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Surviving an Affair

This is Episode number 64 of Stay Happily Married, "Surviving an Affair."

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Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen. I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I am here on the telephone with Peggy Vaughan. Peggy is one of the leading experts on the topics of affairs. She's written several books and I will give you a link to those books at the end of the show; they are *The Monogamy Myth* and *Beyond Affairs*. And she deals with infidelity. She does consulting with couples dealing with infidelity. She writes not only the books but lots and lots of articles. She has a great website that I will refer you to. And I think we will learn a lot about how to survive an affair. This is a -- gosh, just so many people have to deal with this and it is a tough, tough thing to survive.

I think you would like to know that she has been married to her husband James for 50 years. Welcome to the show, Peggy.

Peggy Vaughan: Thank you, Lee. I'm glad to be with you.

Lee Rosen: You know, I would love to -- well, first of all, thank you for being with us. But I would love to jump in right off the bat by asking you, if you don't mind, to tell us your personal story.

Peggy Vaughan: I don't mind at all. I've done this for many years and in fact we were the first couple to ever go on national TV on *Donahue* back in 1980 -- that was the only talk show at the time -- and acknowledge that we had had affairs and stayed together. There was a great misconception that everybody has a divorce when they have an affair and that's not the case. It's just that many people never let it

be known that they've been in an affair, and when you do have a divorce and there's been an affair then you assume that all marriages end in divorce.

So we began talking publicly back in 1980 and that was after six years of us really thinking a lot and coming to the decision to go public. It's not like you just suddenly tell your story. I don't want people to think that I was eager to just get my story out there. But we were both consultants and my husband's a psychologist and we were doing a lot of conferences and workshops about the importance of honesty and trust and in the course of that work we said you can be honest about anything if you have the right approach and the right attitude and the right skills. So we gradually started talking about our own experience with affairs.

And then that led us to be encouraged by others to go ahead and write a book on it, so that's what we did.

So the story's basically I married my childhood sweetheart. I'd known him all my life. We had the same background, the same values, the same expectations of marriage. Neither of us had ever had sex with anybody else.

But after 11 years of marriage and falling into a more kind of a rut, like a lot of marriages do -- and this was early on. I mean, his affair started in 1966 so we're talking about 40 years ago. But after 11 years of marriage he had a change in his opinions and his values and his attitudes. He became influenced by people around him. He doesn't blame that but it's just that he rationalized and denied it, like a lot of people do, and gradually got into that lifestyle and had affairs for seven years.

And I suspected from the very beginning but didn't want to confront it because I really -- we had two small children. I couldn't imagine getting a divorce and I felt like if I knew it for sure I'd have to get a divorce. This is what many women thought back then. Some people still think that way.

But we were able to partly because he voluntarily told me; that helped a lot. And we spent two or three years talking and talking and talking and established a different basis of honesty, which a lot of know each other at a deeper level and work through it in a way that we wound up having a better marriage than we had before, and maybe a better marriage than we could have had without going through that.

I'm quick to say I still would never choose to go through it in order to have what we have now.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Peggy Vaughan: But it is good for people to know that it's possible not only to survive it but to -- it's like any crisis. It can either destroy you or you can use it to become stronger and make something better out of it. And that's what we did. So we have been working -- more me than he; he's continuing his other work -- but we have decided based on the feedback we got from going public that more open discussion of this issue would make a big difference and would allow other couples to not feel like they're so alone and give them hope that, yes, you can survive an affair.

Lee Rosen: Now, I know we're going way back on time, but what -- I assume he did not come to you and say, "Peggy, I'm having an affair now." What caused you to wonder what was going on?

Peggy Vaughan: Well, he did come to me.

Lee Rosen: Okay.

Peggy Vaughan: But that was after seven years.

Lee Rosen: Okay.

Peggy Vaughan: And it was almost a coming together. It was almost -- we knew each other so well that I had been giving more and more hints because I had -- in fact, a book that I looked at had a chapter on affairs and I wanted to go through this book chapter by chapter.

So he sensed that I'd been suspicious. He sensed that it was going to come to a head. He came to me voluntarily -- with notes in hand, by the way. Very organized because he wanted to make sure I heard it in the way that he intended it.

And he was willing to answer all of my questions. This is a very significant thing, very unusual. Most people try to -- there's a kind of mantra, a mindset among people having affairs and it has three parts. It's never tell; if questioned, deny it; if caught, say as little as possible. In his case he did voluntarily tell me. And he hadn't even anticipated that there would be a lot of questions, but once I began asking, he answered every single question, even though I would repeat the same one, like "why" a hundred times a day for two years. And that is a critical piece of it.

