

When A Spouse Is Unfaithful

by Tim Jackson

Trina's day began like most normal days for an active mom of three. Getting the kids off to school by 7:45, a quick shower, and a cup of coffee while mapping out her strategy for attacking her day. She had to return some items to a department store, pick up a few groceries, stop at the dry cleaners, run home for lunch, and make it to her 1:15 dental appointment. Then she would sprint home and prepare supper before the stampede of after-school carnivores arrived.

The errands took longer than expected—they usually do—and she really didn't have time to go home for lunch before her dental appointment. So Trina decided to stop in and surprise Mike at the office by taking him his favorite Chinese takeout—Mongolian beef.

As she pulled into the office parking lot, she saw Mike leaving the building and heading for his car with his secretary, Vicki. Trina felt her stomach tighten. Mike had told her that morning that he would be working

through lunch because the Johnson project bids had to be in by 5:00.

Trina watched as Mike and Vicki brushed against each other as they walked. They hardly took their eyes off each other! In fact, they seemed so engrossed with each other that they didn't seem to notice much else.

When they got to the car, Mike opened the door for Vicki—like he used to for Trina. She tossed her curly auburn hair over one shoulder, slid onto the leather seats, and drew her slender legs into the car. Mike's approving smile transported Trina back to *their* dating days. "That's the smile he used to give *me!*" she thought. "That's *my husband!*"

Trina stared in disbelief. "They're lovers!" she silently screamed. "That's how Mike and I were when we were dating." She wanted to scream, cry, and

throw up all at once. She felt powerless to stop the soap opera that was playing itself out before her eyes.

She followed them as they left the parking lot. Mike drove to Vicki's apartment, and the two disappeared inside. Trina thought her heart would explode. Just a few minutes earlier, her life had been so good, so normal. Now, she felt like the victim of a hit-and-run accident: dazed, bleeding, abandoned, and left to die—alone.

She almost passed out from the concussion to her heart and soul. "This can't be happening to me!" she sobbed.

Many spouses, like Trina, are blindsided by the blow of betrayal that comes from discovering their mate's affair. Even if we haven't experienced it firsthand, all of us know someone close who has

suffered from the painful wounds inflicted by an unfaithful spouse.

The purpose of this booklet is to provide understanding and hope for a spouse whose marriage has been shattered by an affair. We will describe varying levels of unfaithfulness, trace its roots, and walk through the healing process that is so necessary after unfaithfulness is discovered. Our desire is to help a betrayed partner think about how to respond to a situation that feels overwhelming and hopeless. We will explore how God Himself offers timeless answers and assurances that can help us deal with one of the most painful of human experiences. We will see that in spite of the pain, loss, and betrayal, there is hope. Life, even though it will be forever different

after an affair, can be good again.

In the midst of devastation and heartache, God's presence provides the compelling courage and sustaining strength needed to walk through the pain and madness of the dark valley that feels like death (Ps. 23:4).

What Is An Affair?

All affairs violate trust and involve unfaithfulness. They fall into two major categories: affairs involving physical contact and affairs involving emotional intimacy.

Physical Affairs.

These consist of varying degrees of physical and sexual contact between a married person and someone other than his or her spouse. These affairs fall into two categories:

overt sexual and covert physical contacts.

1. Sexual Contact.

An affair can be defined as a sexual relationship with someone other than one's spouse, which violates the marriage covenant. The unfaithfulness may involve sexual intercourse, whether in a "one-night stand" or as part of a long-term emotional entanglement. But complete sexual union is not necessary for it to be considered a sexual affair. An illicit relationship may also occur through any form of intimate physical contact intended to stimulate and enjoy sexual arousal with someone other than one's spouse, even if it doesn't result in intercourse.

2. Physical Contact.

This affair involves an inappropriate display of physical touch or sexualized affection that breaches the healthy

boundaries of a brother/sister relationship. Depending on the intent of the heart, this form of covert touching would include, but not be limited to, a lingering hug, a kiss on the cheek, a touch on the arm or leg, holding hands, or brushing against

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someone in playful ways that indicate more than a casual interest or concern for the well-being of the other person. Because the level and kind of touch is not overtly sexual, and because the real betrayal is an unfaithful intent of the heart, these visible indicators are sometimes difficult to interpret.

Emotional Affairs.

