



## It's Good To Be Broken

by Tim Tedder

When a partner has been betrayed and carries the wound of an affair, they long for the spouse to feel their pain and accept responsibility for it. But in order to do this, a person needs to be willing to move toward pain rather than away from it, and most of us just aren't wired that way. Combine the natural flight response with a strong desire to get past the shame of an affair, and it is easy to understand why so many cheating spouses simply want to confess and move on.

This leaves the betrayed spouse frustrated, struggling to let go of their own anger and resentment because their pain has never been genuinely acknowledged. They want to know their spouse feels a deep, genuine sorrow, unfiltered by self-protective motives, for the affair. They need to believe their spouse really "gets it" and is not just looking for an easy pass back to normality.

When a betrayer genuinely understands their affair's consequences and has an honest, empathetic reaction to the pain they've caused in others, then something shifts inside them. They stop trying to self-protect or control outcomes. Instead, they offer raw expressions of regret and sorrow while accepting responsibility for repairing the damage they caused. This point of personal brokenness is usually a powerful turning point in the healing process.

Not everyone experiences this in one grand moment. For some, it comes in a series of insights. But whatever the process, this brokenness is something that should be embraced, not avoided. Without it, recovery will be more difficult; the wounded spouse will have a harder time moving toward forgiveness and trust. In fact, they may never be able to reach them.

But what if there has been no brokenness?

### If you are a betrayed spouse and your partner has not experienced brokenness, what can you do?

Let me tell you first what you *cannot* do.

1. **You cannot move your spouse toward brokenness by insisting on it.** In fact, if you demand it, you're likely to get the opposite result. Instead of soft vulnerability, you'll get hard resistance. People are drawn toward empathy, not pushed into it.
2. **You cannot move your spouse toward brokenness by shaming them.** The negative emotions born out of shame do produce healing that leads to intimacy. Someone who is shamed into sorrow will be self-focussed rather than other-focussed. It is a "sorrow that does not lead to repentance." Their tears may bring you a feeling of vindication, but it will be void of love.

What you *can* do.

1. **Find the right voice for your pain.** Don't buy into the advice that says "be as angry as you want for as long as you want." This counsel is a reaction against the mistake of stuffing your pain and refusing to deal with it. But anger that is unrestrained can be as damaging as anger that is overly controlled. The fact is, you will have outbursts of anger and your spouse will need to figure out

how to handle them with compassion. But if you use your anger as a weapon to inflict retribution, you will reap the consequences of battle. So find the words and ways to be honest about the pain you feel without going into attack. Here are some ideas:

- a. Make a commitment to write down your feelings before you speak them, and then talk them passionately and honestly.
  - b. Say it in different ways. Make up a story. Write a poem or song. Show a clip from a movie that reflects how you feel. Ask your spouse to read a chapter from a book that explains what you are experiencing. All of these are indirect ways to express feelings, but might be received with less resistance.
  - c. When you realize you've acted in a way that inflicts hurt rather than invites healing, admit it, ask for forgiveness (yes, you need forgiveness, too), and keep working toward more fruitful communication. The truth is, you're likely going to experience feelings that seem to be out of control for a while. You're going to get it wrong sometimes, maybe even a lot in the beginning of recovery. That's normal, so don't beat yourself up about it. But it is important that you not justify your own unhealthy behaviors. Doing so will reinforce your anger while draining your spouse's hope.
2. **Find other outlets for your anger.** Physical exercise, venting with a trusted friend, working with a counselor, and shouting in solitude are all alternative options for expressing negative emotions. It's also important to understand the feelings that are underneath the angry (usually fear, powerlessness, shame, or pain) and talk honestly about those emotions.

## If you have committed an affair but have not experienced brokenness, what can you do?

1. Refuse to run from your spouse's pain. You need to be willing to face it. Not just for a moment, but for months. Your normal reaction will be to shut down or fight back, but you have to work hard to not do either of these things. Instead, you have to be committed to trying to understand your spouse's hurt. Sometimes, that means you'll just be quiet and listen. Sometimes you will ask questions that invite your spouse to express the depth of their confusion and grief. This may be one of the hardest things you have ever done, but your spouse needs to feel heard, and you need to try to understand and empathize as much as possible. Here are some suggestions:
  - a. Instead of waiting in dread for the next time your spouse unleashes anger, take the initiative in talking about these things. Tell your spouse you know you can't really understand how they feel, but that you want to try to listen and learn. Invite them to talk about it. Your willingness to start these conversations will help assure your spouse that you are not just concerned about protecting yourself.
  - b. Imagine a reversed story. Take your story and turn it around so that your spouse is the one who had the affair. Imagine them developing a secret relationship with a coworker, or with someone younger, or maybe even with one of your close friends. With as much vivid detail as you remember your own affair, imagine your spouse with this other person. How do you feel? Really think about it. And when you've imagined the worst possible scenario and can think about how that makes you feel, realize that the pain from this imagination is just a tiny fraction of what your spouse is actually experiencing.

2. **Refuse to run from your own pain.** You've got to be willing to deal honestly with what's going on in you. If you're not aware of any pain (fear, disappointment, shame, hurt), then you need to talk with someone who can help you gain some insight into all of this. Don't hesitate to get help. Otherwise, you are likely to keep making the same relationship mistakes.