

THE RECOVERY ROOM



Signs of Real Affair

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Part 1 (originally recorded March 13, 2016)

Note: Transcripts include answers to caller questions which were part of the original audio but not included in the re-recordings.

Tonight I want to talk about an issue I think is probably among the most important to consider and understand when you're dealing with affair recovery. How do we recognize when genuine, real recovery is happening following an affair? It can become confusing to know if what you're experiencing constitutes real change you can trust, or whether you're just going to be stuck in an ongoing mess.

I recently attended an event where a couple shared their recovery story publicly, talking about what they'd been through. It was the wife in this instance who had an affair. Her husband stated, "It got to the point that it really wasn't about marriage recovery anymore because what we had was gone. It was more about marriage *re-creation*."

Her most recent affair was discovered eighteen months ago. For the last six months they've been on a very consistent path of connection and building together. You can see it in the way they relate, in the hope and joy they have. It is a new relationship, a different kind of relationship.

For most of the clients I work with, that's the goal. Very few people come in and say, "What we want is to go back to the marriage we had." First of all that's impossible. But even if they could, most couples want to move the relationship forward, to experience something better and more secure.

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But how do you know if you're getting there? How do you know that what you're experiencing in recovery is legitimate and can be trusted? How can you be sure you're building something that is going to be good in the future, not just something you end up “putting up with” from now on?

I'd like to talk about the first two things to consider when looking at the legitimacy of the recovery process that a couple is going through. I'm going to say a few words about them and then I'll invite those of you who are listening to join in. If any of you would like to ask a question or make a comment, let's have a dialogue about these things.

What I want to share with you tonight comes out of my experience as a counselor and from my personal experiences as well. I hope you'll be encouraged and learn things that will be helpful to you in your circumstance. But I want to be clear, too, that what I say is not meant to be specific council for your relationship or your marriage. I will talk about principles you should be able to take and apply, but I know every circumstance is different, so my encouragement is for you to seek out counseling and help for your specific needs.

When I'm considering what makes up real affair recovery, the first two things that come to mind have to do with the responsibility of the unfaithful partner. Real affair recovery isn't just about the unfaithful partner; there are things that the betrayed spouse or partner has to be able and willing to do as well. But the first steps of responsibility, and the biggest steps at the beginning, have to come from the one who caused the offense—the person who had the affair.

The first thing that must be seen if recovery is legitimate is this: the unfaithful partner has to demonstrate a certain return to trustworthy behavior. For some that happens quickly, for others it takes a bit longer, but it has to happen.

I have often been witness to unfaithful spouses who simply say, “Okay, well, sorry about that; let's move on,” and then continue with an ongoing secrecy about their life, an unwillingness to be open or to disclose the truth. As time goes on, new secrets are discovered and contact with the affair partner is sometimes renewed.

Trust is rebuilt when openness and honesty are consistently being offered. It requires an intentional effort made by the unfaithful spouse to demonstrate, “You can trust me.” The longer it takes them to get to that point, the harder recovery will be. The longer it takes to return to trustworthy behavior, the less likely the marriage will get to a place of renewed intimacy and trust between the two partners.

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The unfaithful partner has to want to earn this. It cannot be the responsibility of the betrayed spouse to get to truth or to make sure that trustworthy behavior is happening. If real change has occurred, it will be demonstrated by the unfaithful partner's willingness to accept the responsibility for returning to the truth.

Affairs are confusing. In our online community forum I frequently read comments by betrayed spouses trying to wrap their heads around questions like: "Who is this person? I thought I knew my spouse. I thought I knew my partner, but the way they're acting now doesn't even make sense to me. How did this happen?"

Here's one thing you should understand: affairs do not make logical sense. An affair is more a matter of the heart than the head. People who behaved consistently one way can change drastically when they're stepping into affair behavior. And when an affair ends, the recovery isn't just a logical process, either. It's not just about making a choice and then trying to make it happen. Yes, there has to be intention and there has to be effort, but it must also be a matter of the heart. The person who has had an affair usually possess a longing for honesty and trustworthiness. When recovery comes from the heart, openness and honesty will be demonstrated in the marriage.

Holding on to passwords or refusing to be open and accountable are not behaviors of someone who is trying to reestablish trust. Anyone who remains defensive, doesn't want to give an account of where and says, "I don't want to wear a collar around my neck; I don't want to be controlled" is showing evidence that they are not serious about winning trust back again.

As a betrayed spouse, you should make it clear that you need a commitment to the work of recovery. You need to ask for it, but it cannot be your job to make it happen. You have to watch and determine whether you are with someone who is willing to return to honesty and openness and earn your trust back again.