These also violate the exclusivity of the relational bond of marriage. When married people invest time, money, conversation, and emotional energy that should be reserved for their mates, they are guilty of breaking the union with their spouses that God intended (Gen. 2:24). This would include such things as sending flowers, letters, cards, or e-mails to a non-spouse. Intimate dinners alone, conversations, and phone calls involving personal and emotionally sensitive content while under the guise of “friendship” are also included. In essence, *any emotional attachment to someone else that is normally reserved for one’s spouse breaches the exclusivity of the marital bond.*

Emotional affairs may be easier to detect than

physical affairs because inappropriate interactions can be seen. But they can be more difficult to prove because hearts and motives are hidden.

Given the different categories of affairs, some may question whether or not an emotional affair is adulterous. Jesus made it clear, however, that adultery is as much a betrayal of the heart as of the body (Mt. 5:27-28). He taught that anyone who looks lustfully at another person is guilty of adultery in his or her heart, even if the act is not consummated with sexual behavior.

On the other hand, while not minimizing an emotional affair, Jesus said that when a spouse steps over the line and turns adulterous thoughts into a physical affair, the betrayal is so grievous that it gives the wounded spouse legitimate grounds for

divorce (Mt. 5:31-32). Paul made it equally plain that sexual immorality is a unique kind of sin that carries with it severe consequences (1 Cor. 6:18). Although God's original intent was for permanency in marriage, the hardheartedness and sexual betrayal of an unfaithful spouse moves the heart of a wise and loving God to allow an offended spouse the protection of a divorce (Mt. 19:8-9).

Thus, while there is a form of adultery of the heart that can devastate a marriage, the wound of sexual adultery is such a complete betrayal that God grants the faithful spouse the freedom to divorce because the exclusive "one flesh" covenant has been violated.

That being the case, why would so many who say they fear and love God risk

losing so much for so little? Why would they ignore the ancient wisdom of Proverbs? "Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned? . . . a man [or woman] who commits adultery lacks judgment; whoever does so destroys himself" (Prov. 6:27,32).

How Unfaithful Spouses "Explain" Affairs

Most people who are caught up in an affair fail to give their spouses an honest or adequate answer for their behavior. Instead, they hide the motives of their hearts and look for ways to defend their actions. Many shift the blame by citing deficiencies in their spouse. Others hide and detach by saying, "This isn't about you. You're wonderful.

This is about me.” Both responses leave wounded spouses either stunned by a barrage of blaming tactics or floundering alone with nothing to do because “this isn’t about them.” Many are left with lots of questions and few answers.

The rationalization of an unfaithful spouse is often, “If you only knew what I had to put up with at home, you’d understand why I had to look elsewhere. I was dying with her. No one should have to live like that.”

While sex is involved in most affairs, many people report that they don’t have affairs merely for sex. Some do, of course; but many claim, “I just didn’t feel connected with my spouse anymore. I felt unappreciated, bored, unfulfilled, and discontent.” Many a wife has justified her affair by revealing to her husband, “You don’t

make me happy anymore. You pay more attention to your job, sports, and TV than to me. You weren’t there for me when I needed you. You pushed me into his arms.”

No matter what the rationale, in the end many unfaithful spouses are seduced into believing the myth of the “greener grass.” Proverbs 6:32-33 reminds us that the person who commits adultery lacks judgment, destroys himself, and faces an avalanche of shame. Shifting the blame is the usual tactic for dealing with shame. But regardless of what has gone on in the relationship prior to the affair, no spouse is responsible for the unfaithful partner’s lack of judgment and choice to be unfaithful.

Because unfaithful spouses are unlikely to reveal what is really happening inside, every

betrayed husband or wife is left with the nagging question “Why?” “What caused my spouse to cross the line and have an affair? Was it him/her? Or was it me?”

What Fuels An Affair?

Affairs are primarily matters of the heart. While external factors do tempt, entice, and entrap, in the end it is the heart that determines the path one chooses. The biblical story of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife illustrates this (Gen. 39). That’s why the writer of Proverbs warned his young apprentice in wisdom, “Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life” (Prov. 4:23).

But one cannot guard what one does not know. Most people don’t

understand the underlying, deep desires of the heart that they are unwittingly trying to satisfy with physical or emotional pleasure. While much time and energy are consumed with the concerns of daily living, little or no time is spent on exploring and understanding the longings, hopes, and dreams of the heart.

The explosion of passion that erupts in an affair often feels bigger than life because it taps into the desires of the heart that have never really been examined or understood. That’s what happened with Mike. By not understanding the deep spiritual desires that could have helped him renew a healthy passion for his wife, he allowed himself to be enticed and captured by Vicki’s attention and affection.