There are critical pieces to recovering. First is answering questions. And if you're unwilling to -- in other words, if you know something I want to know and you won't tell me, it makes me feel like a child. It

makes me feel like there can never be any quality. It makes me feel like if I can't trust you tell me about the past, how can I trust you in the future? And so the other thing is that it's critical, of course, to sever contact with the third party.

And then the third thing is it's critical to hang in for the long term because you should never make the decision about whether or not the marriage can survive in the first flush of it, because you can only make that decision based on emotions. And most people's typical reaction is, "If my spouse ever had an affair, I'd leave him." Well, when somebody says what they'd do, you can really ignore the rest of that sentence because they don't have a clue what they'll do until it is them.

But if you make that decision too soon, you forever second guess yourself, saying woulda, coulda, shoulda. So the smart way to proceed here is no matter how difficult it is, no matter how painful it is, no matter how much you want to move on, you can't just set it aside and bury it and either stay together or get a divorce, because you are doing it -- whatever you're doing -- on the basis of emotion. And it's absolutely critical that you first get over the shock; even if you suspected, there's still shock.

So you need to first be able to just eat, sleep and function and gradually learn more and more about affairs so that you don't personalize it as much. We think it's always just my fault or just his fault or just a problem in our marriage, but all marriages have problems. And after the fact you can always identify the problems and then assign a cause and effect.

And unfortunately, also many therapists will play into that inadvertently because they focus on the marriage specifically; and when they focus on the problems, it kind of sends the message that if these problems hadn't existed there wouldn't have been an affair. But of course if these problems hadn't existed, there would be other problems and those would be said as to be the reason.

So you really can't survive an affair unless you understand why affairs happen in the first place. Because if you think it's only because of you and only because of your spouse -- obviously this is a huge part of it but there are really -- I call it like a three-legged stool, Lee. There's the one group is what most people think of the things that push you into affairs, whether it's problems or faults or shortcomings of the individual or relationship. Equally critical is the second stool which is things that pull people into affairs, just the excitement, the curiosity, self image, getting caught up and carried away, the ego boost. And then there's societal factors, which almost nobody really acknowledges, that contribute to affairs. It's our

fascination with affairs, the way we use sex to sell everything, the deception we learn as teenagers where we hide everything from our parents.

In fact, one of the things that helped me was when we were teenagers we started having sex before we married and of course we hid it from our parents; we pretended we weren't. So I thought, "How could he appear to be such a wonderful husband and father while having this secret life?" And I realized that we both had learned that. We'd had conditioning in how to do it when we were teenagers doing the same thing and hiding it from my parents.

So there's just a lot of factors. So there's the push factor, the pull factors, and the societal factors. And if you get enough rational understanding so that you can -- it's almost like a seesaw at first. The weight is so strong on the emotions that that end is the only one that's got any strength to it. But if you get more and more and more information -- which is what I try to provide.

I try to provide information, understanding, and perspective. I don't try to deal with individuals and their particular situation. I try to give insight that'll allow them to deal with their situation by understanding that it is so much more than just the limited way they thought of it. So if they can gradually increase their rational understanding of affairs, then that can become strong enough that it can overcome the emotions and then you're prepared to make a decision as to whether or not the marriage can survive.

Lee Rosen: So you don't really know for a long time really. But you said you asked your husband why for two years.

Peggy Vaughan: Oh, yeah. The reason is because no answer is sufficient.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Peggy Vaughan: It doesn't matter what the answer is; it's still not going to be sufficient. You're still going to -- see, you're trying to make it make sense, Lee. And it doesn't make sense. There's nothing sensible about it. So you just keep on because you somehow don't want it to be true and it doesn't make any sense to you and so that's just kind of the way it goes.

But this willingness to hang in is important. Some people will say, "Well, what if I hang in for two years?"

And by the way, I've never seen anyone completely recover from the emotional impact, including myself. Even if you're doing everything "right," quote/unquote, fully recovered in less than two years. So

people who hang in for the two years and then still don't make it will say, "Oh, I wasted that time." They say, "I should have gotten out." But they haven't heard from all the other people I've heard from who got out too soon and forever second guessed themselves and wondered if it might have worked out. So it's not just the decision you make; it's how you live with the decision. And if you make it too soon, you're not able to live with it.

But the decision also -- another misunderstanding people have is they think that the decision is influenced by what happened, if they had a lot of affairs or if it was a long-term affair; or it was an affair with a relative or -- from the outside we think there's a continuum of what's not so bad and what's awful. But if it's you, whatever you're dealing with is as bad as it can be because underneath it all it's the deception. It doesn't matter what else it was. So making the decision to stay married or not based on what happened in the past is not the smart way to do it.

