

Beyond BETRAYAL

Sex Addiction & Betrayal Trauma:

A Primer, from a Christian perspective, for Friends and Family

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beyondbetrayal.community

Contents

Introduction.....	3
Understanding the couple	5
Helping... him	6
Supporting... her.....	8
Supporting the couple	9
Conclusion.....	10

Introduction

Sex addiction is one of those things we always hope will be other people's problem. However, this issue is so common today—in the church as well as secular society—that almost all of us will know and love people whose lives are being impacted by it. While it may seem like one of those issues we should, “stay out of,” it's quite likely your family member/friend has never needed your support more.

That said, many family members/friends inadvertently end up causing harm when they get involved. The information in this booklet was put together to equip you with the best possible tools for supporting: a. the person with the addiction, b. the traumatized spouse and/or c. the two of them as a couple—while at the same time caring for yourself if your life has been impacted by the discovery of the addiction.

What is this problem?

Sex addiction, refers to habitual engagement in, and neurochemical or emotional dependency on, a broad range of “sexual acting out” behaviors including porn use, hiring of sexual services, affairs, one-night-stands and more. Unlike some of the secular sex addiction community, Christian Sex Addiction Specialists International (C-SASI) accepts that habitual self-sex, fantasizing, lusting and emotional affairs can be an addiction—or in other language, a type of sin-trap that is extremely damaging to marital (and other) relationships. In some cases, where the acting out is less habitual, these types of behaviors may be referred to as “sexual integrity issues.”

While it is men who are most likely to struggle with a sexual addiction (or sexual integrity issues), it is not uncommon for women today to also be struggling. Likewise, husbands can also experience betrayal trauma.

Note that a one-time affair does not necessarily indicate a sexual addiction—though it does indicate a problem in the unfaithful partner that needs tending to. Also,

it is not uncommon for a betrayed spouse to have a “revenge affair” (real or virtual). This may be a reaction to a life of betrayal and its (often) accompanying patterns of neglect and abuse. Such a reaction, while concerning, does not necessarily indicate an addiction.

Betrayal trauma: Researchers have demonstrated that the discovery of a spouse's infidelity (particularly when there has been a regular pattern of it) creates a trauma response in most people. This trauma response is usually complicated by other patterns in the marriage that go alongside the sexual acting out—patterns such as lying/hiding, emotional abuse, anger, controlling behaviors, sexual coercion and other forms of domestic violence.

Normal trauma responses you might now be witnessing in your friend/relative include:

- Not being present (aka, being “zoned out”) at times
- Forgetting things she ought to know (including words, facts, and where she left her car keys)
- Uncharacteristic, or seemingly unaccountable, displays of anger, fear, depression
- Sudden panic attacks or startle reactions
- Inability to cope with usual day-to-day tasks
- Inability to enjoy life as she did previously

Community Pain

Whether or not you wanted to know about your friend's, child's, sibling's, etc. issues around sex addiction/betrayal trauma, you are to some degree involved. This is because he/she/they are quite possibly in the crisis of their lives and it's not possible to keep the issues politely “under wraps” all the time any more. They may be wanting to talk about their journey constantly, withdrawing from contact and keeping silent, or going back and forth between the two. They may be exhibiting other types of behaviors that negatively impact their relationships.

Listening and showing empathy are two of the most helpful things you can do right now. If it all starts feeling overwhelming after awhile, remember you can lovingly/prayerfully use boundaries (e.g., "We've spent an hour today talking about 'him,' let's spend the rest of our time talking about other things."). Since, however, rejection is a common theme in the life of both the addict and the partner, consider telling them that the boundary is not a rejection, just an indication that you don't have the capacity to hold all the pain: it needs to be shared around by a broader support community.

That said, your friend's or family member's journey is one that has the potential to grow you. If you are willing to be part of their messy world, to some degree, in this season, there will undoubtedly be blessings and growth that follow.

Thanks for being both brave and loving enough to consider entering in.

Children's specific pain

In addition to the pain of being part of the addict's/spouse's community pain, children (especially of the addict and spouse) will often undergo their own form of betrayal trauma. If this is where you are at, please consider seeking professional support, to help you through this time. Unfortunately, there are currently few resources (books, groups, websites, etc.) specifically for the adult/teen children of sex addicts. However, a professional trained in treating sex addiction or betrayal trauma from a holistic approach (e.g., those trained by the Association of Partners of Sex Addicts Trauma Specialists) should be able to assist you in finding healing.

