

The Post-Affair Divorce

*Heal Your Life, Restore Your Faith When
Infidelity Breaks Up Your Marriage*



Linda J. MacDonald, M.S.

LINDA MACDONALD

“Trauma with a Capital ‘T’”

Sample Rough Draft of the Chapter on Trauma

Copyright © 2023 by Linda MacDonald

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise without written permission from the publisher. It is illegal to copy this book, post it to a website, or distribute it by any other means without permission.

First edition

This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy.

Find out more at reedsy.com

Preface

As an infidelity specialist for 33 years, Linda J. MacDonald has enjoyed much success in helping individuals and couples recover from the wrecking ball of infidelity. While she has a heart for helping couples who wish to recover, she never dreamed that her own Christian husband would betray her in this way. Nor did she ever imagine his affair would change him so much that he would change his religious beliefs and walk away from her. The shock, terror, doubts, and sorrow caused her to question everything: her value, her faith, and her calling.

She soon learned that recovering from this blow would not just happen over time. It required a herculean effort to find the right therapy, resources, and truths from scripture to upright her upside-down life. Linda is using her years of personal and professional experience to write the book she wished she had found early in her crisis.

This is an unedited rough draft of just one chapter from her upcoming book, *Betrandoned: Healing your Life from the Compound Wounds of Infidelity and Unwanted Divorce*. As indicated by the title of the book, Linda has combined the words “Betrayed” and “Abandoned” to create the new term, “Betrandoned,” used throughout the book. This particular chapter introduces the betrayed and abandoned reader to the

ways they may have suffered from symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. In a later chapter, she will discuss ways she found healing and how others may as well.

Unlike her first book, *How to Help Your Spouse Heal from Your Affair: A Compact Manual for the Unfaithful*, which she wrote for the general public and has sold over 114,000 copies, she is writing this next book to Christians who have experienced the heartbreak of losing their marriages due to spousal infidelity. She believes that followers of Christ need a combination of personal stories, sound counseling, and spiritual tools in order to best heal from the isolating shame and double trauma of spousal unfaithfulness and desertion.

This particular chapter introduces the reader to how spousal betrayal and abandonment can lead to symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress.

The full book will cover such topics as:

- Identifying and Healing from Abandonment Grief
- How to Recognize and Heal from PTSD
- How to Stop Wishing You Were Dead
- Understanding Your Spouse's Emotional Distortion
(and Why it Isn't as Personal as it Feels)
- When Your Spouse Rewrites Your Marital History
- When Your Spouse Uses Religion Against You
- How to Cope when Friends and Therapists are Fooled
- The REAL reason God Hates Divorce
- How to Re-trust God When Everything Falls Apart
- Making Anger Work For You not Against You
- How to Forgive Without Betraying Yourself

Rebuilding Your Self-esteem
How to Survive with Class

May this first chapter whet your appetite and instill hope that a resource is coming that you can relate to. Again, sign up for Linda's newsletter so you can learn more about the messy process of recovering from the soul-crushing post-affair divorce.

www.lindajmacdonald.com

Chapter 1

Trauma with a Capital “T”

“Trauma is perhaps the most avoided, ignored, belittled, denied, misunderstood, and untreated cause of human suffering.”

— Peter A Levine

King David was on the run. His son, Absalom and his best friend and confidante, Ahithophel, were seeking to overthrow the throne and murder him. Psalm 55 was written during this tumultuous time in David’s life. He hadn’t suspected his best friend would collude with his son to betray him in this way. And he was scared. David showed evidence of suffering symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress:

My heart is in anguish. The terror of death overpowers me. Fear and trembling overwhelm me. I can’t stop shaking. O how I wish I had wings like a dove; then I would fly away and rest! ~Psalm 55:4-7

Do you identify with some of David’s feelings? When your

spouse joined up with another person to deceive, betray, and threaten your marriage, were you as frightened as I was?