Some people can survive and rebuild the marriage if it was a one night stand, some people can't. Some people can survive and rebuild if there'd been 20 affairs and some can't. And the real difference is what happens afterwards. What happens afterwards? Is there a willingness to talk about what happened to try to learn from it? Is there a willingness to use that information instead of just using it to punish? Is there a willingness to acknowledge that attractions are normal, they're still going to happen and how are we going to handle the temptations? Is there a commitment to talking about this and all things on an honest basis on an ongoing basis?

So you need the time to see whether or not there is a willingness for those things to take place. If those things do take place and you give them time to see if they'll take place, you can recover. But if you just try to decide based on what he or she did to me --

And the thing is, in telling my story I'm always afraid that people will in their heads carry around the idea of the man having affairs. But I've got to tell you, after 30 years of dealing with this I have watched the progression. It used to be that most of us who have a consensus -- and you'll find individual statistics that will refute this -- almost all reports will say that there are fewer affairs. That's because people don't tell the truth and because the questions are phrased in such a way whether it's this year or this marriage or all kind of things that allow people to get -- also, when you ask people if you had an affair, they redefine affair before they answer. They don't call a one night stand an affair, they don't call a prostitute an affair, and all kind of things.

So my statistics and a lot of other people who have dealt with this many years and who take a general consensus of our experience and all the different studies, we believe back 20 years ago that approximately 60 percent of men at some point in some marriage -- we don't just have one marriage these days most of the time, unfortunately -- will have an affair. And approximately 40 percent of women at some point in some marriage will have an affair.

And as there have been more women move into the workplace and as there -- and the Internet coming along -- and I've done research on the Internet and the affairs there -- that number of women has increased to the point now that it's pretty much equal men and women.

So I would hope that anyone listening to this will not get hung up on thinking that this is just for women whose husbands have affairs. Men and women react very much the same. In fact, I had a message board some years ago and if you took away the spouses of people that had affairs and if you took away the name of the person and the references to he or she, you would not know whether it was a man or woman. So I think it's real important as you think through this to -- as you listen to this to recognize that everything I'm saying is relevant for men and for women.

And by the way, I say all this like boy -- and you said I'm an expert. And I am considered an expert and I consider myself that. However, I'm not an expert because I just sat in a corner and read and thought and figured this out and contemplated my navel and came up with these theories. I had listened and people have told me things they don't even tell their therapists, for 30 years.

I always get feedback from everybody I talk to asking them to let me know a year or more later -- because before then they won't really know how it's turning out -- to let me know what steps they took and how it worked out. Therefore, what I say is I can confidently tell you what usually happens and usually doesn't, and what usually works and usually doesn't. I mean, there's always exceptions and there are no guarantees, but everything that I write and everything that I say is really almost like a journalist in that I'm telling you what the people have told me.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Peggy Vaughan: This is the voice of the people telling you this is the real deal. This is not theories. This is not the studies. This is not the therapists. This is the reality. And that's what people don't know enough of.

Lee Rosen: Who is coming to you with questions? Is it usually the person that's had the affair wanting to make the marriage work, or the person who didn't have the affair wanting to make it work?

Peggy Vaughan: I would say that right now it's about 50 percent -- it's changed through the years. But the consulting I do is open to anyone. I will deal with the person that's had an affair, I will deal with the spouse of the person who's had an affair, I will deal with the couple together, or I will deal with the third party.

And so the people that I get, you'd be surprised. I get about 40 percent men because even though men are not as likely to reach out, they're more likely to reach out by telephone anonymously. And so about 40 percent of the people are men. About three-fourths of those are men whose wives have had affairs and about one-fourth are men who themselves have had affairs.

And I would say the same thing is among the women. The women that I hear from, I would say that about three-fourths of them are women whose husbands have had affairs and about one-fourth are women who themselves have had affairs.

Lee Rosen: So more often than not the person calling you is the person who did not have the affair. It's the person --

Peggy Vaughan: That's right.

Lee Rosen: Okay.

Peggy Vaughan: More often than not that is the case. And that's really the prime audience that I'm speaking to because they are the ones who usually -- it's very painful for everybody, and I acknowledge that and recognize that.

I don't use any blaming words. I don't use words like "infidelity." I don't use "betrayal." I don't use any of those -- "adultery" -- I don't use those because inflame the emotions and that's what interferes with people's ability to make good decisions. And my whole goal is to help people make the best decision for them. And when you talk in that, what you do is throw up defenses and denials and you feed the emotions. And whatever you feed, grows.

