

Healing from Sexual Betrayal Through the Power of Group

Relationships can bring both healing and destruction. I am never more reminded of this truth than when I'm surrounded by a group of women who are sharing their stories of being deceived and betrayed by their sexually addicted husbands. Their descriptions of spouses engaging in multiple affairs, compulsive sexting, or pornography addiction, fill the room with palatable pain. Although their stories vary, they all share the devastating experience of having the very foundation of their world shattered. This intimate betrayal has left them in a state of crisis not only in their marriage but also in their relationship to self, others, and God.

The impact of sexual betrayal is profound, extending into intrapersonal, spiritual, and interpersonal realms. Most women report symptoms typically associated with post-traumatic stress disorder.ⁱ They describe reduced cognitive functioning, depression, anxiety, nightmares, intrusive thoughts, insomnia, and decreased self-esteem.ⁱⁱ In addition, women who espouse a strong faith often find themselves experiencing what the literature terms *religious and spiritual struggles*, the distress that emerges when people of faith are unable to reconcile their lived experience with their belief system.ⁱⁱⁱ In the context of sexual betrayal, women often feel abandoned by God and misled by religious teaching.^{iv} Doubting and full of shame, they disconnect from God and other vital sources of support, resulting in increased symptoms of PTSD.^v

Given the vast damage caused by sexual betrayal in these domains, group therapy provides avenues of healing not possible in individual therapy.^{vi} In the group process, therapeutic factors are activated that facilitate growth and change. Healing comes when people learn they are not alone in their experiences (universality), have a safe space to voice their pain (catharsis), contribute to the growth of others (altruism), and receive encouragement from others

who are farther along in their journey (instillation of hope). These factors and more foster group cohesion, the sense of belonging and acceptance that creates a safe environment for betrayed women to do the hard work of reconnecting to self, others, and God.

Often overlooked in the recovery process is the impact that continual denial, deception, and gaslighting has on women's ability to trust themselves.^{vii} Not only has their perception of reality been denied and challenged, but they begin to believe that they are crazy and irrational. The result is that over time, they lose their ability to trust their intuition. Participation in group therapy offers women a safe place to rediscover their voice and learn to trust themselves again. For many, group is the first place where they share their full story. As they give voice to their confusion, shame, and anger, the community of women around them validate and normalize their experience in a uniquely powerful way. In this empathetic exchange, betrayed women begin to trust again in their perceptions of reality and embrace their intuition.^{viii}

The group therapy experience also helps betrayed women begin the hard work of trusting and reconnecting to others. Women who have been betrayed by sexually addicted spouses report a great deal of isolation perpetuated by shame.^{ix} Drawing the conclusion that some deficiency in them has led to their husbands' addiction, they adopt negative beliefs about self. In addition, they fear that they have failed as wives and Christians because they feel stuck and unable to forgive their husbands.^x These false beliefs foster shame, leading women to withdraw from others. Group provides the antidote to shame in a unique and powerful way. In her seminal research, Brené Brown reports that shame is the fear of being unworthy of love and belonging and by nature thrives in secrecy, silence, and judgment.^{xi} As women exercise vulnerability in the safe and confidential environment of group therapy, they give voice to their negative beliefs about self and discover that the very act of sharing helps to dissipate the shame. In addition,

receiving empathy, encouragement, and input from fellow strugglers allows women to begin the arduous task of challenging these distorted beliefs about self. Through the power of group cohesion, women taste belonging and acceptance and begin to hope that they are worthy of love. With a developing sense of self and reduced shame, they reconnect to others and receive the interpersonal support they so desperately need.^{xii}

Finally, group therapy facilitates an environment that allows betrayed women to do the hard work of reconnecting to and trusting God. The impact of repeated infidelity leave many women feeling as if God has been unfaithful as well.^{xiii} In addition, specific religious teachings hint to women that anger towards God is inappropriate and even sinful, resulting in unexpressed anguish and increased disconnection.^{xiv} In group, therapists invite and give permission to women to voice their anger to God and in doing so validate their sense of divine betrayal and abandonment. The supportive and empathetic responses of fellow strugglers to these confessions facilitate divine healing and encourage further spiritual engagement by creating hope that perhaps God is present and active.^{xv} Both the expression of anger and the compassionate response by group members allows betrayed women to begin the slow work of rebuilding trust with God.^{xvi}

Group therapy is a powerful healing agent for women who have been sexually betrayed. Having led several of these therapy groups, I am humbly reminded that although a trauma and narrative focus can provide beneficial coping strategies, the true medium of healing will be the relationships they foster with other women in the group. As Yalom reminds us all, “It is the relationship that heals.”^{xvii}

ⁱ From “Posttraumatic Growth in Relationally Betrayed Women” D. Laasar, H. Putney, M. Bundick, D. Delmonico, & E. Griffin, 2017, *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 43(3), p. 436.

ⁱⁱ From “Transcending the Negative: Spiritual Struggles and Resilience in Older Female Trauma Survivors” S. Bowland, B. Biswas, S. Kyriakakis, & T. Edmond, 2011, *Journal of Religion, Spirituality, & Aging*, 23, p. 322.

-
- ⁱⁱⁱ From “Religious and Spiritual Struggles” J. Exline, 2013, In K. Pargament (Ed.), *APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality: Vol. 1, Context, Theory, and Research*, p.460.
- ^{iv} From “Spiritual Stress and Coping Model of Divorce: A Longitudinal Study” E. Krumrei, A. Mahoney, & K. Pargament, 2011, *Journal of Family Psychology*, 26(6), p. 974.
- ^v From “The Unique Contributions of Positive and Negative Coping to Posttraumatic Growth and PTSD” M. Gerber, A. Boals, & D. Schuettler, 2011 *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 3(4), p.304.
- ^{vi} From “The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy” (3rd Ed.), I. Yalom, I & M. Leszcz, 2005, p. 232.
- ^{vii} From “Intimate Deception: Healing the Wounds of Sexual Betrayal” B. Keffer, 2018, p. 241.
- ^{viii} *Ibid.*, p. 247.
- ^{ix} *Ibid.*, p. 51.
- ^x Bowland, p. 325
- ^{xi} From “The gifts of imperfection” B. Brown, 2010, p. 40.
- ^{xii} Keffer, p. 72-73.
- ^{xiii} Bowland, p. 327.
- ^{xiv} From “The Process of Resolving Spiritual Struggle Following Adulthood Trauma” A. Keith, Doctoral Dissertation, 2017, p. 67-68
- ^{xv} From “If I Tell Others About My Anger Toward God, How Will They Respond? Predictors, Associated Behaviors, and Outcomes in an Adult Sample” J. Exline, & J. Grubbs, 2011, *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 39(4), p. 313.
- ^{xvi} From “God’s Role in Suffering: Theodicies, Divine Struggle, and Mental Health” J. Wilt, J. Exline, J. Grubbs, C. Park, & K. Pargament, 2016, *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 8(4), p.358.
- ^{xvii} From “Love’s Executioner” I. Yalom, 1989, p. 112.