For now, understand that intense emotional pain, confusion (including feeling torn between your parents), grief, shame and even trauma symptoms are commonly reported by teen and adult children of sex addicts—particularly on discovery of the addiction/infidelity.

If you are a friend/family member of the children of a sex addict, please remember that they also may need your support.

Understanding the couple

If you are a family member/friend looking to support the couple on a healing journey from infidelity, porn addiction or sex addiction, please bear in mind:

- Sex addiction (porn addiction/infidelity) and lying go hand in hand
- Sex addiction and abusive behaviors go hand in hand
- Sex addicts (prior to healing) often believe, and tell others, they are the victim in the relationship and that their behavior is justified (this is called "addictive thinking")
- Friends and family add to the betrayer's addictive thinking, and the betrayed partner's trauma, when they excuse the betrayer's actions, blame the partner or invalidate her pain
- It's virtually impossible to heal from either sex addiction or betrayal trauma in isolation
- Families and friends have a tremendous power to help with the healing

These points have been witnessed time and again by professionals in the sex addiction, and other counseling fields. If you would like more information about sex addiction or betrayal trauma, consider checking out some of the [beyond betrayal resources](#) and the [BTR glossary of terms](#).

Many of the common mistakes friends/families make can be avoided by paying attention to the above. Some of those common mistakes are:

- Disbelieving the bad news of the addiction/infidelity (sometimes happens even when he himself is admitting his problem).
- Believing him (the addict—who has motivation to lie and has used lying as a coping mechanism for a long time) and not her (who has little reason to lie).
- Repeating confidences the wife has made (without her permission, and which could result in her being abused).
- Keeping confidences the husband has made—

that are harmful to him and to their relationship.

- Ignoring the evidence of your eyes. (If you catch him doing something counter-productive to good recovery, talk to him/them about it.)
- Putting all the emphasis on his recovery and ignoring her (and the children's) healing.
- Not encouraging him/her/them to seek support – or not seeking it for yourself when needed.
- Assuming that the wife can/should "fix him" by giving him more sex (sex the way he wants it, etc.) praying more, etc.

Helping... him

Lundy Bancroft, who has spent decades counseling abusive men (most of whom also have a porn and/or sex addiction), says to friends and family in his book, *Why Does He Do That?*:

"You are on the front line. You have a better chance of turning around an abuser's attitude than everyone else—the abused woman, a therapist, an abuser program, the courts—put together. You are the hardest ones to discredit. He dismisses the others on the list with a wave of his hand, because they are 'crazy' or 'liars' or 'hysterical' or 'anti-male.' But when his loved ones criticize him, he is likely to experience some uncertainty for the first time."

I believe the same applies to the man who is reluctant to give up his addiction and/or the poisonous behavior patterns surrounding them.

So how exactly do you, the friend or family member, go about helping him change his attitude? Your greatest tools are:

- Listening (particularly to her...)
- Confronting
- Supporting/Praying

Confront... in love

Counselor/author, Lundy Bancroft, who I quoted last week, says that it is impossible to get an abuser (or addict) to work on himself by non-confrontational means. This applies both to the "loud/angry" sex addict (who may have obvious patterns of abusing his wife/children) and the quiet/withdrawn sex addict (who will still have patterns of lying, hiding... and, often, incidents of covert abuse).

This means we'll have to challenge some of the behaviors discussed in the previous section, as well as any evidence of addictive thinking we see. Challenging needs to be done without shaming—because shame is part of what drives your friend/family member toward addiction. The difference between the two is that

shame says, "you're a bad person," while confrontation says, "you are a person of immense value and those behaviors are beneath you and must change."

Bancroft warns that at first, when challenging him, he will say:

"You are siding with her; she's turned you against me.' Respond to these distortions by saying: 'I am not against you; I am against your hurtful behaviour... [this is] the number-one problem [in the relationship].'"

A Tale of Two Addicts

If your friend/family member with the addiction has a strong personality—and frequent episodes of anger or rage—the thought of confronting him can feel intimidating. Pray and seek counsel about the right timing and make sure you yourself are safe. Please also keep in mind that your challenge may increase his wife's/children's risk. For safety's sake, do not instigate a conversation about his addiction and other harmful behaviors while he has been drinking/using drugs or if he has been triggered into anger already.