As a counselor, it's very difficult for me to work with a couple when there is no claim of, "Yes, I am being honest and I'm going to be open; I want to regain trust." That claim needs to be made and then backed up by real efforts and behavior.

So that's the first evidence of recovery: a certain return to trustworthy behavior.

The second evidence of real affair recovery is also the responsibility of the unfaithful partner: creating a safe place in the marriage. Too many times I observe the betrayed spouse being the one working hardest at trying to make the marriage safe again. They try to get the unfaithful partner to do the right things, say the

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right things, and give assurances that everything's fine. Betrayed partners can wear themselves out trying to do all that.

Evidence of genuine recovery, growth, and change is seen when the unfaithful partner assumes responsibility as the protector and the defender of the marriage. They have to accept that role or else there will be uncertainty and insecurity moving forward.

Unfaithful partners often just want things to go back to the way they were before the affair. They want the betrayed partner to say, "Okay, I'll just forgive and forget so can go back to the way things were." That's an impossibility. You can't drop a bomb of betrayal into a marriage and expect the injured spouse to just move on and forget it. The affair changes things. It cracks the very foundation of love in a relationship; it shatters trust. It can only be rebuilt again when the one that broke it steps back in and says, "I need to fix this; I need to assure you that you can come to a place of feeling safe with me."

Many of you know probably know my story. Twenty years ago I had an affair. I know what it's like to be on the unfaithful side of this issue. I know what it's like to play games and be dishonest. I know what it's like to put up the pretenses of wanting to save my marriage while remaining deceitful.

Because of my background, I have a desire to help broken couples experience genuine healing. I'm often sitting across from someone who's had an affair and I want to believe them, just like their spouses want to believe them. They often seem so intentional, so sincere when they say, "I'm committed to this. I want to do this!" But then their behavior demonstrates they're not doing it. They keep making excuses for compromising choices. They still stay in contact with the affair partner and justify their reasons for doing so.

Here's one thing you can count on: if an unfaithful person is sincere about rebuilding trust, they will be the one setting the standards, creating the boundaries, stepping away from the affair partner, and giving their spouse certainty. The consistent message you hear from them is, "You can trust me in this. Here's how I want to show you. What else can I do?"

I know that puts a lot of responsibility on the unfaithful partner, but both of those things (commitment to truth and taking responsibility for creating a safe place in the marriage) have to be true. If you're a betrayed spouse and you're listening this and thinking, "Well, I want my marriage to work and my partner who had an affair says they want the marriage to work; they say they're done with the affair and want to move on, but I don't see a return to commitment to openness and honesty; there are still things that they keep private

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and secretive and they're not taking responsibility for creating a safe place in the relationship," then I want to say something to you.

Openness and honesty don't necessarily come quickly after an affair is discovered. The beginning of recovery can be a little messy. Sometimes it takes a while to get to truthfulness and safety, but you should expect to see a progression towards those things. When I'm with a couple who after weeks and months are still experiencing the same uncertain or compromising behavior, hearing the same excuses being made by someone who just can't seem to make sincere efforts to earn back trust or to separate from an affair partner, as much as I might like that person and want them to be part of a marriage that survives, I say to the betrayed spouse, "You've got to make choices based on their behavior, not on what they're promising to do."

If that is your experience, I can't tell you what your choice should be. For some, it is the choice of separation--leaving the relationship temporarily or permanently. For others, it is a choice of sacrifice--staying in the marriage even though they see no hope for change--because they believe the cost of separation or divorce is too great. They stay, but they give up hope for having a marriage that is intimate and trustworthy. Those are hard choices. And regardless of which direction you choose, you need to make sure you are doing what is necessary for you to be healthy regardless of your circumstances.

Let's go to questions or comments from the listeners.

CALLER ONE: I just found out about the affair three months ago. We're in counselling but he's still talking to that specific person. He's going to counselling individually, also. I'm at a point I don't know if it's even worth it for me to continue going to counselling if he's still in touch with this person. I don't know how to act around him. Should I be affectionate or should I just wait until I figure out what he's going to do? I don't know, I'm at a loss.

How long ago did you find out about the affair?

Three months ago.

And when you say he's in contact with the affair partner, do you know how much he's in contact? Do you know if the affair is still going on? Or are you not certain?

At this point I'm not exactly certain because it's been online, all of it. She's not in the city so I've stopped checking his things so I don't know exactly what's going on. I know he's still in touch with her because I know

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his behaviors when he is in touch with her and when he tries to stop contact it was just a complete change of behavior; it was like a desperation in him. Then when he went back and got in touch with her again that calmed down.