To understand why

anyone can be vulnerable to good, God-given longings gone astray, we must understand that in every heart is hunger, pain, and folly.

Hungry Hearts. We all long for something more than the relationships we have been given.

Something deep inside yearns to be caught up in a romantic love affair of epic proportions. That's why romance is the universal theme of every good story, including the story of the Bible. We've been built for a sacred romance with the Lover of our souls (Isa. 62:5; Eph. 5:25-32).

G. K. Chesterton remarked, "The man who knocks on the door of the brothel is looking for God."¹ The danger, intrigue, mystery, and madness of an illicit affair promises to satisfy a hunger that in reality can be satisfied only in God. When this

underlying spiritual longing is not understood, our unsatisfied hunger fuels the recklessness that can propel us into an affair, and the painful disappointments of our relationships seem to justify it.

A Craving For Romance. Romance is far more than the emotional fireworks and infatuation that get a relationship started. Romance involves passionate pursuit. We crave to be pursued by someone who fully knows and delights in us. What we often fail to realize, however, is that the wonder of romance between a husband and wife is meant not only to deepen the enjoyment of one another, but also to arouse in the heart a deeper understanding of our Creator's love for us. A loving spouse can mirror the romantic pursuit of our

loving God. Many spouses have enjoyed a taste of God's delight in them through the sparkle in the eye of their mate.

When we don't pursue God to meet our deepest longings, we choose others to substitute for Him. Often a spouse is "set up" by being expected to satisfy our deepest hunger. When a spouse falls short (as all will), our hunger for the divine romance can be reduced to a mere physical craving for sexual gratification that our hedonistic, self-indulgent society endorses.

A Yearning For Connection. We all long to belong. God built us for connection with Himself and others. Jesus prayed that we would enjoy the oneness that He enjoyed with His Father (Jn. 17:21). Oneness is to be reflected in the physical and emotional intimacy in

marriage (Gen. 2:24).

If we don't pay attention to our hearts, however, we will settle for the outward trappings of connection with our spouses without enjoying the inner oneness God intended. If we fail to cultivate an intimate relationship with God, our marriage will be reduced to a relationship of selfish convenience without meaningful connection. Eventually we will look for satisfaction of our hunger elsewhere.

Hurting Hearts. Our most significant pain often comes in the form of disappointment and betrayal in the context of our hunger for love, acceptance, and belonging. We all carry into our marriages emotional pain that may have come from past troubled relationships or from their failure to provide us with genuine love.

Our vision of marriage is often clouded with the unrealistic expectation that our spouse will finally satisfy our hunger for romance and connection. While a loving, faithful spouse can provide a delightful taste of genuine intimacy, no spouse can compensate for the other's lack of intimacy with God.

Mourning The Loss Of Romance. All spouses must face disappointment in their marriages. No marriage escapes because no spouse's love is flawless, nor can it satisfy our hunger for the divine romance. If we don't face disappointment and allow it to drive us back to God, we not only lose our romance with Him, we also sabotage a healthy delight in our marriage partner. Instead of pursuing our spouse, we blame him or her for our pain. Rather than mourning the loss of

romance in our relationship with God and with our spouse, we subtly use our hurt to justify seeking emotional and physical comfort in the arms of another lover.

Aching From The Lack Of Connection.

When we don't feel connected, we feel distant. Instead of oneness, we feel separate and alone in a relationship that feels hostile, not healing.

When we feel a lack of connection in marriage, disillusionment soon follows. We end up just going through the motions because "our heart isn't in it." We reduce our expectations and live by the "shoulds" but not from deep desire.

Even good marriages are disappointing, difficult, and demanding. They don't satisfy our deepest longings, nor are they as pain-free as we had hoped.

Instead, they are complicated and require constant maintenance.

The allure of an affair appeals to the longing for a perfect relationship that satisfies our hunger, inflicts no pain, and makes no demands. The mournful lyric “It’s sad to belong to someone else when the right one comes along” is the theme song for many unfaithful spouses. The hope is that maybe the next one will satisfy the hunger for love and salve the hurts.

In reality, the pursuit of an affair to deal with one’s hungry and hurting heart is a foolish attempt to push one’s way back into Eden.