So I'm really trying to get everybody to recognize that there's a lot that we don't know. We have a lot of false assumptions about affairs. We used to think, for instance that affairs happen only to bad people in bad marriages. Fortunately, in the last 10 or 15 years there's a growing awareness that it can happen to good people in good marriages. I mean, I have heard from marriages where the

person had an affair, was an accountant, a veterinarian, a pastor -- pastors are unfortunately a larger group than --

I have this support network that I started many years ago and they now have local meetings. I passed the operation on to someone else. But one of the local groups in a Southern city, at one point out of the 15 people had 16 women whose husbands were pastors -- had 6 of the 15 women -- 6 of the 15 people, men and women, but 6 of the 15 people were women whose husbands were pastors who had affairs.

So this whole idea that this can't touch you, that you're somehow immune, that you don't need to know about this, this touches almost everybody at some point. It may not happen to you personally. It will happen to someone close to you. And if you don't have the information and the knowledge, if you're going by the old stereotypes, the old basic assumptions about what affairs are about and what they're not, then you're going to not be able to handle it well if it happens to you and you're not going to be the kind of support that's needed for other people.

For instance, the old reason for affairs used to be that they developed strictly on the basis of shortcomings and failures of the people involved. But the newer awareness is there are a lot of other factors, like I discussed earlier. The old way of thinking like secrecy was the appropriate way to handle it because it's so personal, that you shouldn't discuss it. And what we're now learning is that that high degree of secrecy makes them more likely to happen and makes their impact more difficult to overcome. So we need to get --

And we used to think -- the old way of thinking was the person who had an affair is a weak, insecure, uncaring, or generally bad person who deserves to be punished. Well, we now come to understand that all kinds of people have affairs, not just certain types. Just about anybody in this society is vulnerable. Now, that's what some of the people do not want to accept. It's like, "Oh, not me. It could never happen to me." I would have said that. My husband would have said that. And many people still say we were the ideal couple. Nobody could believe it happened to us.

We also used to believe -- the old way of thinking was the spouse is clearly the victim and either deserves our pity for being so mistreated or our criticism for failing to keep their mate. And now we understand it's not really a personal reflection on the spouse -- the husband or wife. They're not to blame.

And we used to think the third party was kind of special breed of heartless human being, that they're just selfish and willing to hurt

anybody. But there's all kind of people that have affairs with a person who's married.

And another thing is we used to think that it's such a personal embarrassment that it couldn't be discussed with anybody. People would keep it quiet. And the worst thing is the isolation. You really - - it goes round and round in your head. You obsess about it. You review it. And there's something about being able to talk about it means that articulating it enough to have someone else understand it engages your rational part of your brain. And so it's very beneficial to be able to talk to others.

And then the final thing is what I mentioned earlier. The old way of thinking was that you have to make a decision right away. And it's [inaudible] some think, of course, that marriage is the only right choice while all other people think that divorce is the only right choice. But the new way of understanding is that it's critical that you take a long time because it's complex. And if you make the decision in haste, you may regret it.

Lee Rosen: I would bet that's a huge part of what you do in your consulting is getting people to slow down.

Peggy Vaughan: Slow down. Exactly. In fact, I use the word "patience," Lee. You can't believe -- I mean, that's always my finishing reminder is remember to be patient. Don't judge whether or not you're going to make it based on a particularly good day or particularly bad day. You'll have up days and bad days. It's like two steps forward and one step back. So what you do is monitor it.

Now, I'll just say some of the things I say to people for your audience here. You know, monitor it. Are you generally going in the right direction? If over a three-month period you're better than you were three months ago, that says continue. If three months later you're still better than you were the previous time you kind of checked on it, then keep going. Don't get discouraged by some particular setback and don't think you've got it made when you have a period of good, because any time you get complacent about thinking, "Oh, now I know," you probably don't know if you're making it based on -- it really needs to be analyzed. It needs to be -- you need to get your mind in gear.

That's why I've written so much is because reading is such an important thing. To read and re-read and remind yourself of all the things that are real about affairs. And the thing is, people will hear it from me in a way they won't hear from other people because I contemplated suicide; I wanted to run away and start a new identity; I wished for amnesia. I know what that pain is like. And

therefore, if I can stand here whole and say, "Yes, I got over all that"
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The goal is not to get where you never talk about it. That's another false premise. People think -- or they'll so proudly tell me, "We never talk about it anymore." Well, to me that's a huge red flag because that means you can't talk about it. And the goal is not to get where you don't talk about it; it's to get where you can talk about it but without the pain.

It's like losing a child or losing a leg. How unreasonable would it be to pretend it never happened by never talking about it again? That just makes the pain deeper. That holds onto the wound. It's only by getting it where you can talk about it that it gradually allows you to have the pain not be so acute, not be so painful, not be so interruptive of your life as a whole.

