

Recovery as a Couple

Information based on Back from Betrayal by Jennifer P. Schneider M.D.

What does recovering from addiction with your partner, or as the partner, look like?

Recovering as a couple can be very difficult due to the negative feelings and memories that have built up over time. Resentment of the addict's infidelity, dishonesty, betrayal, hurtful behaviors and emotional unavailability cannot be forgotten or forgiven.

Couples also commonly have deeply entrenched patterns of relating to one another that are unhealthy. Old patterns are difficult to alter and require both parties to be equally committed to changing them.

Another reason it can be hard is the partner's tendency to monitor the addict's recovery program. This is totally understandable since it is the way that the partner can feel safe and predict the future. Partners of addicts have the difficult task of overcoming their relationship addiction/trauma while continuing the relationship with the person they are addicted to.

“Addicts can clearly know they need to stop and cannot. Despite the consequences they continue high-risk behavior. They become so obsessed with the behavior that all their life priorities—children, work, values, family, hobbies, friends—are sacrificed for the behavior and the preoccupation that goes with it. The addiction becomes a way to escape or obliterate pain. The addict needs the behavior in order to feel normal. Now reread the previous paragraph and substitute the word **relationship** for the word **behavior**.”
— Patrick J. Carnes, *The Betrayal Bond: Breaking Free of Exploitive Relationships*

I know this can be hard to take in as the partner, but I just want you to take a minute to think about this and how you have seen it in your life and your relationship patterns. This is not true for all partners, but is very common.

It is important as the partner to recognize that we cannot control the addicts behavior, thoughts, actions, and that it is NOT our fault if the addict acts out. We have no control over what happens next. The only thing we have control over is OUR recovery and healing process.

Common recovery steps we will be covering are as follows:

- Abstinence
- Disclosure by the addict of the addictive behaviors
- What to tell the children
- Establishing Boundaries
- Re-establishing trust

- Changes in the couple's sexual relationship
- Dealing with relapse by the addict

ABSTINENCE

Sobriety is a time out not an end

Sobriety for 90 days is encouraged for several reasons

- Maintaining abstinence allows the addict to achieve a certain level of success in that they are no longer using inappropriate behavior to perpetuate the cycle of dependency.
- Maintaining abstinence allows the addict to practice intimacy outside of the sexual relationship and become aware of their repressed feelings.
- Maintaining abstinence lets the addict learn more effective ways of dealing with pain and with guilt.
- Maintaining abstinence lets the addict learn to see their spouse or partner as a human being rather than as a means of sexual gratification.

For people who have always believed that sex (or the substance, behavior) was their most important need, it is educational to see that they can survive without it.

Ways that abstinence and sobriety is beneficial for both parties is as follows:

1. Partners learn that they are wanted for more than just their bodies and that they can get love without giving sex
2. Abstinence forces partners to adopt new coping strategies and face problems directly
3. Abstinence can be the bridge to a new sexual relationship where both partners feel more comfortable paying attention to their own feelings
4. Abstinence can allow partners to work through their own issues
5. Abstinence in a relationship that is committed to growth can result in renewed intimacy and can teach the couple new, deeper levels of relating.
6. A period of abstinence teaches both parties that sex is OPTIONAL

Not all couples need or want a period of abstinence, the important thing however is that the decision is MUTUAL either way

DISCLOSURE

Disclosure is a vital part of the healing process for every couple. The partner of the addict will finally be able to know the whole truth, have their intuition and instincts be shown to be accurate and correct, and the addict will finally be relieved of the burden that secrets bring!

When one member of a couple is unfaithful, the partner often suspects it. What brings couples to counseling however is a crisis that occurs where the affair can no longer be denied.