Foolish Hearts. The natural inclination of every human heart is toward foolishness. Proverbs 22:15 reminds us of our roots: “Folly is bound up in the heart of a child.” No one *learns* foolishness. It’s part

of what we inherited from Adam and Eve. Instead of taking our hunger and hurt to God, we rebel and try handling it on our own in one of the following ways:

Giving Up On Romance. Rather than feel the gnawing ache of our hunger, we deny our need for romance and connection by calling it a foolish dream. Losing hope of ever having a deeper romance with our spouse indicates that we’ve abandoned our calling to love our spouse the way God does. It also indicates that we’ve abandoned our longing to be romanced by God. We become the “half-hearted creatures” that C. S. Lewis describes as “fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is

meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”²

Selling Out To False Connection. The best counterfeit to true intimacy is the false intimacy that sexual indulgence provides. Forbidden sex gives an immediate and artificial sense of being “alive” when in reality it deadens the heart.

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People who get involved in affairs are deceived by their sinful, foolish hearts and refuse to remember God. It is impossible to enjoy an affair and remain in close fellowship with Him. They must say in essence, “Get out of my life, God. I can’t enjoy this new

relationship in the presence of Your holiness and righteousness.”

Every affair is a running away from God. But there’s a bizarre twist. By the very act of running from God and exchanging His truth for a lie, unfaithful mates are tormented by the lingering consequences of their sin (Isa. 50:10-11). They also forget that God is a jealous lover who will use even their foolishness to arouse their hunger for Him. God’s intent is to draw every heart back to His table, where He will satisfy them with a taste of His own presence (Dt. 8:3).

When an affair is finally exposed, both spouses must embark on a perilous journey. Trina’s journey began when she refused to suffer alone. She left Vicki’s apartment and called a trusted friend. They called their small-group leader from church. He contacted

another elder, and the two men were waiting with Trina for Mike when he came home after work. The journey had begun.

The Healing Journey

In working through the chaos brought about by an affair, wounded people must travel through several stages in their healing journey.

STAGE I: A Time For Suffering And Sorrow. No words adequately describe the trauma a person suffers when a spouse's affair is exposed. Many report that it is the most dreadful thing they have ever faced—more excruciating than losing a parent, being diagnosed with cancer, or being fired. An affair inflicts a vicious wound to the heart of a faithful spouse. One man

told me he would have rather taken a bullet and been paralyzed than to face his wife's affair.

At the same time, the unfaithful spouse is also forced to deal with emotions that will in many ways shape the future of their relationship.

Wounded Spouses.

“While I may look the same on the outside, inside I'm hemorrhaging and I can't stop it.” Most betrayed spouses feel as if they are going crazy—especially during the initial stages of shock. Throughout the counseling process they invariably ask, “Am I going crazy?” My response is always the same: “No, you're not going crazy. What you're feeling is normal for the kind of experience you're going through.” This reassurance doesn't stop the emotional roller coaster that's roaring through their world, but it

does confirm that their feelings are normal.

There are at least four categories of emotions that wounded spouses experience:

They Feel Lost. Gone is the sense of being intact and whole. They feel as if they've lost their voice in the world. They feel fragmented, shattered, confused, and disoriented. They don't know where they belong. It isn't unusual for them to be driving somewhere and either forget where they were going or how to get there. Self-respect is shattered, and they commonly ask themselves, "Why didn't I speak up earlier when I sensed something was wrong?"

They Feel Betrayed. Betrayal can strip the heart of any sense of constancy, security, and meaning. Feelings of being used, discarded,

and rejected replace feelings of being chosen, special, and valued. Their ability to trust is undermined. Everyone, not just the unfaithful spouse, is now suspect. Even God's goodness and protection are questioned.

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They Feel Powerless. The statement "No matter how hard I try, I can't fix it" indicates a loss of control. Anger grows out of a loss of control. They feel as if their life is slipping through their fingers. There is often a loss of control over their thoughts and actions. Obsessive thoughts

and dreams of their spouse with a lover invade their days and nights. Compulsively driving by the lover's apartment every 30 minutes to see if he or she is there isn't unusual. They lose hope that life could ever be good again. Usually anger and depression aren't far behind. Statements like "I give up," "It will never be the same," "I want to die," "There's nothing to live for anymore" are normal.

They Feel Ambivalent.

