

Yours, Mine, and Ours: Creating a Complete Couples Recovery

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One of the first principles I was taught in my marriage and family therapy graduate studies at Auburn University is that “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” We quickly learned that working with an entire family system produces better results than splitting off individuals to help them heal in their own private worlds.

A few years later when I began working more consistently with couples impacted by sexual betrayal, it was tempting to split them apart and help each of them individually focus on their own issues to decrease the drama and intensity in the consulting room. However, most of what they were bringing to my sessions weren't these neatly organized individual issues. They were bringing me the agony of betrayal, the fear of being rejected, the powerlessness of not knowing how to get their partner to respond. They wanted to talk about the tangled mess the addiction, secrets, and betrayal had created in their lives.

Although working with the whole family system was messier than isolating each individual and sending people along their way, I began to see how this approach offered them the support they really needed. Struggling couples aren't necessarily looking for more isolation from one another. They want to know how to fix the shattered mess created by addiction.

Working with an individual addict's recovery is pretty straightforward. This has been well documented in the addiction recovery literature and there are programs and workbooks galore to help an addict face their demons and break the chains of addiction. Although recovery is hardly easy work, finding resources for those struggling with addiction isn't difficult.

On the other hand, figuring out what to do with betrayed partners isn't so easy. I recall battling automatic thoughts about the fairness of asking a betrayed partner to do recovery work. How could I ask her to enter into her own recovery alongside the recovery of her lying, selfish, and addicted husband? Shouldn't she just get sympathy for having to endure the years of secrecy and betrayal?

While I was struggling to figure out whether or not betrayed spouses should even have their own recovery process, the general field of addiction already had partners of addicts pegged as “co-addicts” who were just as sick and pathological as their addicted husbands. I remember hearing one leader in the sex addiction field even referring to betrayed spouses as “co's”, even further diminishing them down to two puny letters. Even though I didn't always know how a spouse should be involved in recovery, labeling betrayed partners as culpable parties never felt right to me.

My search for answers eventually led me to attachment theory, which essentially solved my dilemma. Partners weren't co-addicts. They were desperately trying to cope with disconnection, isolation, and the constantly shifting reality of living with an addict. Their secure base of a loving and committed relationship had been upended and they needed a recovery process that would help them find their bearings through understanding and trusting their own emotions and instincts. Yes, they need compassion, but, most importantly, they need permission to find their voice again and reclaim themselves and their relationships.

The couples recovery process isn't as simple as putting two individuals working their own individual recoveries back together with the hope they'll function well with one another. Instead, it's an ongoing process of helping both individuals learn how to open up to real emotional and physical intimacy with one another. Their individual processes serve as the foundation for the

couples recovery, as it is virtually impossible for them to navigate the vulnerable tenderness of couples intimacy with no individual awareness of themselves.

When a couple faces the reality of sexual betrayal and both individuals commit to harness the power of a whole recovery, they experience a healing that transcends the healing they could do on their own in isolation. It's messier and more difficult, but ultimately, answers their deepest needs.

Here is how I generally structure these three recoveries. Obviously, every couple will have unique needs that require adaptation, but this is the basic framework that organizes the early stages of recovery for an addict, his partner, and the couple.

His recovery

His recovery can't even begin until there is personal accountability for his behavior and how it's affected him and those around him. This begins with an honest inventory of his acting out behaviors. This inventory isn't something that is completed in a late-night session of twenty questions from the spouse. It's something he spends time creating and revising until he has the full story ready to share with his spouse. Having access to a therapist who specializes in treating pornography and sexual addiction makes this part of the process go much smoother. If you don't have a LifeStar program in your area (<http://www.lifestarnetwork.com/the-solution/get-help-now>), then I recommend picking up a copy of "Disclosing Secrets" by Jennifer Schneider and Deborah Corely (http://www.amazon.com/Disclosing-Secrets-Addicts-Guide-Reveal/dp/1477608281/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1403880077&sr=8-1&keywords=disclosing+secrets). There is also a companion book called "Surviving Disclosure" written by the same authors to help partners navigate the disclosure process (http://www.amazon.com/Surviving-Disclosure-Partners-Betrayal-Intimate/dp/1477608303/ref=pd_sim_b_1?ie=UTF8&refRID=15HZHM0WGGXQJGZTTX1M).

His willingness to take responsibility for his behaviors opens the door to his healing. Otherwise, he'll see himself as a victim to outside forces that prevent him from healing. His accountability is the doorway to individual healing.

Even though he has an individual responsibility to work on his own healing, no addict can do this process in isolation. Every man in recovery benefits from having a support system of men who can encourage, empathize, and challenge him in his recovery journey. 12-step groups, therapy groups, and opening up to other men in his life are the best places to begin forming a support system. Dr. Mark Laaser recommends that every man have at least six other men in his life that know his story and can offer support.ⁱ This isn't a time to be a super hero and do everything alone. A brotherhood of men committed to sexual integrity is protective and effective.