Disclosure is a three part process:

- *The Full Disclosure* is when the addict writes up a full and complete account of all addictive and acting out behaviors from childhood to the present moment. This includes all behaviors that occurred while with their partner, all the things that the addict has kept hidden. This is normally excruciatingly painful for both parties and is read aloud by the addict with their therapist, the partner and the partner's therapist present to mediate.
- *The Impact Letter* is the step that comes after the full disclosure. The partner has an opportunity to write up a letter talking about all the ways that the addict's behavior and the addiction have affected their life, their sexuality, their self-esteem, their relationships with others, their self-trust, their ability to work, and the couples relationship. The partner also provides a list of the boundaries they will be putting in place moving forward as well as the consequences that will occur if the boundaries are not followed. This is also read aloud by the partner, with their therapist, the addict and the addict's therapist present.
- *The Restitution Letter* is the final step and in this step the addict responds to the Impact Letter. They validate their partners' experience, apologize for the impact that their lies, deceit, addiction, behaviors have affected their partner, and agree to or refuse the boundaries and consequences set out by the partner. They also confirm what they will do moving forward to help rebuild trust with their partner.

Optional 4th step: *The Polygraph*

- The polygraph is an optional step that many couples choose to take. The polygraph test is normally taken immediately following the Full Disclosure by the addict. This is to confirm that they told the whole truth so that the partner can be confident in the fact that they finally know everything. For most partners there is what is called "staggered disclosure" by the addict that occurs constantly over the years. And this is when the addict provides new details, stories, and bit's and pieces that each time is supposedly "everything", "all that happened", "nothing else", "only happened once"... etc. This is incredibly painful and the partner normally knows that there is more.

The goal of the polygraph is to allow the partner to finally STOP digging, snooping, and looking for more. This allows them to finally relax. No matter how painful the disclosure is most partners are equally RELIEVED to finally know the truth.

WHAT TO TELL THE KIDS

All addiction involves secrecy. We try to keep secrets from our spouse, children, friends, employees, and significant others. Most of the time it is just an illusion of secrecy.

Because addiction is considered a family disease, recovery is most effective when it involves the whole family.

Sex is a difficult subject for parents to discuss with children. It may be harder for an addict to disclose his or her sexual behavior to children due to shame, anger, fear of alienating that child, fear that the children might be harmed by the information, or concern that they might tell others.

“People who are unwilling to share with their children often assume that the children did not know what was going on. In fact, children often knew. They may have overheard telephone calls, arguments, and conversations, but kept the information to themselves. Even if they didn’t know the details, they may have sensed the stress and tension between their parents. Telling older children about addiction and recovery can validate the children’s feelings. Furthermore, it gives them permission to talk about what they may have felt and experienced during their parents’ acting out.”

Evasiveness with children is likely to continue the legacy of secrecy, which promotes addiction.

What do you tell your kids based on their age

Preschool (ages 3 to 5) - They want to know: Are you going to leave me? Am I in trouble? Do you love me?

Elementary-school age - They want to know: Is the fighting my fault? Will something bad (like divorce) happen? Why do you seem different now than before recovery?

Children ages 9 to 13 - They want to know: Am I normal? Will I get this addiction because I have sexual feelings or have masturbated? What will happen to me if you get divorced?

Teens and young adults - They want to know: How could you do this to Mom/Dad (i.e. to the partner of the addict)? To the family? How does this specifically relate to me? (You’ve ruined my life!)

Research has shown that prior to disclosure most children knew of the parent's behavior or suspected it.

Four Reasons to Disclose to Children

- To validate what the children already know
- To explain the situation to them thoughtfully before they find out from others
- To break the generational cycle of addiction often present in families
- For the children's safety, if they are at risk of being exposed to behaviors by the addicted parent.

One word of caution:

Before deciding to share with your family members information about the addicts behaviors and recovery, examine your motives.

Acceptable motives: *To become honest with your children or parents, to allow them to understand what is happening in the family, and to encourage open expression of feelings.*

Unacceptable motives: *To use your children inappropriately as confidantes, seeking allies in a struggle with the mate and complaining about the marital partner's transgressions. Tell a child may be used as a way to get back at the addict.*

ESTABLISHING BOUNDARIES

Boundaries can be difficult to maintain for many partners. However, through this process many partner's see the need to establish and hold boundaries.