So there's just so many false assumptions that people have. And so my basic effort is just to give them information, give them understanding, and give them perspective and ask them to keep on reading and reading and reading.

And I only do my consulting -- you used the word "counseling." I don't do counseling because I think it's irresponsible to do that on the telephone. I do a one-time only consulting. I have a list of almost 300 counselors around the country who have been recommended by people as being effective in dealing with affairs. I post those on my site for people to find someone in their area.

So I do a one-time consulting to provide them resources. I give them a lot of the basics that apply to their particular situation. I turn them on to whoever -- if there's a support group of our BAN support network near them, I point them to that. If there is a therapist on my list near them, I send them the contact information for that. I send them copies of the books of mine in PDF format free that I think will be relevant for them.

I mean, I'm a compulsive helper, Lee. I'm a kind of do-gooder. I've never been very famous or successful because I don't go the kind of quick and easy -- I call it the quick and dirty -- route. I'm too solid and substantive. I don't go for any of the kind of flamboyant stuff. It's just solid as a rock, straight from the people and I'm the mouthpiece.

Lee Rosen:

Wow. Well, I feel like I have just been the recipient of a fire hose of information. I mean, it's just fantastic. It sounds like you are -- if somebody will slow down and take that two years to work on this, it sounds like you're pretty optimistic that they can survive.

Peggy Vaughan: Yeah. Let me tell you something else. Those of us who work up close with this -- Frank Pittman you may have heard of. He's a pretty famous therapist in Atlanta, which is not too far from your area. But everybody around the country knows about him. He works almost exclusively with couples where there's been an affair.

And some of the other counselors that I know and some of the other people who have done a lot of research on this -- and one of the big studies that I did of over 1,000 people when I asked them how many were still married, over 70 percent do stay married, both men and women. In fact, in my study 76 percent of the men whose wives had affairs stayed married; 76 percent of the women whose husbands had affairs stayed married.

And this the public doesn't know. They tend to think that when they hear of a divorce and they hear it was an affair that all marriages where there's an affair end in divorce. They don't realize that so many marriages stay together and they just never tell you. And if you think -- people will say, "Well, I don't know anybody who's had an affair." I say yes, you do. You just don't know that it's happened."

That's why I push for more openness, because if you think it's only me -- that among the whole society, I'm the only one who failed, well, see, we give lip service to monogamy. We don't really support it in our society. And therefore we point fingers and we make it -- we have this fascination and glorification of it on the one hand. It's weird. We condemn it -- we have several ways. We either ignore it, deny it, or condemn it. And none of those are helpful. None of those are helpful.

And by the way, about that fire hose. I realize I talk really fast and somebody said -- with a Southern accent. I was born and raised in Mississippi and lived in South Carolina for about 11 years. I live in California now but I still have that Southern accent. But I talk fast and I never slow down, even when people say making speeches I should, because I want people to realize this stuff is just flowing out of me. I don't have to wonder or memorize or guess or whatever. I just know this in my gut. And that gives them more confidence in what I'm saying. Every word I say is not that critical, but if you get the gist of it, if you get the idea, if you get the hope, if you get the understanding that there's so much more to know, then hopefully I'll have done my job and you'll go out and learn more. So that's why I talk so fast.

Lee Rosen: Well, it's fantastic. Peggy, I cannot thank you enough for sharing your insights today. Absolutely amazing stuff and I think -- you do

talk fast and I think people are going to want to go back and listen to this one a second time because there is --

Peggy Vaughan: I hope so, because it helps to -- because the bad thoughts come involuntarily and you need to voluntarily put the better awarenesses in your brain to counter that. So I hope they do.

And by the way, I want to thank you. You just let me go.

Lee Rosen: Well --

Peggy Vaughan: And I appreciate that.

Lee Rosen: Well, let me tell folks a little bit about getting additional information about what you're up to. The two books -- you can get copies of them at Peggy's website, which is DearPeggy.com. And I will put a link to those -- to the site in our show notes. And there's also -- the books are *The Monogamy Myth* and *Beyond Affairs*. There are a whole bunch of e-books and articles at the site. So go to DearPeggy.com and I think that will help you immeasurably.

And I want to tell you I appreciate you joining us today. Thank you so much for listening in. And if you have comments about this show or any show, we get just so many comments and they are so helpful to us in terms of giving us guidance on where to go next and how we can help you and what questions we should be asking. So shoot us your feedback. The best ways are at our comment line at (919) 256-3083 or you can shoot us e-mail at comments@stayhappilymarried.com.

I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, stay happily married.

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