His individual recovery also benefits from understanding the difference between sobriety and recovery. Sobriety is the immediate goal of eliminating a problematic behavior. Even though stopping addictive behaviors is an obvious goal, entering into recovery is the only way things will get better. Elaine Marshall, former dean of nursing at Brigham Young University, explained it best:

Cure' and 'healing'..are not the same. Healing is not cure. Cure is clean, quick, and done—often under anesthesia. Healing, however, is often a lifelong process of recovery and growth in spite of, maybe because of, enduring physical, emotional, or spiritual assault. It requires time. Healing needs work and time and energy. Cure is passive, as you submit your[self] to the practitioner. Healing is active. It requires all the energy of your entire being. You have to *be* there, fully awake, aware, and participating when it happens."ⁱⁱ

The more he understands about addiction, betrayal, and intimacy, the more he'll realize how much work there is to do. He won't be satisfied by simply stopping the problematic behavior and declaring himself "healed." Instead, he'll embrace the privilege of long-term growth in all areas of his life.

Her recovery

The discovery of a secret addiction throws most women into a world of shock, confusion, and fear. Even if she knew he had an issue with it in the past, the secrecy and hiding are disabling to the safety and trust necessary for a stable relationship. Most women feel they've become someone they don't recognize and suffer as much from the betrayal as they do from the sudden and unplanned transformation from their former self.

In 1948, a 34 year-old woman named Montrue Larkin lost her husband in a tragic plane accident. She had six children and was immediately thrust into a world of grief, loss, and overwhelming disorientation. Here are her words, written the day after his death:

"A bomb was dropped on my known world. My world was shattered. Not a marker of any kind left to tell where I was to go. Everyone was shouting, 'Go this way. Go that way.'

'I know the way,' they said. 'I have been there before.'

'No! You should go this way. I'm sure I'm right.'

But my heart was shattered and it didn't matter. I was 34 years old yesterday. But today, I am a thousand. How can time skip like that? I'm so alone in a sea of people. No one really cares just about me. Oh yes, they say they do, and they mean I so far as they can go. But I have to go alone and find my way amongst the land mines.

Those helping me decide just hand me a mask that I must wear. No one can bear the agony they see on my face, so I put the mask on. It makes everyone feel better. I'll wear it until I can live without it. I'm standing on the sidelines watching a production take place, and I have the main part. I hope my mask fits. It's so heavy and every once in awhile I have to take it off for a few minutes. But people can't stand to see the real me. It is like walking in no man's land.

How can the sun come up and a new day begin when I can never see it? I hate it to be so planned and perfect. It mocks me because I can't see one normal thing in its former setting. It's all so colored with sadness and heartbreak. It can't be normal. The bomb destroyed all of that. I've got to find a way out of this confusion. One that I can live with."

Even though the circumstances of this woman's trauma have a different source, the disorientation, grief, and loss are the same. Her description offers important clues to help guide women suffering from betrayal trauma.

First, she describes feeling so alone and isolated in this new life that was thrust upon her. Women dealing with betrayal trauma need emotional and social support from those who have the capacity for empathy and from those who have been through the same experience. Thankfully, there are abundant resources to connect isolated women. Even though face-to-face contact is ideal, phone support and online support work well and can help a woman feel better knowing she's not alone. 12-step meetings, group therapy, family, friends, counseling, and online support groups are all resources to connect with women who understand the trauma of betrayal.

Education is also a critical piece of a betrayed partner's recovery journey. In the same way Montrue wanted to know how she could find a way out of the confusion she was experiencing, betrayed partners need accurate information about how to find their way out of betrayal trauma. They need to know what's normal, what's not normal, and gain realistic expectations for themselves and their partners. There are books, programs, blogs, and other resources to help organize the journey forward.

Montrue also talks about feeling like she has to wear a mask so others aren't negatively impacted her actual feelings. Her experience highlights the need for betrayed partners to learn congruence with their emotions and their actions. In other words, as a partner feels strong emotions, she needs permission to understand and act on those emotions in healthy ways. For example, if a woman feels emotionally unsafe with her husband and doesn't want to be physically close, she can learn how to give herself permission to feel those emotions and then respond by allowing herself physical space until she feels safe again. This is an important part of her recovery as she learns to use her emotions as a guide toward understanding herself, others, and eventually opening back up to trust and intimacy with her husband.

Couples recovery

The main goal of couples recovery is to help the couple build a strong bond so they can be accessible and responsive to one another. This begins the moment the addict becomes honest with himself and his partner about his behavior. Even though it may initially create more distance due to the trauma and shock of betrayal, it opens up the opportunity to someday create a healthy relationship. When there are secrets and denial, the couple can't share true intimacy, even though they may enjoy being around each other and have an otherwise good relationship. True oneness in marriage is only possible when a couple shares the same reality and has no secrets.