A host of competing emotions all screaming for attention rips them apart. These competing emotions are common: shame and contempt, joy and sorrow, hurt and vengefulness, fear and relief. A wife will miss her husband and yet feel glad that he's gone. She will fluctuate between wanting to hug him and wanting to beat him, wanting to forgive him and

wanting to make him pay. Ambivalence results in one's shutting down internally—causing an emotional numbness that paralyzes any productive movement toward healing.

Unfaithful Spouses.

The emotional response of the ones who are unfaithful can be varied, depending on whether they feel guilty over the affair or justified in having it. If they feel justified and are upset about having been caught, they will be more belligerent. If they feel guilty and are willing to give up the affair and restore the marital relationship, their response will indicate brokenness and humility.

Janis Abrahms Spring provides a list of intense and contradictory feelings that fairly describes the ambivalence of the unfaithful spouse:

- *Relief*—"I'm tired of

lying about all this and wondering when I'd be discovered."

- *Impatience*—"I said I was sorry and gave her up; what more do you want from me?"
- *Chronic Anxiety*—"If I just keep busy I'll be okay."
- *Justified Anger*—"I'm doing what I want to do, and it feels right."
- *Absence Of Guilt*—"I did what I did and that's that."
- *Isolation*—"No one's there for me."
- *Hopelessness*—"There's no way this relationship will ever work."
- *Paralysis*—"I feel torn. I don't know what to do."
- *Self-disgust*—"I'm such a fool. Why did I jeopardize all that I love?"³

The unfaithful spouse may also experience *guilt* over hurting the children and *grief* over the loss of a lover.

After an affair is exposed, marital partners need to take personal responsibility for seeking help to wade through the quagmire of feelings and necessary decisions that must be made so they can make progress in their healing journey. It is virtually impossible for individuals to work through all these issues on their own. They need a counselor or pastor with training and experience to help them sort through and resolve these issues. They desperately need the emotional support and prayerful involvement of friends, family, and the church community if they are going to take on the task of rebuilding.

STAGE 2: A Time To Decide. After an affair, many couples quickly try to restore their broken relationship for a variety of reasons—some good, and

some bad. Well-intentioned friends, family, and church leaders often unwittingly pressure a spouse to quickly reconcile with an unfaithful partner. This push for a quick decision is a mistake. A faithful spouse will probably feel chided or coerced into reconciling quickly, especially if the unfaithful spouse has not been required to take sufficient time to demonstrate sorrow and repentance that is trustworthy. Time is needed for both partners to sort through the issues and put words to the struggles within their own hearts. Both will question if restoration is even possible or worth it. A quick decision either way minimizes both the gravity of what has happened and the necessity of a process of confrontation, confession, repentance, and forgiveness, which *may* or *may not* lead to

reconciliation in the marriage. Deciding if one should quit or recommit is a monumental decision that should never be made lightly.

If you are in this stage, seek wise counsel. Take all the time necessary to sort through the countless questions and ramifications of this life-altering decision. Don't decide quickly in either direction. Be devoted to prayer (Col. 4:2) and solicit the prayers of others (1 Th. 5:25). Take your time and reflect on what God is doing in your own heart as well as where He appears to be leading in the relationship.

As a way of facilitating your journey, walking through some of the following questions may help you decide which path reflects more faith, hope, and love. The choice to divorce or rebuild after an affair will not be easy for

either spouse. Important choices never are. But you can still honor God in your choice.

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Can there be restoration if the affair is still going on?

Absolutely not! It's absurd to think that any genuine progress could be made in healing the wounds in a marriage if the weapon that inflicted the wound is still in the assailant's hand. Restoring the exclusiveness of marriage demands a severing of all connection and communication with the affair partner. Divided

loyalty is no loyalty at all.

How will you know if your unfaithful partner is genuinely attempting to rebuild the marriage?

Unfortunately, nothing can provide the kind of reassurance that will allay the fears of a betrayed spouse. The decision to rebuild is risky. However, a deciding factor is the attitude of the unfaithful spouse. It would be foolish even to consider reconciliation if there is a demanding spirit that pushes for a quick resolution or uses the deficiencies of the faithful spouse to justify the affair. An unfaithful husband or wife must accept the fact that he or she has lost any claim to a restored relationship.

An unfaithful spouse must be willing to go to extraordinary lengths to demonstrate by actions the genuineness of his or her

intentions to rebuild the marriage. Consistency and diligence in the following areas are what will make or break a reconciliation. The offended spouse, counselor, and church community must all work together to hold the unfaithful spouse accountable in these areas. He or she must do the following:

1. Give up the affair by cutting off all contact and communication with the third party. This can be done either by a certified letter approved by the spouse or in a phone call monitored by the spouse and counselor. Gifts or mementos exchanged during the affair must be returned or destroyed.

