

THE RECOVERY ROOM



Forgiving Infidelity

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Tim: One of the biggest needs in recovery is to gain an understanding of how forgiveness fits into the healing process.

Jenn: Absolutely. It comes up whether you are moving forward in your relationship or moving forward as an individual. To move forward in the healthiest way possible, forgiveness plays a huge part.

Tim: Yet there are a lot of people who struggle with understanding what forgiveness means and whether they should be expected to forgive such a great offense.

Jenn: Especially with the pain of infidelity. I think it is easy to say, "They do not deserve my forgiveness. They did something truly painful that's devastated me. Why do I owe them anything?"

Tim: We have written about it and talked about it before, but we wanted to record this podcast to look at the issue of forgiveness. What does it mean? How do we get it in our life? What gets in the way of it? Why is it even important?

Jenn and I are both counselors at Currents Counseling center. We are active in the forums and as coaches on AffairHealing.com. We spend a lot of our time dealing with the issue of affair recovery and all the different steps people go through, trying to get to healing on the other side of such a significant wound. You and I have talked a lot about this and I think that you agree that this is one of those things that comes up a lot.

Jenn: Absolutely.

Tim: People have many ideas about what forgiveness is or what is expected of them--what it means if they are going to forgive somebody. What is forgiveness?

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Jenn: I believe forgiveness is a choice you make to move forward without holding onto anger or resentment, regardless of what the other person has done or chooses to do in the future.

Tim: That that definition is probably discouraging and disheartening to a lot of people because they do not want to just make a choice.

Jenn: No. They just want a feeling.

Tim: Well, there's this pain here--this offense that was done against them. They want some hope that there will be some resolve to that, not that they'll just have to accept the cruel offence and stumble forward.

Jenn: Forgiveness is not forgetting what was done to you. It doesn't mean that because you choose to forgive that you then forget and it no longer affects you for the rest of your life.

Tim: Many people who come from a religious background have in mind a verse from the Bible about the forgiveness of God, "I remember your sins no more." So they have an idea that forgiveness means that the offense should never come to mind again.

Jenn: Right.

Tim: So if I say I forgive you and then the next morning I wake up and feel the hurt and it turns to anger, then obviously I haven't forgiven you.

Jenn: I do not think that's a reasonable expectation, unless they develop a surgery that removes specific memories. You are not going to forget what happened to you, nor do you forget the decisions that someone else made that hurt you.

Tim: I don't think the Bible teaches that God somehow had a lobotomy. It's not that he can never think about our offenses anymore. It is the *choice* we make about a past offense that makes the difference.

Jenn: Right. So it's not forgetting, excusing, or justifying. My forgiveness does not mean that what you did was okay.

Tim: Well, I think that's often the feeling people have: "If I forgive this person, somehow it's excusing what they've done."

Jenn: Forgiveness isn't saying what they did is okay. It's learning to let go of the emotional anger and bitterness that is a result of what they did.

Tim: Easier said than done.

Jenn: Sure

Tim: Hopefully, as we talk through this, we can help people to understand how to get through that process.

I don't think forgiveness is simply giving up either. It's not: "Okay this terrible thing has been done and there's nothing I can do about it now so I just have to resign myself and trudge forward. That must be what forgiveness looks like."

Jenn: That's not genuine. I don't think you will get the benefits forgiveness has to offer if it is not genuine forgiveness.

Tim: The hope we can genuinely offer people is that no matter how deep the pain is, no matter how great the offense was, there is a way for you to start moving toward forgiveness today.

Jenn: Absolutely.

Tim: But before we get to the how, let's talk about why. Why forgive?

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Jenn: One reason people often don't consider is the actual physical health benefits to forgiveness. When you are holding on to anger, bitterness, and negativity, your body feels that. It can lead to anxiety, depression, increased blood pressure...

Tim: When we think of the seat of emotion, we picture the heart. In ancient days the seat of emotion was viewed as being in the stomach. You know down in gut because so many of our emotions affect how the body experiences digestion. You're right; it turns into physical problems when we hold onto negative emotions. So forgiveness is good for emotional health *and* for physical health.

Jenn: I think it is necessary for healing. That could be healing for you in your relationship or healing for you as an individual, even if your relationship does not move forward in a positive way.

Tim: There definitely tends to be a different outcome we observe in people that are able to work through forgiveness than those who are unable to do it.

