



Cleansing the Streams of the Soul: Spiritual Recovery After an Affair

By Angela Reid, LPC, AGTS alumna and adjunct professor

News of an affair can be devastating. Statistics estimating the number of marriages affected by this experience are sobering. What can be expected when the unexpected becomes reality?

Consider the merging of two streams as a picture of the unity of marriage. As joined waters, they flow over stones down the path of life's journey. Yet, they remain one stream—inseparable. An affair is a bend in the stream, an unexpected turn deviating from the stream's natural course—a perfect collection point for debris. The once free-flowing water becomes dammed by rocks, trash and grime. The water begins to stagnate; its movement inhibited, its beauty disfigured.

But God is in the stream cleaning business! His desire is to restore unity in the marriage by cleansing and healing the waters of the soul. Both spouses carry emotional and spiritual baggage after an affair, and it takes both spouses, in unity with God, to recreate a beautiful, healthy stream that flows on course.

If an affair hits home, it is an understatement to say the marriage relationship will suffer hardship. But hardship is not impossible to overcome. In order to move beyond this unforeseen bend in the stream, there are several key components to consider.

- Allow yourself to experience the reality of your emotions. Denying that you are hurt and confused does not cause the hurt and confusion to disappear. Common initial feelings include shock, numbness, disbelief, anger, grief and despair. Acknowledge your feelings and allow God time to bring healing to inner wounds.
- Avoid the tendency to constantly replay the details of the affair in your mind. As

your marriage is moving toward health, refuse to allow yourself to dwell on the ways you've been wronged. Your mind is the battleground where the war for your marriage is won or lost.

- As you take your thoughts captive, replace negative, hurtful thoughts with life-giving Scripture.
- Resist sharing the details of the affair with your children.
- Refrain from publicly criticizing your spouse.
- Find a trusted, accountability partner to help with spiritual and emotional struggles.
- Remain socially active and resist the temptation to isolate from others. Godly friends are a source of hope and strength through life's difficulties.

Marriage was meant to flow with life and zest, but it's difficult to flow when it seems your motivating force is gone, dammed with the debris of emotional and spiritual pain. When couples find themselves in this situation, it is common and appropriate to seek godly counsel from Christian helping professionals. Issues that might be dealt with include

- confusion, anxiety, depression;
- hurt, rejection, shame, isolation;
- anger, resentment, guilt;
- restoration, intimacy; and
- forgiveness and trust.

Personal and marital healing is a process, and there are no easy answers or quick fixes. But there is hope. In times when our strength fails, we know the grace of God will sustain us, as His strength is "made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). ■

Building Strong Marriages: Suggestions for Spouses of Ministers*

- Regularly pray with and for your spouse. Help your spouse set a prayer time with you at home.
- Regularly spend time with your spouse. Evaluate how much time is being invested in others as opposed to each other. Make time for your marriage and guard it zealously. If your spouse asks you out or for a time away, go.
- Strive to meet your spouse's greatest needs. Learn about intimacy, closeness and needs—both your spouse's and your own.
- Regularly communicate with your spouse. Explain to your spouse how you feel. Are there any reasons your spouse might feel you think less of him/her than you do? Write, tell or show your spouse what you would like from him or her.
- Practice listening with approval. Avoid the temptation to shoot down ideas with practicality.
- Enter into sex with abandon. Just not turning him/her down is not enough. Read; think up new ideas. Forget about the dishes, meetings, etc. It only takes a few minutes for what one writer called "a kiss with a future."
- Let your spouse see that you need his or her help and strength.
- Tell your spouse when someone/something makes you feel uncomfortable. Don't shrug off people who flirt with your spouse. Be aware of the person who is delighted to implement the pastor's wishes and hangs around the church a lot.

*Adapted from Heather Bryce, "After the Affair: A Wife's Story," *Leadership: A Practical Journal for Church Leaders* 9, no. 1 (1988): 65. ■