

THE RECOVERY ROOM



Jen & Ryan: Rebuilding A Better Marriage

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Introduction: *This is the story of Ryan and Jen. Seven years ago this young couple came to me. Jennifer had just found out that Ryan had been involved in many affairs during their relationship. Ryan wanted to fix their marriage, but Jennifer wasn't sure she was willing to do that. In their healing, they worked through the stages of relationship renewal. I asked them to talk about what their marriage has become.*

Jen: People think you're a weakling if you decide to stay and try to make [your marriage] work.

Ryan: When my wife first heard about [my affair], she was no pushover. She was very upset. I remember her pulling open several drawers and throwing stuff across the room at me. I remember her saying, "This is not going to work. I don't even want to be with you."

She stayed in the back room and I was sleeping on the couch in the living room. She'd come out at random times and scream at me. She did not want to be near me.

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Several days later she came out and said, “This is probably not going to work but if there's any chance at all, I'm going to find a counselor. I'm going to tell you who it's going to be and you will call, make all the appointments, and attend all of them. If you miss one it is definitely over, but it's still probably not going to work.”

Jen: I said, “You're just going to tell me when to show up. I'm not going to wait on you. I'm not going to ask you about it. You're going to continue to tell me what time the next appointment is.”

Ryan: Our situation was deep: dozens and dozens of people in six or seven years of infidelity. It was really bad.

Jen: I think the only reason why I gave it a chance was because when he told me I saw how broken he was. He was a totally different person than what I had experienced in the prior years. There was definitely an arrogance there before, but then all I saw was broken humility.

He said, “I know you're going to want to leave but I'm asking you to stay with me. I want to make this right.”

So that's why I said, “Well, I don't want to but if you're really serious about feeling that way then you will do all this and prove to me that that's exactly how you feel.” He did all that and more.

Tim: You certainly have a story. You're one of those couples I'd look at and think, “Oh my goodness. Can their marriage really survive this?” There was a lot of hurt, a lot of damage.

There are a number of things that predict whether a couple is going to be able to move towards a marriage that not only experiences recovery but *renewal*: connection and trust again. But perhaps the biggest predictor of a positive outcome is that the unfaithful spouse moves quickly to embrace honesty and openness. That especially applies if they confessed it rather than being caught.

But even if someone's found out, they can encourage healing if they move quickly to honesty and transparency. They need to take responsibility: *I want to fix this. I broke it. I'm going to take responsibility for helping us get on the right track and assuring you that you can trust me.*

That's something you definitely did, Ryan, but it still took time. It was not a quick fix.

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Ryan: No, it certainly wasn't. You hit the nail on the head. Every situation is a little bit different, right? There are those who are actually caught in the middle of an affair. There's a major difference between those who are caught and those who are confessors. I think that's a key contributor.

Tim: Yes, confessors are already demonstrating they've come to the place of recognizing they've done something wrong. They embrace honesty and the first expression of their willingness to be honest is their willing admission: "I'm going to tell you something you might not have known without me confessing it." That's a pretty vulnerable statement.

I will say that there are those who get caught and initially struggle with being defensive or fudging the truth, but then fairly quickly embrace honesty. It's just a little bit harder for them to get there.

Ryan: One of things that really helped us was the fact that I was very open about the ways I cheated. I gave her passwords to every e-mail account I had. I welcomed her to check anything on the Internet. She had complete access to my social media.

I gave her actual names of the people that I had been unfaithful with and she went through and blocked some of them. To this day, years later, those blocks are still there.

Honesty helps show the partner that that you're trying to mend and trying to build a relationship. You're not hiding things anymore, you're confessing them and I think that helps give the spouse confidence that this person actually is serious about trying to move forward.

Tim: Jen, how would you describe your changes since then? You've got a couple kids now and you're living in a new place, but how you feel about your marriage? What's different? How do you remember and explain the change from then to now?

Jen: It's funny, I remember sitting on the couch in your office and thinking, *I just don't think I will ever, ever be able to get over this. I am upset and I'm obsessed with it. I cannot stop thinking about the betrayal. I can't stop thinking about the pain of this.*

My soul was cut deep. I kept thinking, *I will never ever be able to forgive him for this. I don't even understand the depths of what real forgiveness feels like because I can't imagine feeling any type of forgiveness for him.*

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But he just went above and beyond to prove his love for me and how much I've meant to him. He really did work to win me back. But even after he had gone through all the steps and time had passed, I didn't feel forgiveness at first. I chose it.

Forgiveness was a choice for me. I decided that I was just going to start acting like I was forgiving him even though I didn't have the feelings of it. The amazing thing that happened was when I chose action over the feeling, the feelings of forgiveness eventually came.

