

## Dealing with Disclosure

Many questions we receive in our For Men Only, Hidden Hurt and Transparent Love groups pertain to disclosure, so we thought it might be helpful to address some of those here.

### What is disclosure and how do we do it?

When we talk about disclosure we are referring to the process in which a person struggling with sexual addiction tells others about his/her sexual behaviors. Although there are many scenarios in which a person's sexual behaviors outside of the marriage might be discovered and confronted, we believe it is important to have a formal time of disclosure between addict and spouse that is planned and in a safe place.

Guidelines for disclosure we generally suggest to couples in recovery:

The addict works with a counselor or mentor in his small group to create a timeline of all of his sexual behaviors beginning with childhood and ending with the present. (The timeline includes any sexual abuse, first sexual experiences, as well as acting out behaviors before and after marriage.)

When the struggler is confident that the timeline of sexual experiences/behaviors is complete, he and the counselor/mentor talk about what needs to be shared with the spouse, what may be shared with the spouse, and what details need to be avoided during disclosure.

A formal time of disclosure is planned with the spouse when the couple can meet together in a safe place. We do not recommend a restaurant as a safe place due to the public environment. This can prohibit or inhibit freedom in sharing or responding on the part of either the addict or the spouse.

During the time of disclosure the addict discloses the extent of his sexual behaviors while the spouse listens.

After disclosure the spouse is allowed to respond and ask clarifying questions.

### What do I need to know about my spouse's sexual behaviors?

What is shared during a time of formal disclosure is very important. There are some things that absolutely must be shared in order for healing to take place in the marriage. There are other things that may be shared if the struggler feels safe enough to do so. And there are details about sexual behaviors that should not be shared with a spouse. Let's talk about what these look like.

Examples of sexual behaviors that need to be disclosed:

- Use of pornography in any form – Internet, magazines, videos, etc.
- If the pornography is outside the "norm" (e.g. same-sex, cross-dressing, bondage, bestiality, etc.), then that information should be shared with the spouse. Names of exact websites should NOT be given. One way to think about this is, "If my spouse came across the websites or images I viewed later, would she have a legitimate right to feel that I had not

shared fully?" Another way of thinking about this is, after disclosure, is the struggler still afraid of being "found out"?

- Compulsive masturbation
- Sexual behaviors that involved other people – intercourse, oral sex, lap dances, etc.
- Types of sexual encounters – anonymous encounters, one-night stands, prostitutes, short or long-term affairs, massages, phone sex, cyber sex, etc.
- Names of affair partners that the spouse knows or is acquainted with – friend, co-worker, church member.
- Any behaviors that facilitated sexual encounters – placing personal ads, chatting online, going to strip clubs or bars, etc.
- Any sexual behaviors that resulted in pregnancies, abortions or children.
- Any illegal sexual behaviors – voyeurism, exhibitionism, etc.
- Any financial and/or legal consequences of which a spouse is unaware.
- Any physical consequences of which a spouse is unaware (e.g. contraction of an STD).
- Sexual involvement with children or minors
- Examples of sexual behaviors that may be disclosed:
  - Sexual abuse experienced as a child.
  - Sexual behaviors and encounters that happened before engagement/marriage.
- Examples of details to avoid during disclosure:
  - Specific websites the addict frequented.
  - Specific times/places where sexual encounters occurred.
  - Names of partners spouse does not know.
  - Details about the sexual encounter – what person was wearing, physical characteristics of the partner, what was done together, what was said, etc.

### **But I want to know everything. Why shouldn't I know all the details?**

We know how difficult it is when you first learn about your spouse's betrayal. You want to make sense of it all, and a million questions swirl around in your head. Please understand: knowing details about your spouse's sexual behaviors will end up hurting you. Details help us to picture or visualize our spouse doing or participating in sexual behaviors with others. The more details we know about our spouse's experiences, the harder it will be for us to let go of the hurt and pain and move through the grieving process. Details make things more real and more powerful. When we picture something in our minds, the emotional impact is much greater. Do not seek to know details about all that your spouse has done. You will have enough to grieve as it is. And don't forget that you can talk to your small group about your fears and concerns. Those further along on the journey will be able to help you during this difficult time.

## What questions should I ask?

There are some good questions to ask your spouse after he discloses. Let us share some examples of those kinds of questions with you.

You can check out intuitions/suspicions you had at the time. (So, that night when I caught you on the computer at 2 a.m. you were looking at porn?)

You can ask how the addiction has impacted your spouse's relationship with you. (Is this the reason we haven't had sex in three months?)

You can ask about how the addiction has impacted your family's finances. (How much of our money have you spent acting out sexually?)

You can ask about consequences of sexual behaviors that impact you. (Did you have unprotected sex?)

You can address any fears you have related to your spouse's addiction. (Have you done anything inappropriate with our children? Did you ever leave our children alone or unsupervised when you were acting out?)

You can ask about the length of affairs.

