

Why Should I Get Help When It's His Problem?

By Debbie Laaser, MA, LMFT

When Mark left the sexual addiction treatment center, his case manager, Jeff, arranged for his “after care”: the ongoing counseling that he would receive in our local area after treatment. Oddly enough, Jeff had an after-care plan for me, too. I was wondering if he misunderstood the basic issue here: Mark was the one with the problem, not me! Mark was the one who had broken our wedding vows and who had committed sexual sin; I was the one who was faithful, responsible, truthful, and righteous in all I did. Why in the world would I need to go to therapy?

My designated evening for women's group was Tuesday, and I agreed to go if it would help Mark heal. I didn't want to look defiant or angry. I didn't like the “codependent” labels the treatment center people were trying to give me, so I wanted to look cooperative and independent, making the decision to go because I thought it was a good idea. When I arrived for my group, it was probably for all the wrong reasons. Nevertheless, Maureen, my therapist, was gracious in welcoming me to the group and invited me to share my story with the other women. Despite the fact that my world had crashed just four weeks earlier and I was overwhelmed with anger, sadness, and uncertainty, I summarized my situation without one tear or emotional glitch. It felt like a victory. I had gotten through my introduction without falling apart. Maybe I wasn't such a mess after all! Maureen didn't comment on my emotional state one way or the other; she just welcomed me to the safe community of women and began encouraging me to experience my feelings—all of them.

Looking back, I am grateful that my first steps were decided for me, because I don't know if I would have ever taken them for myself. Twenty years ago there was not much help available for women struggling in relationships with men who had been sexually impure. There was barely help for the men. I know today that God's guidance and timing were perfect in those early months. While I didn't always recognize this in the midst of our crisis, I can see that the right steps were revealed many times along the way. I began to trust that God was providing what I needed in this adversity. My job was to step out of isolation and enter a safe community where I would be comforted and pointed in the direction of healing.

What I did know after that first night of group was that I had found a ‘home’—a place where safe women and a very gifted therapist began leading me through my pain and hearing me like I had never been heard before. The experience was freeing. The authenticity

modeled to me was contagious. For the first time in my life my 'insides' matched my 'outsides'. What I said and how I looked reflected what I was feeling. When I was sad, I learned to allow myself to be with that feeling. I looked sad, and often I cried. When I was angry or frustrated or anxious, I learned how to talk about those feelings instead of hide them away—or busy myself with something else to do. Being congruent took a lot of practice, and my new safe community became my practice arena. I quickly claimed this place to be mine—for me—for my healing and growth, no matter what happened to Mark or to our relationship.

My closest friends used to be those I shared classes or activities with, other mothers whose children played with mine, or women I served with on church or school committees. While I thought I was close to them, I didn't begin to know what intimacy meant until I shared the pain and “weirdness” in my life with others doing the same. Doing so began a totally different experience of being connected to other women. Pain and honesty were the foundation of the development of authentic relationships.

I don't think I ever would have signed up for this journey of examining myself and growing more dependent on God if I hadn't been through enough pain. I liked controlling my life. I thought I was doing a fairly good job of being a woman, a wife, and a mother. I didn't see many problems with my character. I had no idea that God wanted more for me and that through the adversity of sexual sin he could take me on a trip of great discovery. The first step was deciding that I needed to participate in a process of uncovering my hurt and that I needed to trust the process – God's process for growing my character and healing my heart.

I hope I have convinced you that staying isolated or avoiding reality is not a solution to ridding yourself of the pain of betrayal. The feelings won't just go away over time. Not thinking about your husband's sinful decisions won't make them magically disappear. Quickly forgiving your husband and “moving on” will only bury your feelings of anger and sadness – only to have them seep out at unexpected times down the road. The better choice is to go to any lengths to get the support you deserve so you can heal and thrive, not just survive.