Jenn: Sure

Tim: Maybe a general way to describe it would be that those who work through forgiveness tend to be healthier. Those who tend not to work through it tend not to be healthy or have as healthy relationships. This is about getting to a healthy place and we believe that forgiveness is one of the ingredients necessary to get to there.

If we could all sit down in a group and talk about how we want to experience life and relationships, most would agree that the kind of life they want to experience, the kind of relationship they want to have, the kind of world they want to live in are characterized by grace and forgiveness rather than ruled by justice. Justice has its place, but most people would agree that, having experienced grace themselves, forgiveness is much preferred over an expectation of payback: "I am never going to let you forget that."

It's easy to create a dividing line between offenses. Everything under that line that's done to me, I can get over, I can forgive. But for any offense above that line, forgiveness stops working.

I want to live in a world where there isn't a line. There needs to be rule and justice (and I'll usually leave justice in the hands of the authorities, the police, and the courts). But it has been helpful for me to know that I did not cross a line at some point in my life, a line that removed all hope for forgiveness or grace.

That has been important for me personally. Even those who have not crossed that imaginary line in their head are still in need of grace. Jenn, you've needed grace and forgiveness.

Jenn: Absolutely. We all do. We as humans often compare: what I've done isn't so bad, but what he/she did, well, that's just too much.

Tim: But let's be honest, betrayal is one of the deepest hurts we can experience. If we are ever going to wrestle with forgiving someone, it will be with the one who betrayed us. The person who said, "I am giving you my heart and faithfulness" and then took them away... forgiveness is a challenge.

Jenn: Absolutely. No one said it was going to be easy.

Tim: So forgiveness is still important, but there's a measure for forgiveness. When there's been a great offense, great forgiveness is required. When there's been a little offense (when someone accidentally bumps into me and says *I'm sorry*) only a little bit of forgiveness or grace is needed. But in a huge offense like betrayal, we have to wrestle with what big forgiveness looks like. How do we get it?

Jenn: First. I think it is important to understand that *it is a process*; it is a journey. It is not some overnight change where you wake up and everything is perfect, you've forgive them, it's never going to affect you again, and life is great.

Tim: How long of a process?

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Jenn: That depends. Everyone's journey is different. A lot can depend on how remorseful your partner is. Proper remorse can lead to a quicker journey.

Tim: It can also be affected by how often you've been hurt in the past. If you have a history of either abandonment or betrayal in your past, the affair is going to touch a nerve. Forgiveness might be more of a challenge.

Jenn: I think it's important not to compare where you are in your journey with someone else's because you do not have the same background. You're not on the same path, even though the ultimate hope is that you are able to reach forgiveness.

Tim: Among all the different individuals or couples that we see, I have watched forgiveness play out in different ways. Some that have been able to move genuinely toward forgiveness relatively quickly. Now, I am always suspect of a couple that comes in and, in their first session after an affair was recently found out, the betrayed spouse declares, "Well, I've already forgiven this. Let's move on."

I just don't think forgiveness comes that quickly. Almost every time someone makes that quick declaration, I know that within the next few days or weeks, they are going to be back-stepping. Suddenly, they are going to wonder why they are so angry.

Jenn: Forgiveness is a choice, but making that choice too soon or for the wrong reasons is not genuine. You are not going to get the same benefits as you will from genuine forgiveness. So allow yourself time. Be patient. It's not likely to come quickly after the pain of infidelity.

Tim: You and I came up with four steps in the process. There might be more or less but these seem to be important steps toward forgiveness. **The first step is Clarity.** What does that mean?

Jenn: Gaining insight into what the injury was, what the betrayal was. What does this look like for me? What are the feelings that are being triggered? Is this something that I am going to have to deal with forever?

Tim: Gaining the true perspective of the offense: What was done against me? How is it affecting me?

Jenn: If you don't understand what you are dealing with, then how do you forgive it? You may not have all the details and maybe you have a only general idea of what happened, but that doesn't mean you can't forgive.

Tim: If the betrayal is like a picture, before you can move past it, you've got to see it clearly enough to forgive it. Minimally, a person needs to know the dimensions of the frame: When did this start and when did it end? How far did it go? Those things are important. But finding out about every little detail can work against forgiveness. Every new detail creates a new pain that will be difficult to work through. All these little bits of clarity about the affair become hooks that make it harder to move past the pain.

