

Infidelity: Prevention and Recovery

Although most wedding liturgies include a promise of faithfulness, some pockets of society seem to accept infidelity as normal behavior to be tolerated or ignored. Sexual and emotional affairs, however, destroy trust and damage families. After an affair, a couple may recover and build a relationship that is stronger than ever, but not without a lot of pain and hard work - and usually not without assistance. Churches can help couples protect their marriage bonds by alerting them to the normalcy and danger of extramarital attractions, encouraging them to take steps to prevent affairs, and supporting them through a healing process if affairs occur.

A young couple starting out their life together might find it difficult to believe they would ever be tempted to be unfaithful, but extramarital sexual attraction does happen, even while couples seem very much in love. Any weakness in the marital bond, such as ongoing disappointment, accumulated resentment, or failure to communicate clearly and effectively, increases an individual's vulnerability to extramarital temptation. Couples can protect their marriages from affairs by recognizing this possibility and establishing clear boundaries for their relationships with others, while nurturing and strengthening their own relationship.

During pre-marital counseling or classes, couples should be encouraged to discuss their feelings about fidelity and to develop a safety plan for whenever they find themselves seeking opportunities to be alone with someone else or tempted to keep secrets from each other. Churches can offer marriage education and enrichment classes that focus on communication and the importance of nurturing the marriage relationship, using such resources as Willard Harley's *His Needs, Her Needs* and Scott Stanley's *The Power of Commitment* (see resources list below). Churches can also promote retreats and events offered through organizations such as Better Marriages (www.bettermarriages.org), Family Dynamics Institute (www.familydynamics.net), and others reviewed online in the Best Practices Articles and Recommended Resources documents posted at www.marriagelovepower.net, which may also be searched by title or topic at www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/intergenerational-family-ministries. See also Upcoming Events schedules posted at both websites. Encourage couples to attend by offering child care and/or scholarships. Through their preaching, pastors can address the sacredness of the marriage bond and the normal stages of marriage: The Dream, The Disillusionment, The Discovery, and The Depth (see *Sustaining Love*, in resource list below). Sermons and class discussions can also focus on how seemingly small, harmless steps can lure us into danger and the importance of resisting selfish impulses that can hurt our loved ones and destroy our families.

Discoveries of infidelity shock and deeply wound betrayed spouses. Some will interpret the betrayal as their own failure, rather than that of the unfaithful spouse. Even those with healthy self-esteem may wonder how they could have misplaced their trust or missed clues that something was amiss. Most will feel as though they have been robbed of something very precious – the sexual and/or emotional connection they thought was theirs exclusively. They will feel that the marriage relationship has been contaminated and that the safety they felt in the relationship was just an illusion. Often they will have difficulty trusting themselves again, not to mention trusting the betrayer. The loss of trust may even include loss of trust in God.

Skilled therapists can work with both individuals and with the couple together to help them process what has happened and repair the damage. Pastors are not necessarily trained to provide such delicate, intense, and long-term therapy, but they should know who in their area is and make referrals accordingly. Such counseling may include confronting the unfaithful party and insisting that the extramarital relationship be broken off completely. Or, if that person is not willing to end the affair, an experienced counselor can help the betrayed spouse understand the addictive nature of affairs and decide how long to wait for the other to regain his/her senses - and what to do in the meantime.

Even when the unfaithful partner fully repents, it can take two years or more for the relationship to fully recover. A skilled therapist will encourage the unfaithful spouse to tell the betrayed partner whatever he or she needs to know in order to reconstruct the story of their relationship and respect whatever boundaries and restrictions are required in order to rebuild trust. This might include sharing of email passwords, more frequent check-ins by phone, and full disclosure. Betrayed spouses will need to talk about the affair in order to discover its meaning. Was it impulsive or compulsive? What did the straying spouse experience in the affair that was missing in the marriage? Contrary to popular belief, it may not have been about sex, but perhaps companionship, fun, or emotional connection. The betrayed spouse cannot, of course, be blamed for the choices and behavior of the unfaithful person, but may eventually understand his or her contribution to the partner's vulnerability. During this period, couples benefit from supportive relationships with others who have been through similar experiences (see *The Beyond Affairs Network*, below) and from those who value the marital covenant.

The church should clearly endorse fidelity, loyalty, and commitment, as well as healing for broken relationships, especially in the face of media messages to the contrary. Worship experiences that acknowledge the human tendency to stray from our values and that emphasize the power of God's grace can encourage persons in trouble, such as betrayed or straying spouses, to feel safe asking for help. Churches can place relevant books in the church library, display pamphlets addressing various personal and family challenges, and promote marriage strengthening events. Couples who have successfully recovered from affairs might serve as mentors to help guide struggling couples through their recovery process. Ongoing opportunities for marriage education and enrichment both help prevent couples from sliding into affairs and strengthen couples recovering from them. Such initiatives can generate a marriage-friendly atmosphere and create a community that honors, preserves, and restores marriages, reducing the risk of infidelity and supporting healing whenever it is needed.

Resources for Infidelity Prevention and Recovery

Reading List

Programs and Organizations

Reading List

Affair-Proofing Your Marriage: Preventive Maintenance for Christian Couples, by Norman and Ann Bales (Atlanta: CarePoint Ministries, 2007). The authors share honestly and humbly out of their own experience with and recovery from infidelity, providing a workbook that could be used by couples or by groups of couples to affair-proof their marriages.

After the Affair: Healing the Pain and Rebuilding Trust When a Partner Has Been Unfaithful, by Janis Abrahms Spring, Ph.D. with Michael Spring (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996). Based on her clinical practice experiences, the author guides readers through the three stages of healing: understanding your reactions and feelings, deciding whether to recommit to the marriage or leave, and rebuilding the relationship.