Couples learn to practice intimacy as they open up to their support networks and become more vulnerable and open about their feelings, needs, and fears. Think of these supports as a dress rehearsal for the real thing - marriage. Not only does the addict learn to talk about his acting out behaviors with his supports, but he also practices sharing his emotional world. His acting out behaviors weren't the only secrets he was keeping. In fact, hiding his emotions, fears, dreams, and needs from his partner and others causes long-term suffering that is completely avoidable as he learns to turn toward healthy relationships. Betrayed partners also learn how to open up about their shame, fears, needs, and other emotions in their support groups. This gives them a chance to clarify and identify what they really need so they better direct their lives and create more closeness with those they love.

Couples can also learn how to navigate talking about setbacks with the addiction. The addict practices accountability and honesty and the partner practices learning how to manage her strong emotions and identify what she needs for safety. Acknowledging the reality of setbacks doesn't grant permission to act out, but it does recognize that many couples use these experiences to deepen their growth and connection with themselves and each other. If the addict is humble, accountable, and willing to learn from his mistakes, the couple has a better chance of ultimately growing closer. If he minimizes, hides, ignores, or blames others for his mistakes, the couple will stay in a perpetual state of disconnection.

Learning to transition from the dependency of an addiction to the interdependent attachment of healthy intimacy takes practice for both partners. Even though a betrayed partner isn't the one turned toward the counterfeit relationship of addiction, she will have to learn how to attach to someone who wasn't emotionally accessible to her. Both the addict and the partners get to jointly learn what healthy emotional and physical intimacy looks like in their relationship. As both partners learn to express emotional and physical vulnerability with each other, they open up a new dimension of connection previously unavailable to them.

Conclusion

Imagine each person in the relationship having an elastic rope tied around his or her waist. As long as they don't cut the rope, they're tied together and will feel a certain amount of tension on the line. If one of them moves away from the other, the tension between them increases. That distance is a signal that they need to move closer. Sometimes it's tempting to want to cut the rope to decrease the tension.

When an addict betrays his partner by sexually acting out and keeping secrets, he's essentially moved so far away from her that the rope between them snaps. His first responsibility is to take accountability for damaging the connection and to begin the process of repairing the damage. Understandably, the betrayed partner may not be interested in tethering herself to him for a while until conditions feel more safe and secure.

Likewise, some betrayed partners are so terrified of moving close to the addict that they stretch the rope out far enough to snap it. If she desires to be in a relationship, but has difficulty moving closer to him, it's important for her to get clarity on why she moves away. Sometimes this involves doing individual trauma work or intensive marital counseling to understand the movements in the relationship.

After the chaos of the acting out and trauma has subsided, the long-term goal is to learn how to manage the tension on the rope when either he moves away or she moves away. As they learn to talk about what's happening to their closeness and distance, they can eventually learn to feel more secure with one another.

Weaving three recoveries together to form a secure bond takes years of trial and error. It's important for couples to strive for progress, not perfection. It's common for one partner to begin moving closer emotionally or physically while the other stays guarded and unsure. This mismatch in readiness can discourage even the most committed couple. If both individuals are able to recognize what's happening inside of them and gently share that with their partner, both can eventually find their way back to each other.

Questions for discussion

1. What's it like for you to recognize that your relationship has three recoveries?
2. Have you discovered any challenges in working with these three recoveries at the same time?
3. How would you describe your own recovery process?
4. How do you work with your husband/partner to manage the couple's recovery?

Resources for couples recovery:

Strengthening Recovery Through Strengthening Marriage – 6 hour audio program by Dr. Kevin Skinner and Geoff Steurer – www.marriage-recovery.com

Love You, Hate the Porn: Healing a Relationship Damaged by Virtual Infidelity – by Dr. Mark Chamberlain and Geoff Steurer http://www.amazon.com/Love-You-Hate-Porn-Relationship/dp/1606419366/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1403911583&sr=8-1&keywords=love+you+hate+the+porn

Sign up for our monthly recovery newsletter – <http://lifestarstgeorge.com/newsletter.php>

Find a LifeStar program in your area – <http://www.lifestarnetwork.com/the-solution/get-help-now>

ⁱ Mark Laaser, “The Seven Principles of Highly Accountable Men” http://www.amazon.com/The-Principles-Highly-Accountable-Valor/dp/0834127423/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1403962778&sr=8-1&keywords=the+seven+principles+of+highly+accountable+men

ⁱⁱ Elaine Marshall, “Learning the Healer’s Art” <http://speeches.byu.edu/?act=viewitem&id=197>