Jenn: Right.

Tim: What clarity does a person need in order to forgive? That's probably different for every person. I often tell betrayed spouses: *you need to know enough and only enough for you to be able to forgive in order to move on.*

Jenn: Once you gained clarity of the situation, you have the "frame," like we talked about: knowing what happened and what needs to be forgiven. Then we start looking at *what does forgiveness mean for me?* What do I need to do to start moving toward it?

Tim: This is **the step of Decision** where someone decides, am I going to do this or not? Some people choose not to.

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I've told the story of the couple that came in ten years after the affair. I was the fourth counselor they came to and they had not been able to move past the affair. After a couple sessions, I asked the wife, "What would it take for you to forgive him?" She answered quickly, "Oh I'll never forgive him."

She made the choice: I'm not going to forgive him. That was my last session with them as I explained, "I'm probably not going to be able to help you get past this. This will always be in your way."

Jenn: Once you've made that decision to move toward forgiveness, **the next step is Effort**. What work will you do to move in that direction?

Tim: You mean it doesn't just come naturally and easily?

Jenn: It doesn't, unfortunately something to turn inside them that will allow them to easily forgive. But it takes work. That effort is the choice to stop turning around and looking at the past betrayal, at its pain, and at all the facts surrounding it.

Forgiveness is the effort to start turning away from that. It feels vulnerable. We naturally want to keep turning around and facing the pain until it goes away.

Jenn: "I don't want you to forget what you did to me."

Tim: It's always going to be there in the past. It takes effort to feel the need to keep looking at it, but turning away instead to face the other way. That's work. That's intentional.

Jenn: It reminds me of a quote: *Life is too short to start your day with broken pieces of yesterday. It will definitely destroy your wonderful today and ruin your great tomorrow.*

If you're constantly looking toward the past and looking at the broken pieces, that is all you're going to ever see. Unless you make that effort to move in a different direction, it's not going to change.

Tim: So forgiveness is not just a feeling, but a discipline as well.

Jenn: Yes.

Tim: We talked about the stages of gaining clarity, making a decision, and then making the effort to actually put it into practice. Forgiveness doesn't just happen naturally once you decide to do it.

So what comes after the effort?

Jenn: **The last stage is Deepening** where you find meaning and growth in your suffering. You consider what you have learned as an individual and in your relationship. It's understanding what you've been through so you can move forward in a way that brings meaning to your suffering.

Tim: I think that a lot of people would rather skip this step. "I don't want to find meaning in my suffering. I just want to be done with it."

Jenn: Right, but this part of your story now. There's no going back and erasing that chapter of your life. So if you are able to find meaning from that chapter and move forward in a healthy way (whether you're in the relationship or not), you're going to be better off.

Tim: That's an important part of understanding the healing process, this deepening stage of forgiveness. For some people, their idea of healing is figuring out how to erase the pain and memories. If that is your goal, good luck.

Jenn: You are setting yourself up for failure.

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Tim: This is the hard part of healing. It is recognizing that you can't undo this pain, you can't undo this betrayal. It's actually important for both spouses if they are going to cooperate in the healing process. Both have to be willing to step into the pain, learn something from it, and allow it to change them.

The unfaithful spouse has to be willing to engage in the difficult understanding of what they've done and the injury they caused to others. They also need to consider what this tells them about themselves if they are going to move toward healthy change.

The betrayed spouse has to be willing to move into this painful process, too, as they work to understand it and learn how to it go. It's difficult.

Jenn: It is.

Tim: You wish for a morning when you can wake up and everything is gone.

It will get better. An affair changes your life. It changes your relationship. The only way to get to healing and move toward forgiveness is by going through this deepening stage where you learn from the pain and discover the things that will change you and your relationship in positive ways.

Jenn: This is when you experience a decrease in negative emotions, when the anger and bitterness start to fall away. You are able to be more present in the moment. You are more able to be a healthy person.

Tim: When a couple has made a choice to forgive and put in some effort, but stall in this deepening stage because they don't want to engage in the pain or disappointment anymore... when they have an expectation to just feel better but then their pain constantly turns into anger and accusation... that is the evidence that forgiveness hasn't finished its work. Maybe it's started, but there needs to be continued to focus on what forgiveness means. If pain is still coming out as anger and accusation, then forgiveness is unfinished; it's still in process.

