

Stephanie: This is Episode Number 170 for Stay Happily Married: How to Tell Your Spouse You Had an Affair.

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Stephanie: I'm Stephanie Lockwood and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show, everyone. They say that once trust is lost it can never be regained. The ultimate betrayal of trust in a relationship is, without a doubt, an affair. People often don't realize the consequences of their actions until after the act has been committed.

Undoubtedly, the hardest part of an affair is when you come to the point where you need to tell your spouse exactly what happened. Like anything else, there's always a right and a wrong way to break this heavy news to your spouse.

I'm here with Dr. Janet Savia. Janet practices in Durham, North Carolina with Lepage Associates, where she helps couples repair marriages damaged by trust issues on a daily basis. She has a Master's and Doctorate in Clinical Psychology. Dr. Savia works with helping people with general stress and life transitions, and personal growth pursuits.

Welcome to the show, Janet. I'm glad you could join us. Let's start with the basics first. Why is an affair so damaging and hurtful to a relationship?

Janet: If you think about a relationship, particularly a marital relationship, it has to be built on the foundation of trust. An affair, whether it's physical or emotional, is a violation of that trust, so you are talking about the very foundations of the marital relationship being undermined.

Stephanie: I guess it's different if it's something that's still ongoing, but if you had an affair that's over, why not keep something as hurtful as this a secret? Why tell them if it's already over?

Janet: A couple of reasons, Stephanie. Again, one of the key things here is the need for trust between a couple. When there are [inaudible 02:37] of this nature between two people, it really serves as a wedge between them.

One of the first things that the person who has been involved in an affair can do is take responsibility and to tell the offended spouse what has happened. If it's not shared, there is the risk that the offended spouse is going to find out.

Stephanie: If the affair is over and you've decided that you really need to tell your spouse about this, you need to get it off your chest, what's the first step that you take when telling your spouse about an affair?

Janet: I think it's important to choose a time and a location where there's privacy and where there's time. You don't want to do this if your spouse is running out the door to a meeting or on the way to pick up the kids from school. It's very important. It needs to be considered.

It's also important to speak plainly. This is not a time to dodge the issue. This is not a time to minimize what has happened. This is a time to really speak clearly, speak plainly, and it's going to be a difficult conversation. It's hard for the person who knows what's coming, so you can only imagine what it's going to be like for the person who is just hearing this from out of the blue. So the time and the location are important.

Privacy is important. You need to give your spouse an opportunity to express themselves, to feel the full brunt of what you are saying to them, but to do so in a place that is private. That's important for both of you, because this deals with the most private aspect of a marriage, that of trust between the spouses.

Stephanie: When you're telling someone such personal and hurtful information, how should you act or react when telling your spouse about an affair?

Janet: Probably the most important thing is that the person who has had the affair needs to take responsibility. Affairs don't just happen. Granted, oftentimes there are a lot of things that can contribute to this, but bottom line, the decision has been on the part of the offending spouse. This is the person who needs to take responsibility. They are basically informing their spouse of a series of decisions that they have made that are bad decisions. They have been damaging, they have been hurtful.

So taking responsibility is absolutely [inaudible 06:02]. Don't make excuses. This is not a time to blame somebody else. Having an affair was the result of choices. Frankly, this can be one of the first steps in the healing process.

Stephanie: How should you deal with the reactions of the offended spouse? They could be silent, they could be loud and angry and screaming. I know one tactic is always just to avoid the topic in general. How should you react or treat these people?

Janet: This is where it's important, Stephanie, to have a place that is private. You may have an idea of how your spouse might react, but you really don't know. Depending on where they are and what they are doing, and how they are feeling in the moment, their reaction can be across the board. It can be anything from stony silence to almost relief if they've been suspecting something, to just anger and vileness. This is one time when the offending spouse needs to stand firm, and I mean that metaphorically, and to recognize that their spouse needs to do whatever they need to do in the moment, obviously with the limitation being that no one should be physically harmed.

Anger and sadness will probably be expressed by many people. If the spouse has had no idea, they may respond just with shock and numbness. Really, if you think about how people respond in traumatic situations, it can be across the board. And this is no less traumatic.

Stephanie: Like I said, affairs can be very private matters just because of the nature of it all, but should you ever think about bringing in a third party to help move the process?