We would also encourage you to express how you're feeling about what you've learned as clearly as you can, using "I feel...about...because" statements. It will be very helpful for your spouse to hear from you how his/her behaviors have impacted you and the marriage. And you'll benefit from being honest about what's going on inside of you as you begin the grieving process.

## What if I think of other questions later?

Often during a time of disclosure you may be so overwhelmed by what you learn that you are too numb and confused to ask any questions. Later, usually a day or two after the disclosure session, all of those unasked and unanswered questions come to your mind riding a huge wave of anger and anxiety. If and when you experience this tidal wave of fear and doubts and questions, we encourage you to take some time to think about what you're feeling and thinking before you approach your spouse. Many of us have found it helpful to:

**Get away by yourself to a place where you can focus and concentrate.**

- Invite the Lord to join you in the painful process of fearing and doubting your spouse's integrity and love for you.
- Write down all of your questions.
- Read each question and ask, "Why do I want to know that?"
- Cross out questions that are asking for more details about things you already know.
- Put a star by questions that seem to be valid concerns and need to be addressed.

- Call your counselor and/or group members to ask for feedback on the questions you have marked with a star.

If others agree that your questions are valid, plan a time with your spouse to discuss them. (You may need to set up another counseling appointment if you have a significant number of questions or if you feel your spouse has been dishonest in his/her initial disclosure.)

### **How can I be sure my spouse has told me everything?**

The answer to this question falls somewhere between “You can’t,” and “You’ll know.” If your spouse is pursuing God and working diligently on his/her recovery, then over time your spouse will be completely honest with you and eventually disclose everything that you need to know. However, if your spouse is not pursuing recovery, he is probably not going to be honest with you about everything. In that case, God Himself will show you what you need to know.

Do we really believe that? Absolutely. In our own lives and the lives of other spouses we have worked with, God has proved his faithfulness to reveal the truth time and time again. You don’t have to be the private detective anymore, but it will take a commitment on your part to leave the investigating and uncovering work to God. That means you must be able to trust God with your spouse. If you’re finding yourself consumed with fear and continually looking for evidence of your spouse’s sexual behaviors, it might be that you have something in your heart that prevents you from trusting God. On our own journeys we have found it very helpful to look at our own past experiences. Messages we carry from our past greatly influence our ability to trust.

We want to mention here that there may be times that your spouse will need to disclose other pieces of information that they did not share initially. This “multiple disclosure” method happens most often for one of four reasons. First, sexual sin causes a great deal of shame. Whatever behaviors a struggler sees as particularly shameful, they may have a great difficulty sharing – even with a counselor. Second, your spouse may withhold some information at the time of disclosure if they feel that particular behaviors will result in losses they are not ready to face or experience. Third, because some of our spouses have engaged in so many sexual encounters with others, they may actually forget about experiences. Addicts can also have blackouts and not remember what they did during an addictive cycle. Finally, it’s very difficult for addicts to witness the pain they’ve caused others. Sometimes, they just can’t bear to see those they love hurt any more and so they omit certain facts during initial disclosure.

The good news is that if your spouse is pursuing healing and recovery, God is actively at work in his/her heart and life. Many times God will remind a struggler of sexual behaviors that they have deliberately withheld. As God works in your spouse’s life all of the secrets are being exposed and his/her mind is being renewed and transformed.

The bad news is that we end up grieving all over again when our spouses disclose additional information about their sexual behaviors. If you end up experiencing “multiple disclosures” in your own marriage, remember that your spouse’s choices are more about them than about you.

### **What do I tell my family and close friends?**

As you think about disclosing to family and friends, you must determine how much they need to know about your spouse's struggles and behaviors. Most often family members only need to know generalities. Remember, details make the emotional impact of truth much greater. If a family member or friend asks for details, your response should be, "I'm not comfortable answering that question." Be as specific as you can to avoid confusion or unnecessary fears, but limit what you tell family members in order not to expose them to more than they might be able to handle. Keep in mind that you have a support group and probably a counselor to talk to. Most of your family members will have to deal with the bad news without that kind of support. Also, when you talk to family members, remember to use language that they understand and try to express the behavior in a way that shows why it's so hurtful to you.

For example, instead of saying, "Jack is a sex addict," you might say something like, "Jack was unfaithful in our marriage with more than one woman, and I am really struggling with his betrayal." If your spouse is addicted to pornography you could say, "My husband has a problem with pornography that has impacted his ability to relate to me and our children."

Remember that some family members and friends are safer than others. Seek advice and counsel from those in your small group about when and what to share with those you love.

### **What about our children? What do I tell them?**

We firmly believe that disclosing to children in progressive and age-appropriate ways is healing for the child and for the family as a whole. Children are very sensitive to tensions between parents. Often they will blame themselves for marital disagreements and discord. Talking about what they already know validates their feelings and helps them feel connected to you – even if the information you share causes them pain. Preschoolers can understand that Daddy lied to Mommy and hurt her heart very much. Elementary children can grasp the fact that Mommy had a friendship with another person that she should have had only with Daddy. Teenagers can handle even more information, and adult children should be told the general facts of the situation.