2. Seek individual and marital counseling to identify the reasons for the affair and to expose the issues needing to be addressed in order to pave

the way for reconciliation.

3. Move out of the home (if requested by the injured spouse) while, if necessary, still maintaining the financial provisions for the family. This move should in no way allow for re-contacting the affair partner, but it does provide a buffer zone for the wounded spouse to begin to heal.

4. Be patient with the slowness of forgiveness from the offended individual. There must be no demand to “just get over it and move on.”

5. Do whatever it takes to help the wounded spouse begin to trust again. This includes, but is not limited to, changing e-mail addresses, relocating, changing jobs if the affair happened at work, quitting a job that requires overnight travel, and relinquishing control of the finances.

6. Be accountable to several trusted individuals and couples who know the whole story and who have access to both partners.

7. Refuse to ask church leaders or others to help pressure the faithful spouse for quick forgiveness and restoration.

What if the unfaithful spouse becomes uncooperative? The faithful spouse should continue in personal and spiritual growth, but may need to take appropriate steps to separate from the spouse who is still emotionally dangerous. The commitment to love the unfaithful spouse is always required, even if that means loving him or her as an enemy (Mt. 5:44; Lk. 6:27,35).

Does the Bible require the injured spouse to take back the unfaithful partner? This question is often asked after an

unfaithful partner has made a public confession of a sexual affair and has asked for forgiveness, but the wounded spouse is reluctant to forgive or reconcile. The key is in the word *require*. The Bible does not require a spouse to restore the relationship after an affair, nor does it require a divorce. Although Jesus taught that divorce in the case of sexual adultery is permissible (Mt. 19:9), the decision to divorce or to reconcile is given exclusively to the wounded spouse. The unfaithful spouse, by reason of his or her unfaithfulness, has breached the marriage covenant and has forfeited all rights to the decision to divorce or reconcile.

If an offending spouse refuses to give up the illicit lover or becomes belligerent, physically threatening, abusive, or

withholds financial support from the family, the most loving response to such ongoing cruelty and hard-heartedness may be to divorce. This prevents the unfaithful spouse from continuing his or her active defiance of the marriage covenant and limits the opportunity for abuse.

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Choosing to divorce is one of the most dreaded decisions a spouse will ever make, but in circumstances like these, divorce is not only permissible, but may also be advisable.

A wounded spouse

should not be made to feel guilty for exercising the God-given option of a divorce. In that case, a wounded spouse still has the opportunity to demonstrate Christlikeness throughout the divorce proceedings. The terms of the divorce should be fair and firm, not vengeful. Revenge is something that God reserves for Himself (Rom. 12:17-21). (For a more thorough treatment of this issue, see RBC booklet *Divorce & Remarriage* Q0806.)

Can a marriage survive an affair?

Ironically, some relationships not only survive but flourish after an affair. Why? All the pretense and denial that may have aided in the development of the affair have been stripped away. Both partners are now capable of viewing each other more honestly than

they did prior to the affair.

This is not an endorsement for the foolish notion that “affairs are good for a marriage,” but it is a reflection of God’s redemptive plan to use things originally intended for evil to accomplish His good purposes in the hearts of His people (Gen. 50:20).

It is highly unlikely, however, that lasting change will take root and grow without the partners looking at their own individual contribution to the troubled relationship. This by no means implies that the faithful spouse is responsible for his or her mate’s choice to have an affair. Nor does it allow the betrayer to justify the affair on the grounds of his or her mate’s deficiencies. No one is ever responsible for the choices of another. But both partners must be willing to look at their individual and

mutual histories, styles of relating, and contributions to the problems in their relationship.

While care must be taken not to minimize or excuse the unfaithful partner’s betrayal, it is likely that some tensions existed in the marriage before the affair. Dan Allender, in his book *The Healing Path*, notes, “No failure of a wife or husband ever causes or excuses an affair; nonetheless, the downward spiral that leads to an affair usually involves mutual failure.”⁴ The issue of mutual failure must be carefully defined and explored if there is to be mutual confession and forgiveness that produces a renewed oneness.