This requires becoming aware of their own feelings, needs, becoming assertive about their needs and wants, and learning to communicate constructively with the addict.

Before recovery, many partners were fearful of abandonment and would tolerate hurtful behaviors rather than confronting the addict. There would be excuses, reasons and mitigating circumstances they could use to excuse the addicts behavior.

Couples in recovery learn to develop limits or boundaries in their relationship as well as consequences when the agreement is broken.

RE-ESTABLISHING TRUST

Trust in someone involves predictability, dependability, and faith. Being able to predict how the person will behave in the future based on the past. Being able to depend on someone no matter

what. We judge both predictability and dependability based on past behavior. Since we cannot know what will happen in the future we have faith that the person will continue to behave the way they always have in the past, in the future.

When an affair comes to light, predictability, dependability, and faith vanish.

For the couple who decides to rebuild their relationship after disclosure of infidelity, re-establishing trust is a major task.

Rebuilding trust requires honesty and consistency day-by-day until a track record exists that new trust can be based.

CHANGES IN THE SEXUAL RELATIONSHIP

When someone who uses sex to feel good marries a partner who believes sex is the most important sign of love, sex is likely constitute a very important part of their relationship.

Most couples have unspoken rules about their sexual relationship. For example, some men always initiate. Many women never say no.

*Many partners' sexual feelings might have been enhanced by the fear and uncertainty in their relationship. The unpredictability of the mate's behavior added excitement to their lovemaking. If they argued and then reconciled by making love, the energy of the argument was experienced as part of the chemistry and sexual activity. **Sex was more about intensity than intimacy.***

In recovery the rules that formerly governed many aspects of the couple's life together need to be replaced with new rules.

The key to successful restructuring of the sexual relationship is a willingness to talk to each other about feelings. This is not easy for most couples, especially when many people grew up believing that it is not okay to talk about feelings.

As the trust in each other grows, so will the intimacy and sharing in the marriage. This will also cause sex to become more enjoyable due to sex becoming more about intimacy than intensity.

DEALING WITH RELAPSE

Relapse occurs when the addict returns to the use of addictive substances or behaviors after a period of abstinence.

A "slip" is a one-time event that happens unexpectedly, whereas a "relapse" is a prolonged move back to the compulsive behavior.

Partners of addicts are likely to discover and/or experience disclosure of relapse if they remain in a committed relationship with a sex addict.

Because of this it is important that the couple establishes a plan of action in the event of a slip or relapse. This includes what the partner needs to know, and what actions the partner expects the addict to take.

- Disclose the relapse or slip to the partner within 24 hours
- The addict needs to tell their sponsor and therapist

Example of a consequence:

- If the slip or relapse is not disclosed in 24 hours the partner will leave the relationship, or separate for a time.

Benefits of having a plan of action:

The addict shares about what happened and the partner gets to see change, motivation on the part of the addict by being open and honest, and a reality gut-check/confirmation about how she is experiencing her spouse at that moment.

This also allows the partner to make an informed decision moving forward about what they will do.

WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT

I know this seems like a lot of work. Why not just give up and move on?

I want to let you know that even though the situation seems hopeless, there IS hope. Couples that go through the recovery process together, and are committed to healing, end up feeling closer with their partner than they ever have before.

This is an opportunity to make diamonds out of rubble! Beauty out of Ashes! You have hit rock bottom, and that is why you are here. Until people hit rock bottom they are usually in denial and unwilling to admit that there is a problem or that they need help.

This is where we come in. We are here to support you, encourage you, and help you gather the strength that you need to make it through this grueling and painful process. This is what it takes to heal your marriage. We are PROUD of you for being so courageous and cannot wait to support you through this process.