



Using Couples Therapy to help restore trust when there's been an affair.

A successful lawyer and his wife demonstrate that **couples therapy** can help heal them from an extramarital affair. Debbie and Marty were able to recognize the affair as a cry for help. It became a stepping-stone to a deeper, more intimate, and more satisfying marriage. Then they used couples therapy to learn how to help their teenage children.

SITUATION

After experiencing some healing from their individual therapy, Marty and Debbie came to me for couple's therapy. **They wanted to save their marriage!** Marty's affair was tearing their marriage apart. **They were both feeling hurt, anger, betrayal, and guilt.** Marty was trying to end the affair but the other woman was continuing her efforts to hang on. **Both Marty and his wife knew that he needed to say "no" loud and clear to any more contact with the other woman.** He was having trouble doing this! Beginning couples therapy sessions were devoted to helping Marty find his voice and end the affair. Otherwise, nothing would change. Marty succeeded! **He had a remarkable breakthrough in couples therapy and ended the affair. Both of them felt immediate relief. However, the initial feelings passed and they found themselves feeling confused, angry and inadequate.** We needed to explore what was going on between them.

COUPLES THERAPY APPROACH

We went deeper! Using couples therapy, I spent a lot of time listening to them. **Together, we created a safe space for both of them to say and feel whatever needed to be expressed.** This way they could really hear each other. As we continued our couples therapy, **I began to see softening and opening up in their communication.** A hallmark of couples therapy is to be on the side of both partners. I helped them hear, see, and understand the underlying behavior and emotional patterns that were getting in their way of connecting and experiencing the love they really had for each other - the love they so desperately needed.

Also common in couples therapy is orchestrating turning points that heal and awaken the couple's natural abilities to relate to each other. I formulated a question that proved to be a tremendous turning point for them: "You've done so well in therapy working through the reality of the affair and using it as a stepping stone to growth and deepening your emotional commitment to each other. What is the historical meaning, given your respective childhoods, that this affair has for each of you?" This question took them right to the heart of where they were stuck! **The conversation that ensued was a heartfelt awakening that "going into the belly of the beast" provides for understanding and healing.** At that point the compassion that each had for the other was palpable. They realized and shared the historical roots of their respective childhood traumas that were unconsciously intertwined with the here and now of "the affair".

RESULTS OF COUPLES THERAPY

Suddenly, Marty could feel Debbie's forgiveness, while realizing that he wasn't blocking it with guilt and shame. He softened and so did she. As Marty let go of his shame, Debbie let go of her fear. **They began to understand what it takes to be in an emotionally committed relationship. They were relating more deeply.** Couples therapy was helping.

As time passed they became more aware of their feelings and were able to express them without attacking or avoiding. They learned to confide in each other as well as to take responsibility when they needed to. Trust, acceptance, understanding, and even forgiveness came back. A deeper and more authentic marriage emerged. They both started to enjoy their relationship and each other again.

Another type of healing was also taking place. A couple of sessions and six weeks later **Debbie reported that, "Now when I find myself thinking about the affair there's no pain."** Hearing her say that, Marty shared, "Now it's o.k. to forgive myself. There's no reason to go there...(to shame and guilt). It's a great feeling!"

Couples therapy really helped Debbie and Marty heal and move on. Today they use couples therapy to successfully help their teenage son and daughter participate in family responsibilities. They are also finding more ease and enjoyment in family activities with their children. They demonstrated that by using and staying with couples therapy they could turn a potential relationship-ending affair into a stepping-stone for the future.