Pray that God will prepare the ground of his heart, and yours as well. Then, when you see your chance, ask God to go in with you and sew seeds of truth, while conveying your (and God's) love for him at the same time.

If your friend/family member with the addiction is the withdrawn type, he is more likely to appear to be the victim. This is particularly the case when his wife is, in her trauma, struggling with rage. When such is the case, it may seem cruel to add to his burden, by confronting him about his addiction or the unhealthy behaviors around it.

However, bear in mind that a lot of this burden is due to the addiction/sin and the changes it is working in him. Hearing the truth from someone who loves him could be a crucial part of his journey to freedom. Moreover, be aware that even very mild men can, when they are in their addiction or the early days of recovery, resort

to uncharacteristic abusive behaviors at times. His wife may need your help in confronting these.

Fortunately, as healing takes place, those with the addiction often find themselves thinking and feeling better, and thus less prone to resorting to uncharacteristic, sinful behaviors. The habituated behaviors (e.g. lying), however, will generally take longer to leave behind.

Support

While confronting is important, words alone don't usually result in change. Addiction requires professional help and ongoing community support. Consider being part of his support community, whether that means:

- Giving him time/space to talk and get helpful feedback
- Taking the kids so the couple can work on building intimacy
- Checking in with him weekly about his recovery work (be sure to check in with her as well... for the whole story), or
- Praying with and for him, because his connection to God is going to be pivotal to his healing

At the very least, please don't undermine his recovery by supporting the addictive thinking habits (sometimes summarized as "minimize, rationalize, justify and blame") or shaming him for his addiction.

The journey to healing from sex addiction and betrayal trauma is one of the messiest ever. If at any time you feel you are in over your head, suggest the couple seek specialist support (consider helping them find it on the [APSATS website](#)).

Supporting... her

Researchers have long been aware that the majority of wives/partners of sex addicts undergo a type of betrayal trauma. That trauma extends from the discovery of the sex addiction, as well as from poisonous patterns sex addiction has brought to the relationship. Wives of sex addicts have often been living with long-standing patterns of such things as:

- Emotional distance and neglect
- Emotional abuse and gaslighting
- Controlling behaviours such as manipulation, intimidation and coercion
- Anger and possibly physical abuse
- Sexual neglect and/or sexual violence
- Spiritual abuse and/or neglect
- Lying and hiding

Listen to her

In his book entitled *Why Does He Do That?* Counselor, Lundy Bancroft, writes, "Nothing would work faster to end the abuse of women than having the friends and family of abusive men stop enabling them. And that begins, in turn, with making sure that you listen carefully and respectfully to her side of the story—something the abusive man never does."

Experienced sex addiction counselors work from the assumption that "his story" is hardly ever a true and full picture of what is going on in the relationship, or his recovery. If, as a friend or relative, you've been given his "dark picture" of the betrayed wife, hold it lightly. You need to hear from her to begin to understand what is really going on.

Allowing her to tell her story is also an outlet for her pain. Try not to be shocked by either the content of the story or the manner in which it comes out. Her pain is enormous and the freer she is to express it (which depends in part on how safe a person she deems you to be) the more healing she will find.

Refrain from judging

It is all too tempting to make judgements about what

you're hearing, and to possibly even verbalize those judgements. Betrayed wives commonly hear such unhelpful comments as:

- All guys do that
- That doesn't sound like such a huge deal
- Don't you think you're overreacting
- What's your part in this
- Well you're not exactly perfect either
- Maybe you need to loosen up more in the bedroom

Here are some things to keep in mind before making such a statement:

- Women rarely tell the ugliest bits of the story: the coercion or humiliation she's faced in the bedroom, the most depraved (or illegal) parts of his acting out, the physical abuse. Some women save this for the counseling room or her best friend. Some go to the grave with these details. Thus, you almost undoubtedly don't know the full story, and that's for your good as well as the couple's. Please don't press for it.
- His sex addiction has nothing to do with her: her sexiness, her willingness to have sex, her temperament or character. God does not hold her accountable for his sin/addiction (which almost always preceded the marriage anyway) and neither should we.
- She has been traumatized by the discovery of his addiction or infidelity. Traumatized people behave in strange, socially unacceptable and/or uncharacteristic ways at times. She is often aware of where she has failed to live up to her own (God's/society's) standards and probably doesn't need it pointed out to her. Before you bring up her behaviors, ask yourself, "would I say this to a friend who just told me she'd been raped?" (another type of traumatic event, though one which many find is easier to cope with than betrayal trauma).