Jenn: It is a process. That's a good point to make.

Tim: It's not failure. You don't have to experience it and conclude, "Oh I can't forgive." It's just hard. This was a great offense and so it requires great forgiveness. You have to keep going back to that choice.

Jenn: It's important, like you just said, to realize that progress and growth toward forgiveness and healing, it's not a straight line up. It looks more like a roller coaster with ups and downs and flips and turns. Don't get discouraged if you are in a down part. Know that you are still working your way up.

Tim: Absolutely. That's a normal part of the process. That's a normal part of forgiving.

Jenn: You'll find that once this stage has really taken hold you will be more understanding, not just with your spouse or partner but with other people in general. You will have the ability to connect with others in a way that maybe you weren't able to before.

Tim: I agree. This is how it begins to affect a person at an emotional level. So let's talk about that.

When forgiveness is just defined as just a choice you have to make, it sounds like "fake it till you make it." But there are people who think, "I have been faking it a long time. When does it turn into a feeling of release? When does it feel like something has been taken off my shoulders? When is the weight gone? When do I experience more freedom? Isn't that what forgiveness is supposed to do?"

Jenn: That's part of what a person is going to feel, that release that comes from not holding on to bitterness and anger. They're no longer clenching their fist, refusing to let it go.

They'll experience relief. Maybe they'll experience it for a few days before it goes away a little bit and then comes back again. Eventually, over time, it grows into: "I'm able to talk about what happened and not turn

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toward anger. I'm able to connect with others in a way that I wasn't able to before because that's the feeling I have now." It almost becomes a way of life.

Tim: So the experience of greater release, freedom, peace, maybe even happiness at some point... all that can come out of the ongoing effort and deepening work of forgiveness.

Now, we would say that forgiveness can be offered whether or not the betrayer is truly remorseful and repentant about what they've done. We can still choose to forgive.

Jenn: Absolutely. That's a huge point I hope people get. Your forgiveness is not dependent on what somebody else does.

Tim: But on an emotional level there is something unique that happens when the person that hurt you comes to you with sincere regret and remorse, when you get the sense that they finally understand how they hurt you and genuine sorrow is expressed. Then our ability to forgive has an emotional release that is hard to experience when we are just doing it on our own.

Jenn: It does accelerate the process when you have that moment, but that moment is not required for forgiveness.

Tim: I agree.

Jenn: What are some of the obstacles that people then face when they are trying to move toward forgiveness?

Tim: It is very common for the person who's been offended, the wounded spouse, to think, "If I forgive them, then I'm being weak." A lot of people imagine that if anybody were to ever cheat on them, the strong response would be to immediately leave the relationship.

Because that was their picture of confidence and strength, they sit in the office and say "I can't believe I am here. I never thought I would be this person trying to work on the relationship and stay."

Well, I think there can be bad reasons to stay in a marriage, like doing it out of fear or insecurity. But if you are staying out of the strength of *-I care about this relationship; I love this person; this is a deep wound but I want to move toward forgiveness-*that's not weakness.

Jenn: No. I would say that is courageous. It takes a lot of courage to say I'm not going to walk away. I want to fight for this relationship even though this has been done to me. Even though I am fully justified in leaving, I am going to stay anyway because that is what is important to me.

Tim: Sometimes people equate forgiveness with excuse. If I forgive this, then I am excusing it.

Jenn: And that means they can do it again.

Tim: That's a common fear: *If I forgive, that gives them permission to go out and start it all over again.*

Jenn: Like we said before, it's important to understand that forgiveness is not saying *it's okay*. Forgiveness means *I am not going to let what you did affect me for the rest of my life*, but it doesn't mean it's okay.

Tim: It's also important to draw out the distinction between forgiveness and trust. Forgiveness is not the same thing as trust.

This is the message of forgiveness: *I am no longer going to keep looking to the past and bringing up the past. It is part of our story. It's always going to be part of our story, but forgiveness allows me to move forward on I am becoming, what we are becoming, what this relationship is becoming.*

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Trust, however, is a different issue. You can choose to forgive but not yet trust. In fact, you may choose to forgive and never trust that person again, although that probably means the end of your marriage.