Janet: Absolutely. In working with couples, one of the things that we have spoken about following the acknowledgement of one spouse to the other that there has been an affair is, "Okay. Now trust has been broken. Now it's known to be broken." Do we want to put the spouse who has been offended in a position of having to police the other spouse? The answer is absolutely not. All of the energy of these two people needs to go into healing.

One of the things that I often suggest is an accountability partner. It needs to be someone of the same gender as the offending spouse and it needs to be someone that is mutually agreed upon by both parties as an acceptable accountability partner. This is a person who is willing to meet on a regular basis at least once a week, and depending on the level of rupture in the relationship, it may need to be more often. But on average, about once a week.

This is the person who will follow through about ensuring that the relationship has indeed ended, provide some encouragement, and provide relief so that the offended spouse is not in a position of policing the other spouse.

Stephanie: When you say 'policing', what typically happens in a situation where one spouse feels they have to police the other?

Janet: Oftentimes they'll want to call, they'll want to check up when they're out of town. They'll call the hotel or they might actually call business associates, checking cell phones and that type of activity. This kind of thing is not helpful. It is understandable, but it is not helpful.

So a third party can come in and do that, if that needs to be done, without there being this back-and-forth between the spouses.

Stephanie: When you do tell your spouse about an affair, how much should you be telling them? Is 100 percent disclosure necessary or something that's required?

Janet: Absolutely not. Just like when spouses hear the news of an affair, their reactions can be across the board, the desire for information can also really range from someone who will say, "It's done, I don't want to know any of the details. I just want us to move on and deal with the problems," to others who say, "I want to know everything. I don't want anymore surprises. I want every detail."

And then there are some who start out saying, "I don't want to know anything," and then they get surprised by a piece of information down the road, something that could be very minor but they were not expecting it. Then they suddenly realize, "Wait a minute. I don't want anymore surprises. I've had it with surprises. I need to know." And sometimes people don't want to know initially simply because they're so overwhelmed. You can tell them, but they just can't deal with that information.

This is one of those situations where control, really, as to what should or should not be shared, is in the hands of the spouse that has been offended. The offending spouse needs to say, "I will tell you what you need to know." And this is not one of those situations where there needs to be minimization or evasion. The offending spouse needs to be clear and responsive to the level of information that is requested.

Stephanie: How long does it usually take for the offended spouse to forgive and forget, and try to rebuild at that point?

Janet: I would love to give you a solid number, you know, 3 months, 6 months, 12 months. But that, too, can range across the board. In my experience with couples, when the offending spouse steps forward and initiates telling about the affair and owning it, and demonstrating sincere, honest remorse, I have found that as painful as that is, that is absolutely an indication that healing in the relationship is more likely to occur than not.

When the offended spouse finds out about an affair, and then they confront the one that has been in the affair, you've lost the opportunity to gain credibility and take that first step towards rebuilding trust by being honest. You haven't been honest; you've been caught.

All of the things that we've talked about so far can be helpful, but at the same time, there are two different things. One is forgetting and one is forgiving. I don't think anyone ever forgets, and not everyone forgives. Couples may choose to stay together but that may always be a hurtful place and a rupture in their relationship, whereas other couples can really use this painful opportunity to heal and to grow strong in those broken places.

Stephanie: Do you believe that an affair is the cause of a ruined relationship, or is it something that's a side effect of one?

Janet: It can be both. Oftentimes before an affair occurs, there has been a considerable deterioration in communication, in sharing and in intimacy. But it is often the painful, destructive symptom of something that is much deeper and more serious.

With that said, because an affair is the result of conscious choice, it can be extremely painful, particularly if the affair has gone on for an extended period of time or if there have been a series of affairs. Then a lot of these guidelines are just completely undermined, and forgiveness may never happen. Forgiveness is a gift. The offending party cannot pressure the offended party to forgive them. They can hope that it happens, they can request forgiveness, they can show genuine remorse not only with words but with actions. But in the end, forgiveness is a gift. And that comes as a result of the choices made by the offended party.

Stephanie: Janet, thank you so much for taking the time and talking with us on the show today. To find out more about Dr. Janet Savia you can visit the Lepage Associates website at www.lepageassociates.com. We will have a link to that in the show notes.

Thank you so much for joining us today, and I hope you'll join us again next week. We always love hearing from you, so to comment on this or any other episode, call our listener comment line at 919-256-3083, or email us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com.

I'm Stephanie Lockwood, and until next time, Stay Happily Married.

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