None of us get married expecting our beloved spouses to betray us with an outside affair partner. We assume they meant their vow to “forsake all others.” And when they promised “Till death do us part,” we never imagine one day they will drag us through a heartbreaking, involuntary divorce. It’s all rather shocking and like a double betrayal. Rarely do we anticipate that the person we love, bond with, form families with, and intertwine our lives and assets with would turn on us, crush our self-esteems, destroy our pasts, and threaten our futures.

I love how Dr. Shirley Glass puts it:

“Following the discovery of a betrayal, there will never again be the blind trust that existed before. In just a few seconds, the safest haven in the world is turned into the source of the greatest treachery.”[1]

My Story

I remember the day I first suspected that James was considering leaving me. While he’d admitted a one-way crush on a woman at work, I still felt assured that our love could weather this temporary mid-life storm. Now that he had revealed his secret to me, I naively figured this admission would burst his fantasy about her. Although he swore me to secrecy and refused to seek support from his Christian friends, I blindly shoved any further suspicions aside.

A month later, when he was supposedly taking a nap, I walked in on him, under the covers, talking with *her* in hushed tones on our phone. This rattled me. He made up some excuse about their discussion being related to a matter at work. Once I

gathered myself, I let him have it. I let him know he had three options: to discuss the matter with our pastor, his weekly small group, or a therapist. I could no longer bear the burden of his struggle alone. He chose the confidentiality of a counselor. I relaxed again, figuring therapy would make a difference, and set his heart straight.

A few weeks after that, when he was leaving for a ministry trip out of the country, I noticed something new. He set his suitcase on the porch to adjust his collar, diverted his eyes, and slightly turned his back toward me before he left, without his usual warm hug goodbye. My heart froze. Something was terribly wrong. Our marriage was in deeper trouble than I thought. This snapped me out of denial-mode and into panic-mode. I went from confident wife to terrified girl in an instant.

That was the day my trauma symptoms began to manifest.

Immediately upon closing the door, my body began to tremble. My hands shook so badly it was difficult for me to hold a glass or pen. I couldn't concentrate. I had little appetite, and I couldn't find a way to calm myself down. My mind raced, going over the hints I had missed the previous couple of months. *Maybe there is more to the story.* That night, I laid awake, quaking for hours. After only getting an hour and a half of sleep, I beelined it for my doctor the next day. I knew I needed sleep medication if I was going to get any rest at all.

I couldn't shed the foreboding sense that my survival as wife, woman, mother, and identity were all at risk. I was on the brink of losing everything I held dear. Especially him.

After his trip, James' therapist suggested he tell me "The truth." That night we sat across the kitchen table from one another, stiffly, both of us on edge. Rather than tell me the *real* truth, that he and the other woman had been cavorting behind my back

for months, he told me a cleverly concocted story of why he'd been popping Tums and occasionally sleeping on the couch.

He said, “The reason I've been acting so strange is that I've been worried about the performance pressure of what everyone would think of me if I got a divorce.” Oh, no! The dreaded “D-word,” something that had never been uttered between us before. I was stunned.

He went on. “I've always tried to plan out my life ahead of time. I no longer believe it was God who brought us together. I love you, but I'm not in love with you. In fact, I'm not sure I ever loved you.” Another shocker. He might as well have told me he had secretly murdered his best friend.

“Besides, I think you are boring. I don't even like hanging out with you in the kitchen.” There it was. In a matter of two minutes, he had managed to dismantle our entire marital story.

I said, “This is really about *her*, isn't it? You think you are in love with *her*, and it has ruined your feelings for me.”

“No, that isn't true. This isn't about Judy. It's about our *marriage*.” He said this over and over with vehemence. And so, the conversation went. He denied any connection between his attraction to the other woman and his shift in feelings toward me. I felt dizzy, invalidated, and helpless.