Does he admit it or does he deny that he's in touch with her?

When I ask him he neither admits nor denies.

That's not an uncommon situation to be in months after the discovery of an affair, especially if the affair had an emotional connection and if it was discovered, not confessed. Many times the breaking of that emotional bond is a difficult thing to process. It's hard for people to let go. Here's the thing: when there has been a sincere disconnection from the affair partner, what you should get from your unfaithful partner is not defensiveness, not vagueness, not the kind of answers to questions that keep you unsure what they mean. If someone has made that step of away from an affair and now is in a single-minded pursuit of a marriage, they will be motivated to assure you that there is no contact. They will go to whatever measure they can to let you know that. If that's not happening, it is probably the clearest indication that a single-minded choice has not been made yet. There is uncertainty... You cannot build towards a trusting relationship with a spouse who's had an affair and has not come to the point of knowing they want to be with you in the marriage again.

It's been three months since you found out about the affair. It's probably reasonable to assume it's going to take some time for that disconnection to happen. That's really normal. It's not going to be a sudden shift. But you need to have certainty that you're with a partner who wants to work through all that with an end result of being with you.

Someone who's been betrayed has the right to walk away from that relationship and separate from that person right from the start, if that's what they choose to do. But for those who decide they want to hope for their marriage and work toward the possibility of restoration, there's a lot that goes into determining how long you wait. But if it has been three months and there is still a lack of clarity, I think you need to disconnect; you need to stop working on it. Leave them to make the choice for your marriage or not, but you need to stop trying to make that happen.

CALLER TWO: It'll be about ninety days since I found out. We've been married thirty years. He had an affair at ten years and then now again at thirty years, both were emotional connection. It's been ninety days and it's very different this time compared to last time. Everything you had just talked about I saw the first time, but I'm not seeing it this time. Now he tells me that he doesn't miss me, he's not in love with me, or he doesn't love me

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the way I deserve to be loved... Now we're separated and I'm considering going ahead and moving forward because I don't feel that he's doing what he needs to do... He says the affair is over but I just don't have anything else to go on. So I'm kind of thinking I just need to move on, would you agree?

I think you really need to focus on whatever it means for you to be healthy. As far as moving on, you need to say, "Listen, if you're not willing to be invested in us, if you're not convinced that's what you want, I'm not going to sit around and play this game anymore. I need more certainty than that." And so moving on might be, "Yes, I'm going to take whatever steps are necessary to be done with this relationship." For others I think moving on simply means, "I'm no longer going to invest in trying to make our marriage work. I'm going to invest in what I need to move forward to be healthy; with or without you, I'm going to be okay; I will still consider the possibility of working on us again, but only if and when you come to the point where you really are single-minded in your decision for us and demonstrate that you're willing to do the work that's necessary." But stop trying to make that happen, stop trying to convince him that's what he should do. Let him go and move on. So, yes, I think after three months with a past history of infidelity, it's probably time for you to move on in that way.

CALLER THREE: It's been three years since my husband's affair. I thought there was no emotional attachment and it went on for, I don't know, four/five months. How on earth can I believe that? Because it doesn't make any sense to me. How you cannot have an emotional attachment to somebody that you call every day and text every day and have sex with every time she's in town? I don't believe him when he said there was no emotional connection and I don't know how to get past that.

Is this the only affair that you know about?

Yeah, it's the only affair that I know about but I wonder... I know that he watches a lot of porn that I'm not supposed to know about. How do I know that this was not emotional?

There are instances in which even heavy involvement with someone that involves maybe texts and conversation can happen without genuine emotional attachment. This is especially common with the kind of behavior that some would label sexual addiction. When someone is tuned into that kind of sexual encounter and is just playing the game, they'll do whatever's necessary to keep the other person involved in the relationship, but really all they're looking for is the sexual connection. So I know that's possible.

Yeah, that's what he has said and he said the sex wasn't that good. which I can't believe either truthfully given the hormones and whatnot. And she also said that. I just feel like that they both lied to me and I just don't know why. I mean I know why but I can't prove it.

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What has he said since then he wants in regards to your marriage?

Oh, he wants to move forward. He had said that he missed me and he said he did it because he wanted to hurt me and he knew it would hurt me badly. That was the motivation for the affair. Which again I don't believe either. He was really angry.

Is he willing to go to counseling himself? Does he get any help for this?