Every Heart Restored: A Wife's Guide to Healing in the Wake of a Husband's Sexual Sin, by Fred and Brenda Stoeker, with Mike Yorkey (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2010). Guidance for wives whose husbands are addicted to pornography and sex and struggling for sexual purity.

His Needs, Her Needs: Building An Affair-Proof Marriage, by Willard F. Harley, Jr. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Fleming H. Revell, 1994). Based on the simple premise that husbands and wives can find lifelong happiness in marriage by committing themselves to meet each other's needs, this book offers information and exercises to help couples deepen their understanding of each other and intentionally behave in ways that will nourish the relationship. The author explains that with every encounter we affect each other positively or negatively, making deposits in or withdrawals from each other's "Love Bank." The author also clarifies the dynamics that may make spouses vulnerable to the temptation of an affair and offers strategies for healing relationships damaged by infidelity.

How Can I Forgive You? The Courage to Forgive, the Freedom Not To, by Janis Abrahms Spring, Ph.D. with Michael Spring (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004). The author describes the benefits of genuine forgiveness and the dangers of "cheap" or inauthentic forgiveness. She provides guidance for two processes: 1) acceptance (when the offender is unwilling or unable to make amends), and 2) genuine forgiveness (when the offender participates in the effort to repair and heal the relationship). Her instructions are geared to help persons make peace with themselves and with others.

My Husband's Affair Became the Best Thing That Ever Happened to Me, by Anne Bercht, Brian Bercht, and Danielle Bercht (Victoria, B.C., Canada: Trafford Publishing, 2004). Devastated by her husband's unexpected announcement that he was in love with another woman, the author embarked on a tumultuous emotional journey, vacillating between despair and determination. Her story gives hope and insight into the healing process.

Not "Just Friends": Rebuilding Trust and Recovering Your Sanity After Infidelity, by Shirley P. Glass, Ph.D. with Jean Coppock Staeheli (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2003). Understanding how easily friendships can slide down the "slippery slope" to infatuation can help couples prevent affairs and to recover if they do occur. Maintaining "windows" within the marital relationship and "walls" with those who could threaten the marriage is the first of seven tips by the author, who also provides insight into infidelity's traumatic effects and the steps necessary for recovery.

Private Lies: Infidelity and the Betrayal of Intimacy, by Frank Pittman (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989). The author shares experiences of infidelity in real life and in literature and provides numerous case studies from his counseling practice, including a wide variety of behaviors and attitudes. He describes romantic affairs as "temporary insanity" and concludes with an affirmation of monogamy and practical suggestions for maintaining fidelity.

Sustaining Love: Healing and Growth in the Passages of Marriage, by David Augsberger (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1988). The author outlines four stages of marriage: The Dream, The Disillusionment, The Discovery, and The Depth, describing how to successfully negotiate these

challenging transitions. Especially dangerous, of course, is the Disillusionment Stage, when the excitement of new love wears off and couples face who they really are and how they really relate. Not only is this stage inevitable, but it can also provide a doorway to deeper discovery and relationship.

Surviving an Affair, by Dr. Willard F. Harley, Jr, and Dr. Jennifer Harley Chalmers (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell, 1998). The authors provide proven step-by-step solutions for recovering from an affair. They emphasize the importance of meeting each other's emotional needs, avoiding being the cause of each other's unhappiness, giving each other undivided attention, and being totally open and honest with each other. This book provides checklists and assessment tools to aid in the recovery process and a Marriage Recovery Agreement, all best used with the assistance of a trained counselor.

The Power of Commitment: A Guide to Active, Lifelong Love, by Scott M. Stanley (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass 2005). The author offers practical and spiritual guidance to help couples understand commitment, handle everyday pressures, deal with the pain of disappointment and unfulfilled hopes, overcome extramarital attractions, and transform "me versus you" to "we" thinking in order to experience the joy of lifelong devotion and loyalty.

When Good People Have Affairs: Inside the Hearts and Minds of People in Two Relationships, by Mira Kirshenbaum (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008). Good people may unintentionally drift into affairs, often because someone else seems to offer something missing from their lives, causing overwhelming pain, confusion, and anxiety. The author offers guidance to help such persons and their spouses sort out their feelings and make decisions leading to growth and happiness.

Programs and Organizations for Infidelity Prevention and Recovery

Marriage Builders: Building Marriages to Last a Lifetime, www.marriagebuilders.com

Based on the work of Dr. Willard Harley, this website offers numerous articles and radio link recordings that teach couples how to meet each other's important emotional needs and cultivate their passion. You can sign up for e-newsletters, purchase online courses and access to radio broadcast archives, and read Dr. Harley's columns, which focus on preventing and healing from affairs.

Retrouaille: A Lifeline for Troubled Marriages. This Christian Peer Ministry begins with a weekend retreat in which husbands and wives learn to re-establish communication and gain new understanding of themselves and each other. Presenting couples, who have survived their own crises, share stories of their pain, reconciliation, and healing. Participants are not asked to share publicly in this setting, but learn tools and receive encouragement to rediscover each other and their relationship. This program also includes follow-up sessions over a three-month period. Couples who have experienced healing through *Retrouaille* would be a wonderful resource for mentoring othe/r couples in crisis. [Call 1-800-470-2230 or visit www.retrouaille.org for information about schedule and location of retreats.]

The Beyond Affairs Network (BAN). Canada: 604-859-9393; USA: 360-306-3367. This network provides website resources and support for those affected by infidelity. Sign up for free e-newsletter, find support groups near you, and learn from the experiences of others. Call or email for a free initial consult and information about coaching. info@beyondaffairs.com, <http://www.beyondaffairs.com>.

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