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Starting Over

With God's help, it's possible to rebuild trust—even after a painful betrayal.

by *Louis McBurney* | posted 12/09/2008

When you promised "for better or for worse," maybe you momentarily considered the possibilities of "worse": illness, problems with children, financial difficulties. You probably never imagined you might one day face betrayal, but it's not uncommon for marital trust to be shattered by secretive behavior or broken promises.

In my counseling office, my own heart was breaking as I watched Barbara suffer in the moments after James, her husband of 21 years, confessed his infidelity. Her sobs wracked her whole body. She trembled in a corner, holding her knees to her chest as if to shield herself from the emotional assault.

James had been involved sexually with Barb's best friend, so she felt doubly betrayed. She had sensed a growing distance between her and James, but she'd never suspected adultery. Once Barb regained control, we returned to the counseling session to begin a process that would, at first, seem completely impossible: rebuilding her ruined trust.

Sexual unfaithfulness inflicts profound wounds, but in our years of counseling, my wife and I have seen deep pain caused by all kinds of betrayal: financial mismanagement, gambling or embezzlement, drug or alcohol abuse, a so-called emotional affair, any habitual hidden behavior. It's devastating to find that your spouse has kept a part of his or her life a secret. Initially, the sense of betrayal is so strong that re-establishing trust seems an unreachable goal. But it is possible, as Barb and James found, to find a way to trust again.

Restoring trust takes place in four areas of your life. The process demands a lot of you, involving your emotions, your mind, your behaviors and your time. But the reward comes when you are able once again to put your faith in your mate.

Healing the Emotions

When secrets are exposed, they leave a trail of pain and shattered emotions. Healing begins through honest communication and a growing understanding of the emotions both partners are dealing with. It's essential that the offending spouse acknowledge the hurt that he or she has caused. And I'm not talking about a casual "I'm sorry" followed by an implied "get over it."

Andy and Becky came to counseling soon after Becky found an X-rated video hidden in her husband's closet. When confronted, Andy reluctantly confessed that he'd been looking at porn since he was about 12. To his surprise, the confession actually relieved the tremendous guilt he had suffered, and he expected Becky to share his gladness that now they had no more secrets. He was understandably embarrassed, but once he had apologized, he felt the whole thing was over. He couldn't figure out why his wife couldn't let it go.

To Becky, Andy's revelation was a land mine that ripped apart her life. She couldn't believe he didn't understand how devastated she felt. She now doubted her sexual attractiveness. She was obsessed with questions about where his mind went when they were making love. She wondered if there had been physical infidelities as well as his fantasized affairs. Most difficult was the unnerving realization that while she thought they had shared all of life's most intimate moments, Andy had kept a secret part of himself from which she'd been totally excluded.

Andy wanted to get on with life, so he tried to avoid Becky's emotional struggle. But soon he realized that his eagerness to get beyond his shame was short-circuiting his wife's need for him to acknowledge the shame and hurt his addiction had caused her.

The healing began for Becky when Andy started to really listen. His care and attention helped her begin to risk intimacy again. As she started to lower her protective barriers, she began to sense what it must have been like for Andy to struggle with his secret shame for 20 years.

Freeing the Mind

People often mistake forgiveness for a feeling, but fundamentally forgiveness is a choice, an act of the will. That's why we are commanded to forgive. Forgiving involves acknowledging your own hurt, releasing your thoughts about the violation and giving up the desire to pay the offender back. If you are the spouse who has been wronged, it may seem strange that the burden of this stage of healing falls to you. But forgiving has more to do with the health of your spiritual and mental life than it does with your spouse's. Forgiving releases your spouse from your wrath, but—more importantly—it frees you from the destructive bondage of unforgiveness.

For a time, Becky got stuck in a painful recycling of Andy's betrayal, complete with vivid instant replay of the initial shock and her imagined scenarios of revenge. She finally left behind the incessant rehearsal of Andy's betrayal by choosing, again and again, to shut

out negative, angry thoughts. She asked God to help keep those ideas from dominating her thinking. She substituted good memories and feelings about their relationship when those thoughts crept back in. She found it becoming easier, especially since Andy seemed more aware of the hurt he had caused. Forgiveness is much tougher if the offending spouse doesn't acknowledge his or her sin and the pain it causes, but it's still necessary.

Changing Behaviors

Most couples eagerly watch for changes in behavior to signal that trust is growing again. Barb found herself doubting James any time he was late coming home or not available when she called him at work. For years she had never questioned him about those things, but with his infidelity fresh in her mind, she had a hard time believing his explanations.

To build trust, James worked on changing his pattern; he tried to let Barb know if he was going to be later than usual or away from the office. After a while, though, having to check in with his wife began to make him feel stifled and controlled. By then, Barb could see James's efforts to be accountable, so she didn't need to check on him so much. After that, it felt good when James did call. It was more an act of love than of duty.

Becky and Andy changed some behaviors, too. Andy told Becky the times of day when he typically felt tempted. They made a pact that he could call her for encouragement any time his mind began to wander into improper fantasies. Eventually, these calls became opportunities to express their love and passion for each other, instead of just an update on his struggle to overcome an addiction.

At home, they became more open about their sexual relationship. Andy was surprised to find that Becky was more adventuresome and interested in a greater variety of pleasurable experiences. Plus, she began to take more initiative sexually, which made Andy feel more accepted and desired. The new behaviors didn't promise an instant fix, but they were necessary steps in learning new skills.

Taking Time

There are rarely instantaneous reversals in behavior, so a crucial ingredient to rebuilding trust is time that is generously undergirded with God's grace. Having a spirit of grace doesn't mean you don't need tough love with clearly defined limits—especially when disastrous consequences (such as sexually transmitted disease, physical abuse, financial ruin or criminal activity) might result.

During your rebuilding time, you will deal with occasional new revelations of past failure, admissions of ongoing temptations, expressions of anger and other traces of the original betrayal. Expect these temporary setbacks, and keep on accepting one another with grace. Don't let the difficulty of the task prevent you from achieving your goal.

As you invest time in the healing process, make sure you celebrate your victories. Call attention to the positive milestones: a day when you no longer feel angry or guilty, an encouraging time of intimacy, a number of months free from an addictive behavior. Another way to celebrate is to check in periodically with a counselor or an accountability and support group. Rejoice together in the progress you make.

It's incredible to see what once appeared to be an irreparable wound transformed into a stimulus for growth. If you've been struggling with a betrayal of trust, be encouraged. You're already living with the "worse" in "for better or worse." With God's help, even the most serious betrayal can be overcome when you honor your vows and commit to making right what has gone wrong.

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