we've done related to the betrayals, which are often the things we are most ashamed of.

Exercise 39 –

Review your What & How and Why letters. Review your partner's Impact letter if you have a copy of it. If not, think back on the presentation of the Impact letter. Be fully honest with yourself. What did you do to your partner, others in your life, your relationships, and yourself? At this point, you're just writing down stream of consciousness or bullet points; you're not trying to write fully formed sentences or paragraphs (unless you process better that way).

The second step in writing the Amends letter is adding empathy. Empathy is understanding someone else's pain by connecting it to emotions you've experienced that are similar or give context to what the other person might be feeling. For example, if someone's pet dies, you might have empathy for them if you've had a pet you really cared about, even if your pet is still alive. You could consider how much you love your pet and how painful it might be to lose them.

The question Dina and Daniel focus on for this step is "How did I bring harm to this relationship?" I'd add "How did I hurt my partner, those connected to me, and myself?" Try to put yourself in your partner's place and you go back over the events you described. Think back to listening to the Impact letter. Remember the pain in your partner's voice and story. Consider specific patterns or instances that stuck out to you. Imagine what it must have been like for them as each of those events happened. If you need additional help in this area, the workbook Help Her Heal by Carol Jurgensen Sheets or Out of the Doghouse by Rob Weiss (or the Christian version with edits by Marnie Ferree) may be helpful (note – both of those are written for males betrayers and female partners, but the concepts apply regardless of gender – if you'd like a book that focuses on male partners, I'd recommend The Betrayed Husband's Survival Guide by Gary Owens – I am not aware of one that is not gender-based or focuses on LGBTQ+ relationships).

As you work to have empathy for your partner, recognize that there are two approaches that are helpful to include. The first is considering the situation in

general. What would it be like for someone (anyone) to go through what your partner went through? Dina and Daniel call this “the human condition” approach. The second is considering how the experience might have been more painful in certain ways because of who your partner is and things that are important to them specifically. It deepens your empathy to consider the situation from both a generalized perspective and a personalized perspective.

Just as the previous step, this step takes courage. It is often very painful to look at pain you caused in others. To see how you added to the weight they carried. It also takes vulnerability. In order to understand what someone may have felt, we have to look at our own emotions, which opens up our hearts and minds. And it takes recovery work and tools to be able to identify, sit in, and process your own emotions so that you develop context to understand what someone else may be feeling. If your betrayals have been a pattern for years, studies have shown that it’s difficult to identify any emotions other than disgust and anger, because those are the two emotions that escape cycles (betrayal patterns are escape cycles -for more information on this, refer to volume one of Recovering Connection™) have the most difficult time numbing. To accomplish this part of the disclosure process, you may need to work with your therapist and support group to deepen your understanding of your own emotions, and then to broaden that understanding to help you understand what your partner has experienced and felt.

Exercise 40 –

Using your two letters, the Impact letter, and your notes from exercise 39, consider what this experience might have been like for your partner. Work with your therapist and group to deepen your understanding of your partner’s possible emotions, losses, and the messages they may have gotten from you and your behaviors, both before and after they found out about them. Consider what it would have been like if the roles had been reversed. Write down your thoughts and ideas as you process through this step. Don’t worry about organizing it yet, just get them written down for future reference.

The previous exercises have helped you better understand what you’ve done and what your partner has gone through. This leads you to the third step of this process – compassion. The Greater Good Magazine through UC Berkeley (*What is Compassion*, 2022) states “Compassion literally means ‘to suffer together.’ Among emotion researchers, it is defined as the feeling that arises when you are confronted

with another's suffering and feel motivated to relieve that suffering." Basically, compassion is the shift into changing behaviors.

The question Dina and Daniel connect to this step is "What am I committing to do going forward?" This step pulls what we've learned from the previous two steps together and helps you formulate the work you need to do, or have already done, so you won't do it again, and the steps you have taken or will take to repair the pain you've caused. It requires both a willingness to change behavior and a commitment to do so.

Exercise 41 –

Consider your work in exercises 39 and 40. Using whatever format works best for you, list the steps you've already taken to identify and change your patterns of betrayal. Consider what else you plan to do and specifically how you intend to take those steps. Write down what you've done to help your partner and others connected to the situation (i.e., your children, family members, friends, etc.) heal. Consider additional steps you could take to help that process.