You can be in a marriage and say, “I am still willing to work on this. I forgive you. Let’s deal with the present and the future. We no longer have to keep dealing with the past. But I don’t trust you. It’s going to take time for me to establish trust in you again.”

Betrayed partners sometimes falsely accuse their spouse of not forgiving them because they’re not trusting them.

Jenn: They’re two separate things.

Tim: “You said you forgave me so quit asking me questions about what I was doing today.” But those kinds of questions are issues of trust, not forgiveness.

Jenn: Another obstacle is the thought that forgiveness makes a person too vulnerable. By moving toward forgiveness, a person is opening themselves up to the possibility of being hurt again.

Tim: My answer to that is, yes, you’re right. Forgiveness is a vulnerable choice. But you will never get to intimacy and trust unless you are willing to move through that vulnerability. You can play it safe to avoid the risk of being hurt or disappointed again, but you’ll be sacrificing intimacy.

There’s one quote about forgiveness we’ve often repeated...

Jenn: *Forgiveness is giving up the hope that you’re past could be any different.*

Tim: That’s powerful when you really understand it.

We don’t know where you are in your journey of forgiveness. Maybe you recently found out about betrayal. Maybe it’s been several months or maybe it’s been years. Wherever you are right now, there is a next step toward forgiveness that you can take.

We encourage you to begin stepping toward forgiveness. If you are someone who has already done the work and you have allowed forgiveness to take its place and deepen in your life, continue to live in the grace of forgiveness. Your life will be better, your relationship will have more hope, and it will lead you toward healing.

When considering what “big forgiveness” looks like, I am reminded of Corrie ten Boom's story. During World War II, she and her sister, Betsie, were sent to a concentration camp after it was discovered that they were hiding Jews in their home during the Nazi occupation of Holland. In her book, [*The Hiding Place*](#), she wrote about her spiritual journey of healing, and about the day she unexpectedly encountered a man who had been one of her guards. Here’s what she wrote:

It was in a church in Munich that I saw him, a balding heavysset man in a gray overcoat, a brown felt hat clutched between his hands. People were filing out of the basement room where I had just spoken, moving along the rows of wooden chairs to the door at the rear.

It was 1947 and I had come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives... The solemn faces stared back at me, not quite daring to believe. There were never questions after a talk in Germany in 1947. People stood up in silence, in silence collected their wraps, in silence left the room.

And that’s when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones.

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It came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister's frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. Betsie, how thin you were!

Betsie and I had been arrested for concealing Jews in our home during the Nazi occupation of Holland; this man had been a guard at Ravensbrück concentration camp where we were sent.

Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: "A fine message, fräulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!"

And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course—how could he remember one prisoner among those thousands of women?

But I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt. It was the first time since my release that I had been face to face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze.

"You mentioned Ravensbrück in your talk," he was saying. "I was a guard in there." No, he did not remember me.

He went on: "I know God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fräulein" – again the hand came out – "will you forgive me?"

I stood there and could not. Betsie had died in that place. Could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking?

It could not have been many seconds that he stood there, hand held out, but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do.

For I had to do it—I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. I knew it not only as a commandment of God, but as a daily experience. Since the end of the war I had had a home in Holland for victims of Nazi brutality.

Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able also to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and as horrible as that.

And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion – I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart.

"God, help me!" I prayed silently. "I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling."

And so woodenly, mechanically I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

"I forgive you, brother!" I cried. "With all my heart!"

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For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then.

I wish I could say that merciful and charitable thoughts just naturally flowed from me from then on. But they didn't. [Several years later, I found myself failing in the attempt to forgive friends who had wronged me. I seemed unable to move past their offense.]

Help came in the form of a kindly pastor to whom I confessed my failure after two sleepless weeks.

"Up in that church tower," he said, nodding out the window, "is a bell which is rung by pulling on a rope. But you know what? After the sexton lets go of the rope, the bell keeps on swinging. First ding then dong. Slower and slower until there's a final dong and it stops.

"I believe the same thing is true of forgiveness. When we forgive someone, we take our hand off the rope. But if we've been tugging at our grievances for a long time, we mustn't be surprised if the old angry thoughts keep coming for a while. They're just the ding-dongs of the old bell slowing down."

And so it proved to be. There were a few more midnight reverberations, a couple of dings when the subject came up in my conversation. But the force – which was my willingness in the matter – had gone out of them. They came less and less often and at last stopped altogether.