And feelings of love came back, but it was different. I loved him in a new way.

Here we are seven years later from when all that happened and I can legitimately say I have zero feelings about it now. I mean, I know it happened and I was hurt and everything. It's not that I don't acknowledge the affair, or that I deny it.

It's like when you get a deep wound. When I was a kid, I got a really deep gash on my arm from a screw on a slide I was sliding down. I remember that happening, I remember how bad it hurt. I have this scar on my arm, but I don't feel the sting of it anymore.

I can see the scar and I can feel it on my arm, but I don't feel any pain. That's how I feel about our situation as well. It's part of our story, it's a scar on our marriage, but I feel no more sting. I don't dwell on it. I used to think about it literally all day long, even eight months to a year after it happened. Now I can honestly say I don't know how long it's been since I thought about it.

Tim: Until your old counselor calls you up and asks you to talk about it again.

Jen: We were just counselling with another couple in our church that is dealing with an affair right now. I pulled out my old journal yesterday, after talking to her, and... Wow, it reminded me of that dark, dark place of emotions. There was so much of it that I had forgotten: how deeply hurt I was. It was amazing to go back and read that and see where I'm at today.

We've really worked on repairing our marriage and creating a new marriage. Three years went by and we decided to have a kid, then another three years went by we decided to have another one. So here we are: seven years and two kids later.

Tim: I love your story. I love you guys. I love the fact that even though you have every right to say, "Listen this is our healing and we're going to keep it to ourselves" (and some couples make that choice because

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it's the right choice for them), you have decided to take your story of healing and grace and share it with others. You come alongside other couples that may be struggling in similar ways and help them see what healing can look like in their lives and in their marriages. That's great.

I love that about you. I'm thankful for the work you're letting God do through you and the effort you're making to tell a good story with your lives.

Ryan: It certainly took God in the middle of our marriage. We had to pray and allow God to extend grace and forgiveness to me. Even to this day, I can still struggle at times with guilt and forgiveness.

You know, I have a real life picture of what actual forgiveness looks like through my wife. She certainly didn't want to go that route, as she mentioned earlier. She chose forgiveness and then several months later I think she really felt like, *I actually do forgive you.*

Jen: I had vindictive moments, too, if you remember, Tim.

Tim: Yes, I remember.

Jen: It was not like: *I'm just going to forgive him and it's going to be roses and it's going to be wonderful.*

Tim: When I hear someone say that, I don't trust it.

Jen: You wanted to help us heal, whether that was us staying together or apart. I never felt pressure from you to stay married. I never felt pressure from you to walk away. I think you just wanted to see us healed, whatever that may be.

Ryan and I are firm believers that if our situation can be healed then pretty much anybody's can. We've seen a few couples, maybe ten since we went through everything, that we've either referred to you or worked with ourselves here. I think there was one couple where we concluded, "No, that one's not going to happen."

You taught us about getting healed and becoming whole, no matter what that looks like, while still being a champion for marriage and staying together.

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Ryan: We say that we are both better people. We are stronger and our relationship is way stronger than what it was in what we call our “first marriage” before we actually processed all this stuff. We absolutely enjoy life together.

We're not perfect. We deal with a lot of things just like other couples do, but we have another level of commitment, maybe greater than some couples, because of what we've overcome together.

Jen: No, we don't have a perfect marriage, but I feel like we don't fight over petty stuff. There's some sort of deeper communication, or commitment to each other and to working things out. I do feel like we do have a very strong marriage. We really don't fight that often anymore.

And it's not because we're sitting here, like, “We don't fight... everything's great...” We communicate so well now that it just, I don't know...

Tim: There's nothing hidden.

Jen: Yeah. It's a lot easier now to coexist together, I guess.

Ryan: Last night we were out to dinner with three other couples and Jen cracked a joke about my lifestyle in the first six or seven years of our marriage. Everybody at the table laughed, but it was almost like they were more uncomfortable over it than we were.

Jen: We're at that point where we will talk about it so freely.

Ryan: People want to dance around it with us but we're like, “No, you can ask direct questions. What do you want to know? There's nothing we're hiding here. I will tell you the truth about how we process it.”

I want to make sure I'm clear: we're not minimizing the affair. But the fact that you know where we were at the start and what a disaster that was, to the point now where a joke can be cracked in front of our friends—that's a long way.

Tim: When a couple is willing to step into that pain together with a kind of vulnerability that helps establish trust again... you don't go through an experience like that and come out the other side of it with the normal things affecting you the same way as they did. You come out with a greater capacity to understand what it means to communicate honestly and to be vulnerable with one another. A marriage

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can't be the same on the other side of that. It's going to change, for better or for worse. You're giving the example of the ways it can change for the better.