STAGE 3: A Time To Rebuild. Building a good marriage is always an uphill battle—even when there hasn’t been an affair. It requires hard work,

sacrifice, humility, confession, forgiveness, understanding, and love. Couples who make the courageous choice to rebuild their relationship after an affair find that the core issues don't change. But the intensity level that has been raised by the betrayal and distrust must now be addressed and overcome. Betrayal crushes the trust between a husband and wife. Without trust, a relationship can't grow. Thus, the major work in healing a broken marriage is rebuilding trust and restoring friendship.

Rebuilding Trust Through Telling The Truth. Affairs thrive on secrecy. Deception is essential to the duplicity that makes an affair possible. The betrayed husband who has been fed a steady diet of deceit hungers for the truth from

his wife. He will often say, "I don't care how bad it is, just tell me the truth! I can take the truth. I just can't deal with the lies anymore."

While the power of an affair may be in its secrecy, the weakness of a marriage may be in its avoidance of issues.⁵ Truth-telling means no more pretending from either spouse. The assumption is that while the unfaithful spouse's duplicity is more easily seen, both individuals have deceptive hearts (Jer. 17:9) that have played off each other in a bizarre dance of deception. One lied; the other looked the other way. One got angry and indignant; the other backed off. One withdrew; the other didn't pursue. One ignored; the other avoided. "Speaking the truth in love" to each other (Eph. 4:15) means admitting the dance and the part each took in it.

The purpose of truth-telling is to put the issues out on the table where they can be dealt with. It means

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coming clean—not just exposing each other, but admitting one's own current feelings and attitudes. It involves asking and honestly answering questions in three categories:

The Affair. What happened? With whom? When did it begin? How long did it last? Is it over? This is a major test for the unfaithful spouse. He or

she must be totally honest and tell the wounded spouse anything he or she wants to know about the extent and duration of the affair, but not all the sordid details. Sometimes the offended spouse believes that knowledge of the details will provide the control needed to prevent an affair from recurring. It won't. Knowing the details may only inflame the wound, filling the mind with images that will make it even more difficult to overcome. This is where a seasoned counselor can help a couple get past new revelations about the affair and not get bogged down in details that serve no good purpose.

The Damage. The wounded spouse must honestly share how much pain the affair has caused. The unfaithful spouse should not be defensive or try to explain but truly

listen to, absorb, and understand the other's suffering.

The Relationship.

Both spouses need to talk honestly about the way they relate to each other, how they struggle personally, and how that has affected their relationship in all areas. They need the help of wise counsel to make the connection between their past and current struggles. This involves seeing how their unique struggles reflect a failure to trust God, which weakens their relationship, hurts those they care about the most, and makes them vulnerable to a host of self-destructive choices—one of which is the affair.

Truth-telling opens the door to confession that is cleansing and grief that is healing.

Rebuilding Trust Through Confession.

Confession must be specific.

It isn't enough to say "I'm sorry I had an affair. Will you forgive me?" The specific behaviors, attitudes, and responses that inflicted so much pain and suffering must be individually named, owned, and tied to the damage spoken of earlier. When a spouse confesses to God (Ps. 51) and to his or her mate the guilt over the individual wounds that have been inflicted, it paves the way for a deepening sorrow that leads to repentance and change (2 Cor. 7:10). Confession is necessary for the healing of body, soul, and relationships (Jas. 5:16). It also brings hope because God assures that "he who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy" (Prov. 28:13).

Confession must be mutual. Seldom is either spouse blameless. While

not guilty of the affair, the offended spouse has had failures of love that need to be named and confessed to the unfaithful spouse and to God.

Should other affairs be confessed? There are always risks with this. Each situation must be evaluated individually. But given the human propensity toward deception, it would be a good idea to come clean all at once rather than risk future exposure that would undermine any progress made in rebuilding trust. Again, caution is needed so as to guard against unnecessary exposure of the sordid details.

Who needs to be told? Not everyone needs to know. Certainly those directly affected by the affair—one's family. One's pastor, small group, and some trusted friends need to know so they can help in

the rebuilding process. If a parent needs to leave the home for a while, the children should be told in general terms, but not in the specifics. While teenagers may already have figured it out, don't assume that they know. If there is evidence that they know, parents should tell them together and prepare them for the changes that may be ahead, but avoid revealing unnecessary details.

Rebuilding Trust Through Repentance.

The best description of repentance comes from the lips of the king of Israel whose adulterous affair rocked the nation:

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise (Ps. 51:17).

