

V.A.S.E. - Responding to Your Spouse's Triggers

As we move into marriage recovery after the initial trauma from the discovery of a betrayal, the partner who has been betrayed may become “triggered.” This means that some event or stimulus will remind them of the betrayal and they will emotionally return to that traumatized space. This is an expected part of the healing process for the partner and the marriage. As the betrayer, it is our opportunity to support our partner through this process by how we respond to their emotional volatility. Our ability to stay emotionally regulated and offer these four responses will help our partner and marriage heal that much quicker. When your spouse gets triggered, seek to respond in as many of the following ways that are appropriate. To help you remember what to do memorize the initials V.A.S.E.

Validate

Make sure and validate what your spouse is going through by letting them know that “it makes sense” that they are traumatized when they are reminded of what has happened. Betrayal in a marriage is traumatic and we would expect a person who has been lied to or had a spouse who has committed an affair to struggle to figure out the best way forward. Validate by connecting what has triggered them to one of your possible behaviors. Avoid statements like, “Why are you so upset?” or “I am not doing that anymore”

Example: *“It makes sense that you are triggered by me going out of town this weekend because my acting out took place in other cities. I get why you would feel upset or worried.”*

Assure

We assure our spouse by doing them two things. First, re-stating our commitment to change. Second, by giving our spouse the ability to ask or expect verifiable proof of our trustworthiness. Assurance avoids getting defensive and instead is about practicing a new habit of sharing needed information freely with our spouse. We do not assure our partner by telling them “it is going to be okay” or “but I have changed”.

Example: *“I want to do everything I can to help you to feel safe and if you need to ask me questions about this issue or if you need to check that I am being honest and safe in my behavior I want to provide that to you in any way I can.”*

Seek to Understand

We seek to understand by giving our spouse a chance to elaborate and process what is going on with their emotional instability. We do this best by asking curiosity questions that help our partner share with us what they are feeling, what was the source, and if there is something we can do that would help them feel safe. We do not say “I understand” or “I know why you are...” With this response it is good to use reflective listening to make sure you have heard your spouse accurately.

Example: *“What does this feeling remind you of? What brought this up? What I can I do that is most helpful in this moment and the future”*

Empathize

Empathy is about joining with someone in their pain. It is about naming how hard these feeling can be to experience. It is about appreciating that person’s willingness to trust you with their vulnerability. Empathy is about our ability to sit with someone patiently in their crisis, rather than hurry them on to something else or even worse telling them that what they are going through isn’t that bad.

Example: *“What you are feeling right now sounds really tough and painful. Thank you for sharing that with me. I am here for you as long as you need me to be.”*