We've been in marriage counseling. It was twice a week at first and now it's every three weeks with a different counselor for three years. He has never gone for individual counselling.

Do you have any indication that the behavior has continued since then in the past three years?

Not with her. No.

It's difficult when you have this kind of ambiguous explanation for what an affair relationship was. There are two things to look for. First of all, I know it's been three years, but I'd be really curious about the three to six months after the affair. How invested he was in trying to explain what happened, in being honest, and making a commitment to change. If it was just kind of an acknowledgment ("Yeah, I did something bad.") without explanation or conversation about it, without a willingness to be honest and help you understand why it happened and what change look like for him, then I think it's reasonable to expect you're going to have difficulty knowing what to trust moving forward.

If he *was* invested in doing all those things, my encouragement would be, if you're willing to take the risk, to move forward as if he has been telling you the truth. Over time, his behavior and his investment in the marriage will show the sincerity of his change. It starts working against you to constantly go back and wonder: what did it really mean? It is possible that what he's telling you is the truth. I haven't talked to him, I don't know your specific circumstances, but I have observed affairs that were sexual with a lot of communication, but their involvement wasn't due to emotional connection as much as it was a fuel for the sexual connection.

CALLER FOUR: Hi. My husband is a teacher and has been having an affair with a woman that he teaches with who is twenty-three years younger. We've been married twenty eight years and I see all the signs of mid-life crisis. I mean, all of them.

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I discovered the affair; he did not admit it and he's now living with her and it's at the two year mark. I'm just wondering is there any point in me hanging on. He's already filed for divorce. Is there any point in me thinking that he's going to come out of this tunnel? Is two years an average?

Well, I can talk to you statistically. If he has gone that far, he's that committed, and the relationship has gone that long, the chances of recovery and the restoration of your marriage is pretty minimal. Is there ever any chance it can happen? Of course. But when I'm sitting with the woman in a situation like yours, what I usually say is, "Listen, I deal with this a lot. If you were my sister or my friend, I would be telling you to move on. Two years is plenty of time for him to figure out what he wants. If he's not showing the progress of moving towards you and making those consistent choices for the other person then, even though I know it's a painful choice for you, it's going to be a healthier choice for you to begin separating from him."

You don't think that the mid-life crisis is why this is going on? I mean, this is like her third affair. She's married with two little kids.

I know the midlife crisis gets blamed on a lot of things. It is true that men in a certain age range start asking questions about the value of their life and all sorts of things that are peculiar to that time of life... so, yes, it could be related to things he's struggling with, but that doesn't necessarily mean they will be resolved when the crisis ends. I just don't think you have any certainty of this.

I see this happen all the time when men enter a phase like this; it can start a cycle. They can stay involved in one relationship for years, or move from that relationship and, continuing in that behavior, move on to the next one. The only thing you can base your decision on is what you observe in him. If he recognizes that he not content, if he understands the choices he's making are against his values or character, if he's conflicted and seeking the kind of help that allows him to move forward in a healthy way, those are all evidence of a good outcome for him and your marriage. If you're not seeing those things, I think you need to move on.

Again, just like my advice to the other caller, I can't tell you what "move on" means for you... whether or not you should get a divorce and give up all hope. You're within your rights to certainly do that, but if you look at the circumstances and decide you want to offer the kind of grace that simply gives more time, if you start investing in being healthy and allow him to do his thing, then you sacrifice your expectations for a time to see if he comes out of this. But if you're trying to convince him to come back to the marriage, if you're trying to do the work to make that happen I would tell you to stop doing that completely.

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CALLER FIVE: I'm forty-seven, my wife is forty-two. We've been together for twenty three years. She had a heavy emotional and sexual affair that I found about in November, so it's been four months now. Just trying to get back on my feet day to day.

He's married with young children; we are married with teenage children. She's wrought with guilt and won't talk to me at all about it. She's staying in her mother's vacant house now. She's in at four in the evenings, cooks dinner for our kids, comes in and out. She still won't look me in the eye. We've gone on a casual outing together here and there in the last month and it's gotten much more comfortable.

There's no physical contact between us. I gave her the ring back and said it's up to you. She makes no conscious effort to even acknowledge how she feels... she won't look at me, she won't talk. She freaks out when I try to bring anything up and let her go in the past month... What is your take on that, is it that I just need to let her have more time?

Is she in counseling?

She was for five or six sessions when this initially happened then stopped going. She said she doesn't really believe that it can help much. She knows that she has to deal with it and she wants to be left by yourself... I try not to ignore her. I tell her I love her. I want to be with her and work it out but she can't seem to come to grips with anything.