As the evening wore on, he continued to whack away at my long-held reality. By the end of the evening, his twisted reasoning made my head spin to the point I doubted myself and nearly bought his maligned views. *Perhaps his feelings for her had not hijacked his feelings for me. Maybe he's right. I'm boring. No wonder he finds her more appealing.*

Then, as soon as I got away from him, I came to my senses, knowing that his perspective was horribly skewed. I was not the root of his problem. A strange and powerful undertow had

gripped his heart, dragging him out to sea, with the potential to pull me and our marriage out with it. I felt stymied as to what to do.

Over the ensuing months, I was so physically weak, I could hardly function. Everywhere I went, I seemed to lose something. My keys, my purse, my credit cards, where I parked my car. And even with nightly medication, my sleep was fitful and usually only three hours long. My doctor also prescribed a mild antidepressant to try to mitigate my heightened anxiety.

In the meantime, I developed a case of “hypervigilance.” As soon as James walked in the door, my brain turned to high alert. My eyes would lock onto him involuntarily, like a heat-seeking missile, following his every move, facial expression, body language, trying to read his mood: *Is his heart leaning toward me or against me today?* I knew it creeped him out, but I couldn’t help it.

Frozen and numb inside, I had to coach myself. *You will make dinner tonight. Just put one foot in front of the other. Walk over to the refrigerator and pull out something to fix. And do not burst into tears in front of your son, no matter how grief-stricken you are.* My brains were scrambled, and my movements felt rather mechanical, as I’d rather stay in bed, curl up a ball, and cry my eyes out.

After the holidays, well-meaning friends gave us tickets to a Seahawks game with our sons. I remember my petrified state walking into the stadium. I feared I might collapse at any moment. Legs numb, brain disconnected from my body, I made my way down the stairs to our seats. Having to fake being a secure family seemed surreal. I watched the game in suspended animation outside myself, despite sitting next to my kids who seemed clueless as to my condition. *Don’t they*

realize our family-life is hanging by a thread, about to be blown to smithereens? I wanted to scream.

Two more tortured months later, I took an extended mental health break to stay with friends in Hawaii and sought a church staff counselor while there. I had several dreams that indicated there was more to their relationship than I consciously knew.

Scared I was going to leave him, James finally called me and confessed that he and the other woman had been mutually involved all along. His tone was warm and kind. I asked a few specific questions about their liaisons, sad yet relieved to finally know the truth. My counselor warned me that we were not out of the woods yet. She believed my husband needed accountability with a few friends in-the-know.

I flew home, full of hope that he was back to his real self. However, once I returned home, he flatly refused to tell his closest friends the truth and would not honor my requests for no further contact with her. After much consternation, I chose to move into a friend’s cabin as a tough-love measure. A few months later, he and the other woman broke up for good.

Over the previous year I had tried everything I could think of to save our marriage: being super kind, being distant, pressuring him into counseling, intercessory prayer, moving out, arranging a friend to do an “intervention,” confronting the other woman, moving back home. Nothing seemed to make a difference. And his light-bulb moment when I was in Hawaii was over in a flash.

As a result of lying to his bosses about the affair, James lost his well-paying job. We had to sell nearly everything we owned and relocate. Surprisingly, he began to pursue me again, promising to “do whatever it takes” to repair our relationship. He further promised to take me out on weekly dates and attend marriage

counseling together. He even said, “I love you.” Everything I wanted to hear. Filled with hope again, I moved back in with him.

The next 6 weeks were pure torture. It soon became obvious to me that his heart was still far from me. Spiritually, we were miles apart. Physically, he avoided being in the same room with me. Emotionally, he was as detached as ever. He broke every promise he made to get me back. I had no confidence he could pull out of his messed-up thinking without professional help, which he now refused. Trying to salvage what little self-respect I still had, I moved out again, hoping he’d get the message that I would not tolerate any more broken promises.

