I Will Survive!

Recovering from Spousal Infidelity

By Theresa Wright, Ph.D.

You can't watch TV, surf the net or thumb through a magazine without coming across a sensationalized and scandalous celebrity affair. Marital indiscretions are no longer limited to political icons, sports figures and entertainers. They are occurring much closer to home. Perhaps in your home.

According to Dr. Robert Huzinger, the "Infidelity Coach," statistics suggest that 40% of women and 60% of men engage in extramarital affairs. For some women, after 10, 20, 30 years of marriage, the once solid ground of wedding vows and commitment opens up and plummets them, at warp speed, into the world of infidelity. And the physical and emotional impact of an extramarital affair can be devastating.

There is a profound sense of loss. The loss of trust, faith, life as you knew it, and for some - your marriage. The most painful loss is a sense of self which includes your identity, value, esteem and respect. Women report feeling unlovable and defective. According to Dr. Janis Abrahms Spring in "After the Affair," the discovery of a husband's infidelity takes a toll on a woman physically. For some women, the body's response is to release stress-inducing hormones which cause anxiety and agitation. They are unable to sleep and eat, have ruminating thoughts and sensitivity to noises. At the other extreme, a woman's body may react by releasing endogenous hormones, similar to morphine, and they will simply shut down and disengage from everyone and everything around them.

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The immediate task at hand is not to heal the marriage but rather to heal your mind, body and spirit in order for you to make a healthy decision about your relationship. Recovery from the pain of a partner's extramarital affair is not a leisurely stroll but rather a circuitous journey. It requires you to place a foot on its path if you are to reclaim your sense of self and well-being. To quote Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Courage consists of the power of self recovery."

Relationship experts offer a number of helpful recommendations for a healthy recovery. Dr. Judy Kramer, a practicing family therapist, suggests that you access support from trusted friends and family so that you can talk out your feelings rather than act them out in ways that you might regret. It is important that you do not make any major decisions about the future of your relationship while in a state of emotional distress. Do not go it alone! You will benefit from having companions on this journey. If family and friends are not an option, join a support group or seek counseling.

Ann Bercht, cofounder of *Beyond Affairs Network (BAN) and author of My Husband's Affair Became the Best Thing That Ever Happened to Me*, offers several tips for recovery. She suggests that it is important to treat yourself kindly by pampering yourself. Go for a spa treatment, get your hair done, buy a nice outfit or a bouquet of flowers. That's not to say that you should go overboard on the "retail therapy!" It's vital that you also engage in activities that you find comforting and soothing, whether it's taking a walk, reading, listening to music, journaling, going to the beach or feeding the ducks. These simple activities

can offer moments of peace and tranquility. Although it may be difficult at first, participating in your typical routines and activities can provide balance and a welcomed sense of normalcy.

You also need to be attentive to your physical and spiritual health. This will require you to eat nutritious meals (or take supplements) and get enough sleep, but also customize your plan for what works for you, whether it's exercise, yoga, meditation or prayer. Ann Bercht also suggests that laughter can be a healing force. Enjoy a comedy or some light moments with family and friends. Anything that provides much needed distractions that serve to lighten your spirit.

Like any excursion, the journey to recovery can be met with some detours, speed bumps and misdirection. Be careful not to wander down too many dead-end streets by torturing yourself with images that you are creating with your own mental movie making; whether it's relentless interrogation of your spouse for details which can border on masochism, or becoming needlessly preoccupied with how others may perceive you or your situation. Surround yourself with things that are comforting and people you love who are important to you.

There is no predetermined time period for healing. It's a gradual process that's aided by self care and nurturing. It's the first step on the road to recovery, with more stops along the way including forgiveness and a re-evaluation of your relationship. But the journey towards healing after an extramarital affair offers the opportunity to rebuild and redesign your life. g

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