It sounds like you're doing the right thing and letting her know that the door is open for reconciliation. You care about her and it sounds like you're saying, "I'm willing to work this out and forgive you for those things." When an affair has ended but the unfaithful spouse does not come back to re-commitment to the marriage, I'm always curious about that. It may be that the connection in the marriage was broken before the affair even happened and now there's a sense of hopelessness. They don't even think it can be repaired.

It may be that some emotional longing remains. Even though the affair has ended, they still have these ties to the affair partner and they're dealing with the grief of that being over. Or it could be a mix of shame and guilt that keeps them distant and unable to move forward.

It sounds like you've done the right things in offering her something different. If I were you, I would invite her into a conversation to say, "Help me understand what you're going through. This is not a pressure for you to do anything in particular, I just would like to know. I care about us and care about you and I need to make decisions about moving forward. Can you help me understand what it is going on inside of you?"

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She gets defensive.

Let's go back to the two things I mentioned, two things to look for from the unfaithful partner if you are going to have healthy recovery in a marriage or relationship. One is a certain return to trustworthy behavior with openness and honesty and the second is the unfaithful partner's assumption of responsibility for creating a safe place in a marriage. When you are a betrayed partner or spouse who is not getting those things from your partner, it's confusing. The work of counseling is to help both partners understand what's going on. Whatever the reason she stays disconnected and distant from you (whether it's due to shame, or ongoing ties with the affair partner, or whether she's already decided she doesn't want to do the work in coming back to your marriage), you may never get the real clarity regarding why. The one thing you have responsibility for is the choice you make in the circumstances.

You have to deal with the pain of a partner that has stepped away from you and is leaving you, and you can't make them come back. It sounds like you've done the right thing by saying to her, "Listen, despite what's been done I'm willing to work past this." You stand in that space of your relationship and invite her into it, but you can't go out and drag her in. She has to be willing to step into it on her own. If she's not and it's been long enough, you may realize the healthy thing to do is shut the door. Maybe don't lock it, yet. If she comes knocking at some point maybe you'll be willing to open up again. But stop sitting at the door waiting and wishing and hoping they come back. Focus on getting healthy yourself and let them to figure out what they are going to do.

How long a person takes to come to that choice? It's different for everyone. When an affair has been discovered (not disclosed) and there has been an emotional tie, it's probably going to take two or three months to even understand which direction everything is going, because there's so much craziness in the process. But once you get past that point, if there's not a clear direction (even though it may not all be cleaned up, may not be perfect) from the unfaithful partner toward being single minded, being open and honest, and taking responsibility as the protector and defender of your relationship, your marriage, then stop investing. Stop trying to do the work yourself. Put boundaries up and let them deal with their choice.

Part 2 (originally recorded March 20, 2016)

Let's move to the next area of authentic recovery and consider the responsibility of the betrayed spouse. I suppose justice might rise up and demand that all repair work after an affair fall on the shoulders of the one who had the affair, but justice will never bring about a return to intimacy and connection. For that kind of recovery to happen the betrayed spouse must be part of the work as well, and their first efforts will be in offering grace and forgiveness to the person who wounded them so deeply.

If you are of a betrayed spouse who is still in a marriage and still open to the relationship, you are already offering grace by not yet leaving the marriage. If you are open to a future together you are, in some measure, offering something that maybe isn't even deserved. That's what grace is: the giving of undeserved favor.

But recovery has to go beyond grace. You have to do more than just choose to stay. If your goal is a return to connection with your spouse, you will need to forgive them.

Opinions about forgiveness often err in two extremes. From one extreme comes the idea that forgiving should come easily and quickly. In order to do this, you may be encouraged to forget the affair or pretend it never happened. That's not forgiveness; that's denial. Forgiveness fully recognizes the pain of betrayal and can speak honestly about it for years to come. Forgiveness doesn't have to pretend the affair didn't exist.

This view of quick forgiveness often includes an expectation that the offended spouse instantly trust their partner again. That's not part of real forgiveness, either. Forgiveness and trust are two different matters. You can forgive someone, yet never trust them again. However, if you hope to trust your partner in a restored marriage, you need to first figure out what it means to forgive them.

That is the view from one extreme where forgiveness is too quickly embraced or encompasses more than it should.

On the other extreme are those who insist there should be no expectation of ever forgiving. I understand betrayal is a deep pain, the most significant pain that many will ever experience. Because the pain is great, there must also be great forgiveness if a marriage is going to be healed. The one who was betrayed must be willing to let the affair become a thing of the past instead of something constantly brought up in present conversations or used against the unfaithful partner. Forgiveness allows the affair to be part of their past story while they begin to focus on the current and future troubles or blessings; it allows them to work through the struggle of their marriage without reaching into the past to pull the affair back into the present

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again.

