

Reacting to the affair



*Jo Ann
Lederman*

FAMILY MATTERS

Dear Jo Ann,

I just discovered my husband's affair. I was tipped off by a colleague of his with whom I am friends. I hired a detective to check it out. The detective confirmed what I feared. When confronted with the photographs, my husband fessed up. I am devastated. Can I heal?

Louise.

Dear Louise,

Unfortunately, millions of women have asked themselves the same question.

My answer is "yes" but not immediately; that would be unrealistic. There are steps you must take now to repair your shattered feelings. Later, as part of the process, there are issues you and your husband will want to examine, and new skills to be learned and put in place.

In her book *After the Affair*, Janis Spring addresses three sequential stages that the hurt partner typically goes through:

- Reacting to the affair
- Reviewing your options
- Recovering from the affair

Louise, you are in stage one, reacting to the affair. Nothing in life prepares us for the shattering, crushing betrayal. You will find yourself numb and out of control, abandoned, reeling from the shock and sense of betrayal. One patient said, "When I learned of my husband's affair with his secretary, it felt worse than when our child died. Then, I knew doctors had done all that they could. I never dreamed my husband, my best friend, would become the instrument of my torment and grief."

Many women feel so out of control they believe they are going crazy. You can expect physiological changes in your nervous system and in your cogni-

tive abilities. Adrenaline floods through your body creating a heightened state of arousal. You may become hyper-vigilant looking for signs that your husband is seeing his mistress. You lose all sense of restraint, reacting reflexively in fear. You may be unable to sleep or eat. You may have a sense of disorientation, losing track of time or conversations, losing keys or even getting lost. There is no right or wrong during this period.

Some women are wracked with pain; others become so numb as to be dysfunctional. Some women I have treated even lose their will to live. Questioning identity and self esteem are common. Questioning your value; what's wrong with me? Anger may turn to shame and become a crisis of confidence. What did I do wrong? Some women debase themselves begging for their husband's love; others react by demanding their husbands leave. The crisis of this time is heightened by a sense of further disconnection. Who can I confide in? Who can help? If my husband and I are to have a chance at reconciliation, do I want our friends to know?

We have had no rehearsal for this type of betrayal and loss. The wounds are initially devastating, but they do not have to be fatal. So many of the couples I treat have used this crisis as a crisis of opportunity to explore the elements from both sides that contributed to this moment. Examination and correction of the elements leading to this affair are essential to healing.

With information, love, support and new strategies enacted, most couples that I treat go on to forge even stronger bonds than existed prior to the affair. Temporarily crippled, the marriage limps until it can walk, then run strong, stronger than before.

Jo Ann Lederman is executive director of South Miami Psychology Associates, specializing in marriage and family therapy, couples therapy, infertility issues, behavioral medicine and business consulting. For more information, call 305-666-8833 or address email to <JoAnnVolkLederman1@juno.com>.