



COUPLES & RELATIONSHIPS

When Trust Is Broken and Accountability Is Missing

A guide for navigating trust, self-protection, and difficult decisions when your partner has hurt you — and hasn't taken responsibility for it.

This guide is for you if you have been hurt by someone you love — through dishonesty, broken promises, or repeated poor decisions — and you are still waiting for them to truly own it. Maybe they minimized what happened. Maybe they apologized but nothing changed. Maybe they blamed you, or acted as though the problem was your reaction rather than their actions.

This guide will not tell you whether to stay or leave. What it will do is help you understand what is actually happening, what trust requires to be rebuilt, and how to protect yourself while you figure out what you need.

SECTION 1

What Accountability Actually Looks Like

Understanding the difference between an apology and genuine accountability.

One of the most painful experiences in a relationship is receiving an apology that feels hollow — the words are there, but nothing changes. True accountability is not just saying "I'm sorry." It is a process, and it has specific, observable components.

Genuine accountability includes all of the following:

1 Acknowledgment without minimizing

They name what they did specifically, without softening it with "but" or "if you hadn't." They do not say "I'm sorry you feel that way" — they say "I'm sorry I did that."

2 Taking full ownership

They do not share the blame or deflect to your reaction. They hold the impact of their actions without making excuses.

3 Demonstrating understanding of the harm

They show they understand how their actions affected you — not just that you are upset, but why. They can articulate the impact from your perspective.

4 Genuine remorse

There is a felt quality to their regret — not just words. They are not performing an apology to end the conflict; they are expressing real distress at having hurt you.

5 Behavioral change

This is the most important and most often missing piece. Accountability without change is just a performance. Real accountability shows up in what they do differently, consistently, over time.



6 Repair

They actively work to address the damage — through transparency, making amends, seeking help, or changing the patterns that led to the harm.

"Trust is not something you give because you love someone. It is something you extend because their actions have made it safe to do so."

SECTION 2

Why You Cannot Force Yourself to Trust

Trust is not a choice you make — it is a response to safety.

You may have been told — or told yourself — that you need to "just trust" your partner, that holding onto hurt is punishing them, or that choosing to stay means choosing to let it go. This is one of the most damaging myths about trust in relationships.

Trust is not a decision you make with your mind. It is a felt sense of safety that your nervous system either has or does not have — based on evidence. When someone has hurt you and not taken accountability, your nervous system is doing exactly what it is designed to do: it is protecting you by remaining alert.

Trying to force trust before it has been earned does not make you a better partner. It makes you less safe.

"You cannot think your way into trusting someone. Trust is rebuilt through their actions — not your effort."

What keeps trust broken:

When a partner has not taken accountability, several patterns tend to keep trust from being possible — even when you want to move forward:

1 The harm is repeated or ongoing

If the behavior that broke trust continues — even in smaller ways — your nervous system cannot reset. Each repetition confirms the original message: this is not safe.

2 The narrative is distorted

When your partner minimizes, denies, or reframes what happened, you are left questioning your own perception. This is called gaslighting, and it makes trust impossible because you cannot trust your own reality.

3 Apologies replace change

Repeated apologies without behavioral change teach you that the apology is a tool to manage your reaction — not a genuine commitment to do differently.

4 Your feelings are treated as the problem

When your hurt, anger, or wariness is framed as the issue — rather than the behavior that caused it — you are being asked to suppress your own protective responses. This is not healing; it is suppression.

5 There is no transparency

Trust requires the ability to verify. When a partner is defensive about accountability, avoids honest conversations, or withholds information, they are asking you to trust without giving you any basis to do so.



Reflection: Where Are You Right Now?

- *When I think about what happened, what specifically still feels unresolved or unacknowledged?*
- *Has anything actually changed — in their behavior, not just their words?*
- *Do I feel more or less safe than I did when the harm first occurred? Why?*
- *Am I holding onto hope for who they could be, or responding to who they are showing me they are?*

SECTION 3

Patterns That Replace Accountability

Recognizing the behaviors that look like repair — but aren't.

When a partner is not willing or able to take genuine accountability, they often engage in behaviors that create the appearance of repair without the substance of it. Learning to recognize these patterns is not about building a case against your partner — it is about understanding what is actually happening so you can make clear-eyed decisions.