It takes a while to get to that place, but when it is experienced the unfaithful spouse will know what it is like to be pardoned, let off the hook, given a fresh start. Justice steps away and stops demanding fairness because that will never happen; the betrayal can never be undone.

A few years ago, a couple came to my office. I was the third counselor they had seen, looking help in getting over an affair the husband had ten years earlier. By our third session, we were still getting nowhere and I was pretty sure I would be the next in the line of counselors who had failed to help them. I turned to the wife and I asked her pointedly, “What would your husband need to do in order for you to forgive him?” By all indications, he had been committed to honesty, truthfulness and protecting the marriage. He had not stepped back into that or any other affair. It looked like he was making the effort to bring healing to his wife and his marriage, but she was constantly angry and accusing. When I asked what it would take for her to forgive him, she replied without thought, “Oh, I’ll never forgive him.”

That was my last session with them. I told them, “I’m sorry for how much this has hurt both of you, but I don’t think you should waste time and resources with any more counselors unless you are willing to move towards forgiveness. It’s not likely you will experience anything other than what you’ve been experiencing these past ten years.”

I looked at the husband and I said, “If your wife cannot forgive, you need to decide whether you are willing to be in a relationship with someone who will always hold this against you. Maybe you are. Maybe there are reasons enough for you to sacrifice the hope for forgiveness in order to stay, but you have to understand that your fight for a different marriage is not going to accomplish anything unless there is forgiveness.”

I was able to hear a recent example of this kind of forgiveness in action. A couple I worked with gave me permission to use their real names. They’ve decided to be very public about their story.

Tim and Lori came to me about eighteen months ago. Lori had an affair. It was not the first time she had been unfaithful in her marriage. This time, though, things seemed to move in a much different direction. Lori was dealing with issues in ways they had never been dealt with before. She was understanding what it meant to heal the broken places in her and to create a place of safety for her husband.

Her husband, Tim, had experienced disappointment and betrayal several times. He was hurt, angry, barely holding on to any hope. He struggled for months: Why am I stuck having to do this work with a wife who has betrayed me more than once? It seemed unfair to him. He experienced depression and anger. He

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wanted something different; he wanted change.

Last September, something finally switched. All the input that had come into his life finally settled into place and he was able to experience a shift. He emailed me afterwards and this is part of what he wrote:

“It's difficult to explain the transformation. I made a conscious decision to be a friend. That day I released Lori of all obligations and decided to accept her for who she was and who she is including all the choices, both good and bad, that she had made or would make in future. I read somewhere that a friend loves at all times; that's what I decided to do. Within the choice to release Lori I found something amazing. I found that I had released myself, too. I released the anger, the jealousy, the regret, the victim mentality and all the junk that had burdened me for so long. We are loving each other again and it's not even difficult. It's natural, the way it was in the very beginning when we first fell in love.”

The other day I got on the phone with Tim to talk a little bit more about his experience. I'd like you to listen to that call.

[Recording of a phone conversation]

TIM TEDDER (Host): I know that in the process of recovery, you had to deal with a period of time where you were hurt. You were angry. If I can be frank, it felt like justice was the thing that was right in front of you in regards to your wife and marriage. I guess you had a right to feel that way, but when you held on to that, the marriage really wasn't going anywhere. You seem to be in a constant state of conflict, not necessarily enjoying much of the process, either. Would you agree with that?

TIM SMITH (Guest): I would agree. It wasn't just a sense of not knowing which way to go it was a strong sense of feeling trapped.

TT: What do you mean by that?

TS: Trapped by my own obligations. I had a voice in my mind telling me the marriage was over, but I felt so strongly that I needed to be there for the boys and given the fact that I wasn't the one that had cheated, I didn't feel like I really was the one that should be leaving. So I really felt trapped during that time period.

TT: So explain what happened. It didn't happen quickly, did it? It took a while to get to this place.

TS: It was a process. But on September 23 it seemed like the result of all of the processes I had been

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experiencing culminated on the same day. There were friends that had come into my life that had shown me what real friendship should be. They were showing that by their example. But there were other friends that began calling and telling me their marriages were in trouble. I didn't really have anything that I felt I could offer them except friendship. I really began to contemplate that and realized that I'd never really offered that kind of friendship to Lori. Not in a non-judgmental accepting way. That was one of the processes.