What are signs of a repentant heart? (See list on pages 20-21.) A humble

attitude that is neither demanding nor defensive when questioned. An openness that replaces deceit. The willingness to be accountable for time, money, and whereabouts. Not blaming or making excuses for failures. Quietly accepting consequences.

A betrayer's humble repentance in word and deed will pave the way for the betrayed to again risk opening his or her heart and offering the sweet fruit of forgiveness that can lead to restoration and renewed joy.

Rebuilding Relationship Through Forgiveness. The sin is always before those who have had an affair (Ps. 51:3), but it is ever before their spouse as well. It created a debt that remains outstanding, and it demands a response.

The natural response

would be revenge—to make the betrayer suffer. But God calls us to a radical standard of loving that advocates mercy, not revenge (Rom. 12:17-21). He calls us to “be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Eph. 4:32). This doesn't seem fair, especially when the wound has cut so deep. It seems as if it's minimizing our pain and letting the offender off the hook. But that's not what forgiveness is.

Jesus taught that forgiveness is the loving, voluntary cancellation of a debt (Lk. 7:36-48). It doesn't mean that the pain or the anger will miraculously vanish or that the consequences of sinful choices will evaporate. Once the betrayed sees signs of repentance (Lk. 17:3-4), forgiveness opens the

heart to reconciliation that is based on mutual respect, mercy, gratefulness, and love. (See RBC booklet *When Forgiveness Seems Impossible* CB941.)

Rebuilding Relationship Through Reinitiating Physical Intimacy. After an affair is revealed, both spouses should get tested for AIDS and STDs. This is a humbling but necessary experience. In most cases, a minimum of 6 months abstinence from any sexual relations is necessary to protect the health of the faithful spouse. If the AIDS test is positive, the couple will have to grieve and accept the loss of certain forms of sexual intimacy so as not to endanger the non-infected partner.

The rule for reinitiating sexual intimacy after an affair is to go slow. Returning to the home after a time of separation

doesn't automatically mean returning to the bedroom and sexual intimacy. A spouse whose mate has had an affair may want to try to satisfy all the mate's sexual needs for fear he or she may go looking elsewhere. The unfaithful partner will need to reassure the wounded spouse that he or she will not go looking and will be patient.

Trying to prevent a relapse by using sexual intimacy is foolish and is not a celebration of love the way God intended sex to be enjoyed. The couple will also need to have some extensive conversations about the fear, meaning, use, and expression of sexual intimacy in their relationship prior to reengaging in sexual relations.

Recovery Of The Heart

If an unguarded heart is what sets us up for an affair, the best defense against an affair is to guard our heart. This will free us to live wholeheartedly in a romance of epic proportions. The apostle Paul expressed this wholehearted living when he wrote:

I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain (Phil. 1:20-21).

To live wholeheartedly means to live redemptively. It is to enter each day courageously with eager anticipation for what God

will do in and through us because of our confidence in being caught up in the most passionate love story of all time—the story of redemption.

*✿The best
defense against
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But wholehearted living puts us in touch with our hurt in this world and our hunger for heaven. Paul described the inescapable tension of wholehearted living as inwardly groaning in a painful world we cannot escape while eagerly anticipating our eternal home which we cannot create (Rom. 8:23).

Oswald Chambers recognized that the only way to silence our

demand for heaven now is to wholeheartedly embrace life with the full knowledge that “there is only one Being who can satisfy the last aching abyss of the human heart, and that is the Lord Jesus Christ.” The psalmist stated it this way:

Whom have I in heaven but You? And earth has nothing I desire besides You (Ps. 73:25).

When our hearts are enraptured by the love of our God who would sacrifice all for us, then His request of us to love others the way He has loved us becomes a delight and not merely a duty. His perfect love casts out our fear of loving (1 Jn. 4:11,18) and opens our hearts to redemptive living, which can triumph over the most heart-deadening of betrayals—an affair.

Few things have more power to entice others to wholehearted living than

the stories of God’s redemptive work in the lives of His people. Our stories of tragedy and triumph, suffering and celebration are small parts of God’s larger story. So sharing our stories is crucial to building a community of faith that remembers how God worked in the past, of hope that dreams of what He will yet do in the future, and of love that moves with confidence and courage to redeem the present in the face of evil (Eph. 5:16).

So share your stories.

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OTHER RBC BOOKLETS ON RELATED TOPICS:

When Anger Burns—

dealing with angry
emotions (CB942).

***When Violence Comes
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***Divorce &
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***When Forgiveness
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Designed For Desire—
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