As children grow, we can continue to share more and more of our story with them. We want them to see that God loves us when we behave badly, that there are consequences for our choices, and that God can redeem any situation we give to Him.

One more thing to add—if your spouse is in recovery, the best possible way to disclose to your children is for you and your spouse to sit down together as your spouse shares what he has done and any consequences that will affect the family as a whole. Children need words of security. Don't lie in order to make them feel secure, but do reassure them about the things that won't change during the coming weeks and months. Also, remember to give your children a chance to share how they are feeling and express any fears they may have.

### **Whose responsibility is it to tell my spouse's parents about the problem?**

Often when we find out about our spouse's sexual addiction, the first phone call we make is to our parents. Our spouses, however, may struggle with telling their parents about their problem.

Facing the disappointment of parents is a huge hurdle to overcome. In our opinion, however, it is your spouse's responsibility to tell his/her parents – not yours. It's part of the hard work your spouse must do – facing his/her sin and taking responsibility for it. Don't rescue your spouse from that work.

If your spouse is blaming you for the problems in your marriage, it is still not your responsibility to tell your in-laws. You can say, “Your son/daughter is not being completely honest with you. The marriage has been damaged greatly by his/her choices. I'm really hurting right now, but it is his/her responsibility to be honest with you about what is going on.” If your spouse's parents really care for you and are interested in knowing the truth, they will confront their child. If they are unhealthy and deceived, then they won't believe anything you tell them anyway.

### **Should my spouse meet with my parents for a time of reconciliation?**

If your parents are aware of the problem, are safe people (i.e. won't meet him at the door with a shotgun), and are willing to talk with your spouse, it can be a very good and Scriptural thing to do. Your family needs to know that your spouse is sorry for what he has done to you and to them. Regardless of how your family members respond, it is a great exercise in obedience and faith for your spouse. However, that plan to meet your parents and apologize should be initiated by your spouse – not you. That's your spouse's stuff. Let God work in your spouse's heart to bring them to that place of maturity and obedience.

### **What should I do if my spouse doesn't want me to tell anyone about their struggle?**

Especially in situations in which the spouse is not working on recovery, this is a very common response. If this is your situation, you will need great discernment and great courage. Tell your spouse that you need a place to talk about how his/her sexual behaviors have impacted you. Assure your spouse that you will use discretion. Then find a counselor, become involved in a confidential support group, and if you have a safe friend or two, share with them as well. Be respectful. Talk to your spouse about the nature of what you are sharing and who you're talking with. But also be firm about getting your heart the help it needs.

You've been greatly impacted by your spouse's sinful choices; it's now your responsibility to make healthy choices and live in such a way that you can heal and grow. You can't heal apart from healthy relationships, so telling safe people is a necessary part of your recovery. You may need a lot of courage to stand by your work if your spouse threatens to leave you, but covering up your spouse's sexual sin in order to save the marriage won't work. You'll be miserable, and the marriage will eventually fall apart. So, be honest with safe people, be truthful with your spouse about who you're sharing with, and trust God to be at work in your spouse's life.

### **What should I tell acquaintances who are really not close friends?**

Tell them the truth without sharing any details. Things like, “Yes, we are really struggling right now. I can't really share what's going on, but we are getting help. Please do pray for our marriage.” Or you could try being very real. “Thanks for your concern. I really don't know you well enough to share details with you, but I appreciate your prayers for our marriage.”

### **I'm too embarrassed to tell anyone about this. Must I?**

Well that depends on two things: Can you keep from telling others without being dishonest, and can you remain in relationships with others without telling? You have to have people, and you have to have truth. If the truth about your spouse's struggle causes you to isolate yourself from other people, you will never heal. Healing comes in relationship – and not just relationship, but intimate relationship. If you're lying about your situation, you will never heal – and neither will your spouse. It was secrets that got your spouse this far, and it is secrets that will keep your spouse (and you) bound. We can't make you tell safe people about your pain and your struggles, but overcoming your fears and shame will be necessary for you and your spouse to continue on the journey.

### **What can I expect after disclosure?**

After disclosure you will grieve. You'll likely feel numb at first, and then experience anger and sadness and despair. Your spouse may feel better than they have in years, now that all the secrets are out. But you may resent your mate for being so happy when your world has been torn apart. Expect mood swings and tiredness. If you find yourself unable to sleep, eat or function for 14 or more consecutive days, it is time to see a doctor for help.

The most important things you can do after disclosure are to be authentic with your spouse about what you're feeling, and authentic with the friends God has placed in your life. As long as you're talking about what's going on in your heart – the good, the bad and the ugly – you're on the healing journey. Withdrawing and isolating yourself will only limit what God can do in your life to heal your wounds.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from *L.I.F.E. Ministries, A L.I.F.E. Guide for Spouses* by Melissa Haas. Used by permission.