Another one was simply letting go of the obligation I felt that Lori had. I realized that she couldn't repay it. She couldn't undo what she'd done. Even if she became perfect, the trust was still gone. Once I understood that, I realized I could stop trying to control it. I could stop trying to manipulate it. I could stop trying to bring back what should have been because it never will be. Once I realized that it never would be, I just put that to rest.

TT: And then how did that change your perspective of your wife and your marriage?

TS: I just wanted to be done with the conflict. If I could let it go the way I was beginning to let it go, she could be free of what I was trying to control: my need for payback. I really began to contemplate the whole idea of freedom and what that means. When I went home that day, we had a long conversation but the bottom line of what I said is, "You're free. You can do whatever you want to do." I haven't called it forgiveness, but that's probably what it is.

TT: I think was grace, forgiveness—all wrapped up together. You were letting go of justice there that's for sure.

TS: I was. I can't even say that I was after justice because there was no way she could repay and I wasn't out to pay her back. That's just not in my heart.

TT: Yeah, I never perceive that in you. When I say injustice I think of it more as an attitude of unfairness: "This isn't fair! I didn't do this stuff, so why am I having to pay consequences for it and being forced into a corner?"

I'm sure your message to Lori was something extraordinary and good for her, but I'm really curious about what difference it made to you. How did you start experiencing life and marriage differently once you came to that place?

TS: Well, I realized that if what could have been or what should have been never would be, then I could

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simply over, and I could start simply by talking about friendship. On that day I remember saying, “I don’t even want to concentrate on a marriage. Let’s just be friends.”

There are so many things about Lori that I still like. I’ve told her that all of the things I absolutely love about her are the things that she probably unintentionally used to betray me: her talents, her beauty, her outgoing personality, her laugh. I love all of of them and I realized I didn’t want to change those things. I still love those things, so let’s just be friends. We happen to be married, but let’s not restore the old marriage. We can’t. It’s gone. It’s about creating something new.

[End of recorded phone conversation]

The healing of Tim and Lori’s marriage provides a clear example of the evidences to look for in real affair recovery. For Lori, there was a willingness to be completely honest and to take responsibility for assuring Tim that she was committed to making their marriage a safe place by working on those changes she needed to make for herself and for their relationship. Tim had to finally get to the place where he was willing to forgive her and re-establish the kind of connection that would allow him to begin learning to trust again. Because they were both willing to do their part, they are experiencing a marriage much different than it has ever been before.

TIM: I’d be happy to entertain any questions or comments about this. Go ahead, what do you have to say?

CALLER 1: I’m fifteen months out from discovery and we’re doing a lot of work towards repairing our marriage. It took quite a while for my husband to start participating at the level I needed him to, but he is now. I feel like I’m living in forgiveness but I certainly can’t bring myself to officially grant it or say it.

TIM: What keeps you from doing that?

CALLER 1: I don’t want him to stop working at it. My head and my heart are in a different place. My head understands that granting forgiveness doesn’t mean condoning the behavior or erasing it but my heart kind of goes there.

TIM: I understand that. I think a lot of people who genuinely forgive still feel the hurt deeply. I don’t think forgiveness somehow forgets that pain. I think forgiveness is the choice to just say, “Despite even feeling like this, I’m still on unsteady ground. I’m going to choose to deal with you in our relationship in terms of our present condition and where we’re moving in the future. That future is going to include triggers of the affair and things that touch the pain of the affair. Forgiveness doesn’t mean that you can never be honest about

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that again, but when those pains are triggered you will talk about them in terms of what it's doing to you in the present, not reaching back and condemning the other person and not talking about the details of the past affair. Instead, you deal with the pain as it's being felt and experienced in the present even though it's rooted in that past offense. I really do think forgiveness is a choice that the heart begins to follow.

Let me comment on the other thing you were asking: If I forgive him will he stop doing the work? Maybe my withholding forgiveness is that extra incentive he needs to keep working to earn it.

I do think the person who betrays needs to put a lot of effort in earning trust back again, but forgiveness is something you grant or you don't grant whether they deserve it or not. I would really hold those two things separate. If your husband is working on recovery out of the right motivation (not just doing it because you boxed him in a corner or because he's being forced to do it or feels like he's stuck and there's no other out) and really wanting to do the right kind of repair, then forgiveness strengthens that resolve, it doesn't diminish it.

Those of us who have betrayed carry shame and guilt. From the perspective of those who have been hurt, that shame is something we deserved. But we long for grace and forgiveness, and when they are received it is empowering. I suspect that if your husband experienced forgiveness from you and if he's doing things for the right reasons, your forgiveness will encourage him to do it more and to do it longer. I don't think it will have the opposite effect.