Supporting the couple

It's not uncommon to hear betrayed wives say they don't talk to friends/family because they just "don't get it." But it doesn't have to be that way. The friend or family member who is truly making an effort to understand her experience **can** give her good support.

In the best case scenario, by the time you've been told about the addiction, the couple have already worked out some healthy boundaries that support their healing. In a survey I conducted in 2015 (more details in the book [Beyond Betrayal](#)), I discovered that many men were quick to put boundaries around their technology use: i.e. they wanted a filtering/accountability software package such as [Covenant Eyes](#), they set boundaries around when/where/how they got on the internet, watched TV, etc. Some were also quick to suggest individual or couple's counseling.

However, it is also common for the betrayed spouse to want some boundaries that he's not keen on. Many of these boundaries can be summarized as "greater transparency." This might look like letting her go through his text messages at the end of the day, keeping an eye on his email, asking him to tell her each day (or more frequently) how he "did" in a given situation where he was exposed to sexualized media or people. The "what" of transparency is usually influenced by what form his sexual acting out has taken previously.

In his excellent book, *Worthy of Her Trust*, counselor Jason Martinkus explains that men need to be willing to begin to live more transparently and take the lead on that front:

"Try to anticipate what your wife might want to know. You don't need to be a mind reader. But you can be accommodating, proactive and empathetic enough to help her avoid taking on a private investigator role. Remember, most wives don't want to be in that role and are incredibly disappointed in themselves when they adopt it."

Thus, if you see that the wife is playing the private detective, don't have a word with her, have a word with him. Since he has misused his privacy in the past to

betray her, he needs to be proactively inviting her into his world to rebuild the relationship.

If the person with the addiction is refusing to live transparently and resisting her boundaries, this is another place where confrontation is called for. The main message for him is the same as above: "you misused your freedom and privacy in ways that traumatized your wife and greatly damaged your relationship; now you need to give up some freedom in order to lead in the healing process."

Consequences

For the wife, she might need your assistance to stand firm on her consequences if her husband is pushing/breaking healthy protective boundaries. This can feel really tough for some Christians, who may themselves struggle with healthy inter-personal boundaries. If you need help with this, consider reading one of the books in the *Boundaries* series by John Townsend and Henry Cloud.

Moreover, Christians often struggle with accepting that sometimes the only suitable consequence that the wife of a sex addict can bring to bear in her situation is leaving. Please try to be hopeful and supportive of the wife if that's the consequence she has chosen. Not all separations ultimately result in divorce. Not all divorces are irreparable separations. The sex addiction community is full of stories of re-marriage (to each other) following divorce. Townsend (in *Beyond Boundaries*) tells us it's important to hold a balance of "hope" that this isn't the end with "acceptance" that it could be, thus we need to move forward with our lives.

As mentioned above, it's not uncommon for the wife/couple to be withholding some of the worst bits of the story from their community. Thus, please don't judge if it comes down to separation/divorce. Try to listen compassionately and love them. If you need your own support to deal with the consequences: please seek out assistance from professionals or those who have the spiritual and emotional maturity to walk with you in this.

Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, the healing journey from sex addiction and betrayal trauma (in either the partner or the children) is one of the messiest ever. It is not linear. It results in regular crises: spiritual, emotional and sometimes even physical. It's the journey of years, not weeks.

Compassion and wisdom are needed when walking with a sex addict/betrayed wife. If you're concerned that you aren't particularly strong in these areas, God would like to help. Ask him to guide you in supporting the couple and caring for yourself.

You may also find it helpful to educate yourself further on the topic of sex addiction and betrayal trauma. For more resources please refer to beyondbetrayal.community/resources.

About Lisa

Lisa Taylor is a counsellor (NZCCA), certified clinical partner specialist candidate (APSATS) and pastoral sex addiction specialists (C-SASI) living in New Zealand. She has spent the last several years counseling and supporting women and couples whose lives, like her own, have been impacted by a husband's struggle with sex addiction, sex offending or sexual integrity issues. Her books on this topic include *Beyond Betrayal*, *Beyond Betrayal Couples' Guide* and *There's WHAT on my Phone?* (youth fiction). She also runs an online community blog for partners at beyondbetrayal.community.