I waited for him to come to his senses. As Christmas approached, I forced myself to attend a party for a non-profit we’d been involved in. Walking through the dessert line, a good friend leaned over and said, “James has told a couple of friends that he plans to file for divorce.” Stunned, I nearly dropped my plate. I called him as soon as I returned to what I had hoped were my temporary living quarters.

He said, “I was going to let you know after the first of the year. I just didn’t want to ruin Christmas for you.” *Ruin (another) Christmas? Was he kidding? How about, ruin my whole life!*

Once he made that decision, I stopped taking my year-long antidepressant medication. *After all, what was the use? It’s over.* I had no idea that as traumatizing as his betrayal and prior ambivalence were, his choice to give up on us and divorce me against my wishes knocked me over the edge.

And that’s when my nightly nightmares began. Usually around 2 am I woke up sobbing, heart pounding, after some horrid dream about “them”—his disdainful looks at me, the sweet tone in his voice when talking to her, them saying “I love

you’s” to one another. I even had dreams of him trying to kill me. Most of the time, I was so distraught, I couldn’t go back to sleep. Instead, I’d usually cry into my pillow for hours until daylight, call my clients in the morning. and cancel my day at work.

As bad as my nights were, the days bore their own torment. I’d be driving along in my car when a sudden flashback would startle me out of nowhere. The vision was usually a composite of some unbidden, painful memory. His cold facial expressions toward me. The glow on his face when they made bets over the World Series. Her soft voice or sexy laugh. His brooding over the piano, wistfully playing romantic music, wishing he was with her. Such images flashed across the screen of my mind with a fair amount of frequency for the next two years.

And then, I had to deal with “triggers”—reminders of him, her, their affair, our lovely home, shared friends, information through my kids—all painful associations of my former life. I tried to steer clear of certain places and people who represented him or their affair. I avoided driving by her house or going to Fred Meyer, as I knew that was where *she* shopped for groceries. I turned down wedding invites and changed the television channel when certain scenes were too close to home.

These reminders seemed to mock me: “You weren’t loveable enough.” “That pretty NFL sports announcer looks and sounds just like her. No wonder he preferred her over you!” “See that adoring couple sitting close to one another at church? That used to be the two of you.” I saw disparaging messages everywhere: *You are a discarded, undesirable relic, likely to die a lonely old lady.*

And oh, the obsessing. I had missed so many of the signs they were involved. *Perhaps if I had figured it out earlier, I might have been able to stop the affair before it gained so much traction. I*

found myself reviewing the details of all that happened, poring over them from every angle, trying to piece together the clues I had missed. My blood boiled in remembrance of his sneaking around, the stories he told that didn't add up, and blushed over some of my own shameful actions. I'd replay our past conversations ad nauseam, trying to fill in the blanks of how I'd let myself be so fooled and what else I could have done that might have made a difference. I wrote thousands of pages in my journals, trying to piece together the puzzle of our demise.

Although I met with a clinical psychologist at the time, neither he nor I understood that my ruminating, nightmares, fear, rage, tormented mind, hypervigilance, flashbacks, and avoidance were not merely signs of generalized anxiety. I was suffering classic symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

As a therapist, in 1999, I was unaware of the developing literature supporting a PTSD diagnosis for betrayed spouses and those suffering abandonment trauma. I knew post-war vets, rape victims, and victims of sudden car accidents could develop PTSD. But Betrandoned spouses?

A Brief History of PTSD.

I decided to search for better explanations for my debilitating symptoms. Here are a few helpful things I learned, starting with a short history of the PTSD diagnosis.

During and immediately after the Civil War, the experts of the time labeled the disorder in post-war soldiers "Hysterical Neurosis." After World War I the syndrome was called "Shell Shock." At the conclusion of World War II, the psychiatric disorder was called "Acute Situational Maladjustment." In 1952, when the first DSM manual for professionals was published,

it was labeled “Gross Stress Reaction,” caused by combat or a civilian catastrophe. All somewhat negative and shaming characterizations.