What it looks like	What it actually is
<i>"I said I was sorry. What more do you want?"</i>	Using the apology as a closing statement rather than an opening to repair. Accountability is not a one-time event.
<i>"You're so sensitive. I didn't mean it that way."</i>	Redirecting focus from the impact of their actions to your response. Impact matters regardless of intent.
<i>"You always bring up the past."</i>	Framing your unresolved hurt as a character flaw. Unhealed wounds resurface because they haven't been addressed.
<i>"I've changed. Why don't you trust me?"</i>	Demanding trust as proof of your love rather than earning it through demonstrated change over time.
<i>"Everyone makes mistakes."</i>	Normalizing the behavior without examining the pattern or taking responsibility for the specific harm caused.
<i>"If you really loved me, you'd let this go."</i>	Using love as leverage to pressure you into suppressing your legitimate need for accountability and safety.
<i>"I can't keep apologizing forever."</i>	Setting a timeline on your healing process. Recovery from betrayal does not follow a schedule.

The DARVO pattern

Psychologist Jennifer Freyd identified a common response to accountability called DARVO: **D**eny, **A**ttack, **R**everse **V**ictim and **O**ffender. When confronted with their behavior, some people deny it happened, attack the person raising the concern, and then position themselves as the real victim of the situation. If you have ever felt like you ended up comforting the person who hurt you — or apologizing for bringing something up — you may have experienced DARVO.

■ If your partner consistently turns accountability conversations into attacks on your character, your memory, or your mental health — this is a significant warning sign. You deserve to be able to raise concerns without being punished for it.



Reflection: Recognizing the Pattern

- *When I try to talk about what happened, how does my partner typically respond?*
- *Do I often end up feeling responsible for their reaction when I raise a concern?*
- *Have I ever apologized for being hurt — or for bringing something up?*
- *What would it feel like to have my experience fully acknowledged?*

SECTION 4

Protecting Yourself While You Decide

You do not have to make a decision right now. But you do need to take care of yourself.

One of the most difficult aspects of this situation is the pressure — internal and external — to decide quickly. To stay or go. To forgive or not. To trust or walk away. The truth is that you are allowed to be in the middle. You are allowed to still love someone while also being deeply hurt by them. You are allowed to not know yet.

What matters most right now is not making the "right" decision — it is making sure you are not losing yourself in the process of trying to figure it out.

Emotional self-protection strategies:

Name what you are feeling — to yourself

You do not have to share everything with your partner. Journaling, therapy, or trusted friends can hold space for feelings that are not yet safe to express in the relationship.

Stop trying to convince them

You cannot argue someone into accountability. Continuing to explain, justify, or prove your hurt to someone who is not ready to hear it will exhaust you and reinforce their avoidance.

Maintain your own support system

Isolation is one of the most common side effects of relationship pain. Stay connected to people who know you, see you clearly, and are not invested in a particular outcome for your relationship.

Set limits on what you will accept

You do not have to tolerate ongoing harm while you decide. It is okay to say: "I am not willing to continue having conversations that end with me being blamed for bringing this up."

Notice what your body is telling you

Anxiety, chronic tension, hypervigilance, and emotional numbness are not signs of weakness — they are your nervous system communicating that something is not safe. Take them seriously.

Separate their behavior from your worth

Their inability or unwillingness to take accountability is not a reflection of your value. It is a reflection of where they are. These are not the same thing.

What you are allowed to ask for:

You do not have to accept the terms your partner has set for how this gets resolved. You are allowed to ask for — and to need — the following:

- Time to process without being pressured to "move on"
- Honest answers to direct questions without defensiveness or deflection
- Couples therapy with a neutral third party who can hold both of you accountable
- Transparency about the specific behaviors that broke trust
- Consistent, observable change over time — not promises



- The ability to express your hurt without it being turned back on you
- Space to grieve what the relationship was, or what you thought it was

"Asking for accountability is not an attack. It is an act of care — for yourself, and for the relationship."

SECTION 5

Can Trust Be Rebuilt?

What genuine repair looks like — and what it requires from both of you.

Trust can be rebuilt after serious harm — but only under specific conditions. Research on relationship repair, including the work of Dr. John Gottman and betrayal trauma researchers, consistently shows that recovery is possible when both partners are genuinely committed to the process. The key word is both.

