



After the Affair - Ten Steps of Healing

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Sexual infidelity is betrayal of the deepest kind, and most marriages don't fully recover. That's why Jesus said it was one of the few grounds for divorce (Matthew 19:9). For a marriage to heal, both the unfaithful spouse and the one betrayed must fight hard to rebuild their relationship.

After disclosure, couples may seek pastoral or professional help. This is important because without outside accountability most couples will not do the work necessary to heal the damage even if they choose to stay married.

As biblical counselors it is crucial that we understand that adultery is always evidence of a deeper more sinister problem. Before a marriage can be rebuilt, the root heart problem(s) must be identified and owned.

Let me illustrate: Many years ago near where I live, the city of Allentown, PA was held spellbound by the drama surrounding a giant sinkhole that threatened to topple an entire office structure called Corporate Office Plaza. The sinkhole had developed in the middle of the night and quickly spread over 50 feet wide and 18 feet deep.

The first clue that something was wrong came when operators of the city's reservoirs noticed a two-foot drop in water levels in the middle of the night. Crews were sent out to search for the leak and discovered a widening sinkhole that was swallowing up the water. At dawn, before any businesses opened, the menacing sinkhole began its destruction in the street. Corporate Office Plaza began to sink and crumble. Huge shards of glass and bricks tumbled to the pavement below as the building began to buckle and crack, teetering on the verge of collapse.

"Can't this building be stabilized?" the new anchors questioned. Business owners asked, "Can we at least go in to salvage our things?" It was February and many of the businesses occupying building were accounting firms who were smack in the middle of tax season.

Unfortunately, Corporate Office Plaza was ruined—destroyed from deep within by a force that was unobserved and unknown until too late.

In the same way, when adultery is exposed, what looked like a good marriage on the outside suddenly and dramatically begins to crumble. The very foundation upon which that structure has been built is questioned. What happened? What went wrong? How do we fix this? Is it even fixable?

Just like Corporate Office Plaza could not be safely rebuilt without first addressing the sinkhole problem, a marriage cannot be rebuilt without addressing the inner issues going on in the heart that led someone to choose to betray and lie to his or her partner.

Below are ten (10) areas we need to explore with couples experiencing the pain of infidelity so that healing can take place.

1. Does the spouse who committed adultery take ownership and repent for his or her choice without blaming? Please note—in addition, there may be serious marital issues that need to be addressed that may have contributed to the adulterer's feelings of anger, resentment, and loneliness in the marriage that made his or her choice to cheat feel reasonable and acceptable. But those issues are secondary to first taking full responsibility and repenting for one's choice to be unfaithful.
2. Is there a willingness on the part of the adulterer to do the work of self-examination to understand better why he/she made that choice so that the triggers and excuses are addressed? Is he/she willing to look at the deep heart issues that allowed him/her to make this choice—the sinkholes in his life like pride, entitlement, selfishness, anger, poor impulse control, sexual addiction, and/or family history issues?
3. Is there a genuine sorrow for the pain he/she has caused the spouse? Often times we see the "guilty" spouse in pain, but it's more for the pain they're in than the pain they've caused. Perhaps he is conflicted about whether to stay in the affair or in the marriage; or she is in pain because she's been caught, humiliated, fearing the loss of her children or financial security through divorce. But we don't see any genuine acknowledgment or awareness for the pain they've caused their spouse.
4. Is the adulterous spouse willing to sit with his/her spouse and really listen to her hurt and heartache over this and show compassion, empathy and care no matter how long it takes?
5. Is the injured spouse willing to forgive even if right now he/she doesn't know how to do that?

6. Is the injured spouse willing to take a hard look at ways he/she may have contributed to neglect in the marriage or other unresolved problems that created emotional distancing to develop? What were the sinkholes in the marriage before this happened?
7. Is the injured spouse willing to be honest with her feelings of sadness, hurt, anger and do the hard work to work through them and move past them? So often there is pressure to sweep one's negative emotions under the rug and forgive and move on without doing the hard work of actually feeling them and letting them go.
8. Is the injured spouse willing to acknowledge the positive changes his/her spouse is making toward rebuilding trust and healing the marriage?
9. Is the couple able to tolerate that the healing process goes in fits and starts; it isn't a smooth ride?
10. Is the spouse who committed adultery willing to be patient with the process as his/her spouse struggles to let it go, gets retriggered with old memories or current reminders, or can't immediately feel trust or warm feelings for his/her spouse? Does the adulterer show empathy and compassion for his/her partner's struggle or irritation and impatience? Is the adulterer willing to do what it takes to rebuild her trust?

A marriage that has suffered infidelity can come through it stronger and healthier than it was before the affair if together a couple does the hard work. Sadly, often a couple wants a quick fix and aren't willing to do what it takes. But think of it this way—if Corporate Plaza had been rebuilt without addressing why the sinkhole was there and how to prevent it from happening in the future, it would have been foolish. The entire structure would be vulnerable to the same problem happening all over again.

In the same way let's be careful as biblical counselors to not try to repair the marriage after adultery without addressing the sinkholes that got them there in the first place.