After the Viet Nam War, a new label appeared: Post-Vietnam Syndrome. Eventually psychologists settled on the term Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

I remember a friend from the 1980s whose extended family vacationed in Hawaii. She reported that her son-in-law hid in their condo the entire time. He refused to go outside and join them at the pool or the beach with everyone else. The reason? The tropical foliage triggered panic, as it reminded him of his deployment to Viet Nam during the war.

Beyond the fallout of combat, experts observed similar, maladaptive reactions from other kinds of traumatic experiences, such as abuse. Soon “Abused Child Syndrome” and “Battered Women Syndrome” were added to the list. [2]

Intimate betrayal is often so shattering that many folks experience the same dysregulating symptoms as post-war veterans or victims of rape and other crimes. Gradually, the psychiatric community has come to recognize intimate betrayal among the list of causes of PTSD.

So, What is PTSD?

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder can develop when we are overwhelmed by a shocking, unexpected, unbearable event that threatens our sense of safety and we feel helpless to do anything about it.

We are wired to self-protect. When an unexpected danger comes our way, our brains release stress hormones (cortisol and adrenalin) to give us the energy to run away or stay and

fight. Often referred to as our “flight or fight” response. When neither option is possible, these hormones may cause us to freeze (or play dead) in the hopes the danger will pass. Yet, when there is no let-up in the threat, these hormones keep firing and our systems get stuck in overdrive. In other words, we stay in survival mode which diminishes our ability to use our rational brain. This in turn, interferes with our ability to cope in regular life.

Dr. Jill Manning distinguishes betrayal trauma from other kinds of fear-based traumas:

Betrayal trauma occurs when someone we depend on for survival, or are significantly attached to, violates our trust in a critical way. Although betrayal trauma shares many of the same psychological, physiological, and neurological symptoms associated with fear-based traumas, it is distinct in two important ways:

The perpetrator is in close relationship with the victim:

Perpetrators of betrayal traumas are in close relationship with the victim, and therefore the violation of trust is experienced as a deeply personalized (versus random) offense. Due to the personalized nature of the betrayal, betrayal trauma can be more destabilizing to one’s social schema than a strictly fear-based trauma. Research has also shown betrayal trauma to be associated with more physical illness, anxiety, dissociation and depression than traumas low in betrayal [also validated by Jennifer Freyd’s research].

(1) High risk of reoccurrence:

Due to the close and interconnected relationship between the perpetrator and the victim, it can be difficult to confront or sever ties with the perpetrator. As a result, victims may feel trapped and remain in the relationship out of necessity, thereby making the risk of future reoccurrence of betrayal trauma higher than with random or accidental traumas.

Thus, she concludes,

A betrayed spouse...typically shares a life, home, children, extended family, and finances with the perpetrator. These life ties make extrication infinitely more complex and prolonged — even if the victim chooses to divorce the perpetrator.³

In Appendix A, I’ve included a list of the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, adapted from the DSM-5. Take a look at these and check the boxes of symptoms you can relate to. The more boxes you check, the more likely that you have or are experiencing a significant degree of Post-Traumatic Stress.

No matter how many boxes you checked, my guess is that Betrandonment Trauma has resulted in at least some symptoms of PTSD in your own life. I’d like to explain a little more about how both intimate betrayal and partner abandonment are such life-altering experiences.

We marry people we love and who we believe love us. We begin our new lives together with assumed trust. As we sexually and affectionately connect, our bodies flood with oxytocin, also referred to as the “cuddle hormone”—the same bonding hormone released when a mother nurses her baby. We form what we believe is a safe, private attachment with our spouses and expect to be married for life.

So, when the first D-day occurs (usually not the entire story),

our minds are blown to discover our beloved has violated our agreed upon sexual exclusivity. It seems surreal.

I've known spouses who were so shocked upon learning of their spouses' unfaithfulness that they began vomiting. Others lost their hair, either in chunks or entirely in a short period of time. One woman told me of the discouragement she felt watching her hair go down the shower drain.