CALLER 1: That makes sense to me. I do feel that I'm living in forgiveness because my actions are those of a person who has forgiven, but I have not bestowed upon him those words.

TIM: When you are ready to forgive, I encourage you to move to a statement of forgiveness as soon as it makes sense to do so. When you get to the point where you are choosing to forgive but are withholding the words, I don't think that there is good reason for that. Proclaiming forgiveness is healing for you and for the relationship. I would encourage you to think about that intently.

By the way for those of you who have not yet said in any way "I forgive you," I would encourage you to make it a special event. Maybe you've kept a journal of all of that's happened or you write a list of all the ways you've been wounded. That's probably a pretty lengthy list, but do something with it to demonstrate your forgiveness. Some people have tied offences to a balloon and let it drift off. Others have burned their journals or burned a letter that describes all the injuries. A visual representation can be a powerful display of your forgiveness.

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You say I have made the choice to forgive; it sounds like you have. I would encourage you to add your words to it.

CALLER 1: I have in my heart forgiven the affair. The part that I'm not quite ready to forgive is the deception that took place post affair. The months that it took to get the whole truth. Is it okay to forgive one part and then come to the next part another time, because that's the part I'm not ready to let go of yet?

TIM: I think so. If you honestly see those things as separate and your healing from them separately, then absolutely. I think you can say, "Listen, I'm letting the affair be in our past. I don't need to talk to you anymore about that I'm not going to use it against you. But the part I'm still struggling with is how long it took you to get to the truth. I want to get to forgiving that, too, and I'm working on it. I'm still struggling with that part of it."

CALLER 2: I've been living with a combat veteran four years and I found out six months ago when I met his girlfriend that he had been living a double life. The whole time he wanted so much to be in a relationship but his thoughts of suicide and everything was so strong. When I was gone he couldn't get out of his head by himself and so he started finding people online to spend time with to get some approval. I don't think he needed the sex, I think he needed approval and that's what he talks about, somebody to say he was okay.

This went on and in my life with me raising my son together and having a dog and building a home and you know we have this whole thing and everyone thought he was this amazing guy and then I found out that the whole time he had this other life and almost killed himself; he was really at the end of his rope. We finally found some good help for him and he's done everything we talked about last week in terms of the hundred percent change, being honest, being very clear in his efforts.

In terms of rebuilding a safety, he doesn't have any idea how to do that. I think some of that's because of the limits of his disability. But I worry that he just can't ever get to a place where he can put my needs first... I feel like I've forgiven him, but what I'm trying to work on is going forward with trust. I don't need to talk about the affairs anymore; I'm trying to find out if we can build the trust moving forward. And when I tell him I need him to work on building the safety he says, "I don't know what you want me to do; I don't know what's going to make it look different."

TIM: I can tell from your voice, that this is a difficult issue. Underlying issues like PTSD complicate affair recovery. Recovery can still happen. but it's another thing that gets added into the mix, and it has to be addressed. Let's consider a couple things.

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If you're in a relationship with someone who's had an affair and they are fragile (because of some past injury, because of a significant emotional problem or distress, because of trauma) they may not even be currently capable of doing what is required for full recovery. You as a partner or spouse have to recognize if that's true and make one of two choices: either sacrifice or separation.

To stay in a relationship when you know the person you're with, at least right now, may not have the capacity to do everything that's required of them because of other circumstances, can be a choice of love but it is also a choice of tremendous sacrifice. It is a sacrifice because you want and need things in the relationship that you may not be able to get from them, at least for a while. There is no quick solution other than to say, "I'm going to release my expectation that they satisfy this need for a while. Maybe things will eventually change, but right now it doesn't do me any good to expect something that cannot give.

If your husband has the capacity to do those things but lacks the understanding of how to create a safe place, there are a number of resources that certainly can help. Get the book, *How to Help Your Spouse Heal from Your Affair*, by Linda McDonald. If a betrayer wants a guide for what to do, that book is about as clear cut as you can get. It's to the point. It's not a fun book to read but it's very accurate and very good.

The Recovery Room podcasts, along with many other recovery resources, are provided through AffairHealing.com. If you need personal help in your affair recovery, you may want to consider making use of the following services:

- **Phone Coaching** (AffairHealing.com/phone-coaching)
- **Couple's Recovery Retreats** (MarriageICU.com)
- **Counseling in Central Florida** (AffairHealing.com/affair-counseling-orlando)