If your partner is not yet willing to take accountability, that does not mean they never will. People grow. Circumstances change. Therapy can open doors that felt permanently closed. But it does mean that trust cannot be rebuilt right now — and that waiting indefinitely for someone to change, while absorbing the ongoing cost of their unaccountability, is not a sustainable or fair position for you to be in.

The conditions required for genuine trust repair:

1 Their willingness to be uncomfortable

Genuine repair requires the person who caused harm to sit with discomfort — guilt, shame, the weight of what they did — without running from it or pushing it back onto you. If they cannot tolerate that discomfort, they will continue to avoid accountability.

2 Your safety to be honest

You must be able to say "I am still hurting" without it being treated as an attack. If honesty about your experience is consistently met with defensiveness, the conditions for repair are not present.

3 Consistent behavior over time

Trust is rebuilt in small, repeated moments — not in grand gestures or single conversations. Look for patterns, not performances. Change that lasts six weeks is different from change that lasts six months.

4 Professional support

When the harm is significant, couples therapy is not optional — it is essential. A skilled therapist provides structure, safety, and accountability that most couples cannot create on their own. Individual therapy for both partners is also valuable.

5 Mutual investment in the relationship

Repair requires that both people genuinely want the relationship to work — not just that one person is fighting for it while the other tolerates the process. One-sided repair is not repair; it is one person doing all the work.

Signs that repair is genuinely happening:

They initiate accountability conversations

They bring up what happened — not to relitigate it, but to check in on how you are doing and reaffirm their commitment to change.

They tolerate your hurt without reacting

When you express pain, they stay present. They do not become defensive, withdraw, or turn the conversation back to themselves.

**Their behavior matches their words**

The specific things that broke trust are no longer happening. Not because they are trying harder — but because something has genuinely shifted.

They seek help independently

They pursue therapy, read, or do the inner work without being asked. Accountability that requires constant prompting is not yet internalized.

Reflection: Assessing Where Things Stand

- *Is my partner showing any of the signs of genuine repair — consistently, not just when I raise concerns?*
- *Am I seeing change in behavior, or change in how they manage my reaction to their behavior?*
- *What would I need to see, over what period of time, to feel that trust is being rebuilt?*
- *Am I staying because I see real change, or because leaving feels too hard right now?*

SECTION 6

What You Deserve — Regardless of What You Decide

Staying or leaving, you are entitled to these things.

Whatever you decide about your relationship, there are things you are entitled to that do not depend on your partner's choices. These are not negotiable — not because relationships are transactional, but because they are the foundation of your own wellbeing.

To be believed

Your experience of what happened is valid. You do not need your partner's agreement to know what you lived through.

To grieve

You are allowed to mourn the relationship you thought you had, the version of your partner you believed in, and the future you imagined. Grief is not weakness — it is the honest response to real loss.

To change your mind

You are allowed to decide to stay and then change your mind. You are allowed to decide to leave and then change your mind. You are not required to be certain before you act.

To heal at your own pace

Your healing does not have a timeline. You are not "too sensitive" for still being affected. You are human, and what happened to you mattered.

To prioritize your safety

If you are in a relationship where you do not feel emotionally or physically safe, that is the most important thing. Safety is not a preference — it is a requirement.

To ask for help

Therapy, trusted friends, support groups, and crisis resources all exist for exactly this reason. You do not have to navigate this alone.

A note from Dr. Natalie Ellis

The people I work with who are navigating this situation are some of the most resilient, self-aware, and loving people I know. They are not staying because they are weak. They are not leaving because they gave up. They are doing the incredibly hard work of trying to see clearly in a situation that has been made deliberately confusing. If you are in this place, I want you to know: your instincts are not wrong. Your need for accountability is not too much.



Working through trust and accountability in a relationship is hard — and you don't have to do it alone. Sage & Sol Therapy offers individual and couples therapy via telehealth for adults in Alaska, Florida, Pennsylvania, and Texas. Schedule a free consultation with Dr. Natalie Ellis, LCSW-QS sagesoltherapy.com | natalie@sagesoltherapy.com Book online: sagesoltherapy.clientsecure.me/request/service