Having walked through the three steps of relational repair, you're ready start writing your Amends letter.

Exercise 42 –

Use the work you've done in exercise 39 (also considering what you've learned in exercises 40 and 41) to write the first part of your Amends letter. This is the accountability part of the letter. As you've already detailed your betrayals in both the What & How letter and the Why letter, don't focus on lots of details in this letter. Focus instead on general patterns. Be honest about what you did.

As you go through each of these steps, make sure you're checking in with your therapist, group, and support system (NOT your partner – they should not be the ones who support you through your emotions related to this part of the process). Process through the emotions you experience. Lean into your own pain and walk through it with support. This does not mean to spiral into shame. It means to sit in your pain and the knowledge of what you did.

Once you've briefly summarized your behaviors and betrayals, move on to the next step of the letter, empathy.

Exercise 43 –

Using the work you did in exercise 40, explore how you hurt your partner (and others such as your children, but the main focus of this letter is your partner). Don't focus on yourself and your pain. Focus on their pain. Do NOT use phrases like "I know what it must have been like for you" or "I completely understand". You don't. You aren't them. Instead say things like "As I heard you talk about ____, I could see so much pain in your face and hear so much pain in your voice. That must have been so ____ (lonely, discouraging, hopeless, heartbreaking) ____." Consider the emotions and experiences your behaviors took from them as well. This might sound like "I stole your joy" or "I stole your peace" or "I made you question your worth" or "I made you question your sanity" or "I robbed you of this experience." Work to use words that encapsulate the depth of the harm that they may have experienced. Don't just say "I broke your trust" but explore what that means and what they must live with because of it. Try to address the major patterns and instances your partner pointed out in their Impact letter (note – these may be different from those that stick out to you).

As you go through this part of the letter, it may be helpful to work with your therapist, group, and support system to help deepen your understanding of what your partner may have experienced.

Finally, once you've done all you can to reflect their pain in an empathetic way, outline the steps you are taking in recovery. Review the steps you've already taken. Present your current recovery plan. Don't ask for praise or acknowledgement. Offer your accountability, empathy, and compassion to them without asking for anything in return. This helps to show that you are going to continue to do your recovery work. It helps to show that their pain matters to you. It helps to change the previous dynamic of the relationship, as active betrayals demonstrate a lack of concern about how someone else is affected. It helps to start to build a foundation of empathy and connection.

Exercise 44 –

Using the work you did in exercise 41 to add compassion to your letter. Detail the steps you have already taken to ensure that it won't happen again, along with steps you plan to continue to add. Talk about what you're committed to doing to help your partner heal. Note that your goal for this part of the letter is to show a willingness to change your behaviors and your commitment to taking those steps, not to look for praise or credit. You are taking the steps to make connection with you safe and heal the pain you've caused. You're explaining those steps, so they don't have to guess what you've done and what you're committing to continue to do.

Once you've written the three parts of the Amends letter, repeat the editing process you used for the What & How and Why letters.

Exercise 45 –

Review your letter with your therapist, working to deepen your understanding of your partner's experience and pain. Make sure the work you're offering to help rebuild trust and heal their pain is explained as clearly and completely as possible.

Repeat the process you used for the other letters; work with your therapist to finalize the edits and then have your partner's therapist review it if your partner has chosen to do so.

Exercise 46 –

Set up a cotherapy session to complete another Day of the Disclosure worksheet for the presentation of the Amends letter. Review what was helpful in the structure of the presentation of the other letters and what might be helpful to change for the presentation of this letter.

As with the other letters, take the time to process with your therapist and/or your group how to make the presentation of your letter a success for you. Again, your success cannot be based on your partner reacting in a certain way.

Exercise 47 –

Define what success is for you in the presentation of the letter and the days following it.

It's time to present the final letter! Set up the presentation of that letter using the Plan for the Day of Disclosure worksheet and question 7 of the Disclosure Process worksheet.

Exercise 48 –

Present your letter to your partner, following the format you both agreed on in the Disclosure Process worksheet (primarily question 7 on that worksheet for this letter) and the Plan for the Day of Disclosure worksheet.

Congratulations on completing the disclosure process! I hope you have found healing in this process, for you, your partner, and your relationship.