Some folks throw phones across the room or smash their wedding photos. Still others lie on the floor, a scream from the top of their lungs. Others, like myself, begin to shake uncontrollably, followed by other symptoms of post-traumatic distress as I described in my own story.

Author Vaneetha Risner describes her first response to discovering her husband's betrayal,

"I grabbed the counter to stop myself from falling onto the hardwood floor. The ground beneath me seemed to be swaying uncontrollably. I lurched to a barstool and sat, waiting for my racing heart to calm down." ⁴

The initial discovery of unfaithfulness by your beloved spouse is traumatic enough. But when you learn that his/her heart has turned away from you enough to abandon you, it can feel like your world has caved in. Such an emotional shake-up can seem life-threatening and lead to post-traumatic stress reactions.

Romantic betrayal ruptures our marriages, tears away at our most primary attachments, and feels threatening to us on many levels: emotionally, physically, financially, and psychologically. It imperils our closest family and social connection, and strips away our sense of protection and shelter in the world—and even with God.

Betrayal Trauma

In the days facing my unwanted divorce, I scoured the internet for books and blogs to see if anyone else suffered the way I did. I found a few online articles and a couple of books with information on trauma, which helped. Yet, in the late 1990s, material linking PTSD with intimate betrayal was only beginning to come on the market, mostly as a result of the explosion of internet pornography and its devastating effect on marriages.

One of the unique features of Betrayal Trauma, compared to veterans of war, is the breach of trust involved between people in an intimate relationship. The very ones we depend on to protect us suddenly turn into someone who is dangerous to our emotional health. Thanks to the work of recent authors and researchers who’ve studied the impact of sexual betrayal on partners, many books and articles have since popped up, confirming the PTSD diagnoses as appropriate following sexual or romantic betrayal. Some writers are comfortable labeling this as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Others prefer similar terms: Betrayal Trauma, Post Betrayal Trauma, Relationship PTSD, Post-traumatic Relationship Syndrome, and Traumatic Distress.

Infidelity specialist, Dr. Shirley Glass, writes,

“The reactions of the betrayed spouse resemble the post-traumatic stress symptoms of the victims of catastrophic events. Common reactions to the loss of innocence and shattered assumptions include obsessively pondering the details of the affair; continuously watching for further signs of betrayal; and physiological hyperarousal, flashbacks, and intrusive images.”⁵

Over the past couple of decades, various helping professionals have increasingly recognized the need to provide targeted trauma therapy for betrayed partners. A number of organizations that originally sprang up to help the sexually addicted also began to provide materials and support groups for betrayed spouses.

However, in the early days, support and treatment for betrayed spouses followed the “addiction” model used for alcoholic families. Rather than recognizing the true impact of betrayal trauma on the innocent spouse, the faithful partner was saddled with terms like “co-dependent” and “co-addict,” with “COSA” groups forming all over the United States. This inadequate label ascribed the dynamic as a cooperative dysfunctional dance between the betrayed and their straying partners, much like a codependent or enabling spouse with an alcoholic family member.

While sex addicts and others who find elation outside their marriages are under the influence of neurochemicals that alter their behaviors and attitudes, few spouses of the sexually unfaithful knowingly enable the deceitful behaviors of their straying partners. In fact, they usually have little to no idea what all is transpiring behind the scenes. Unlike alcohol addiction, which is obvious to sober family members, much of the thrill of extra-marital activities stems from their secrecy. Dr. Omar Minwalla refers to this as the unfaithful person’s “Secret Sexual Basement.”⁶ Strayers tend to become experts at hiding the truth from their innocent partners. So, it begs the question, “How could partners co-dependently cooperate with or enable something that is outside of their awareness?”

Once D-day (Discovery Day) occurs, injured spouses are usually caught off guard, deeply wounded, and in shock from

learning that the sanctity of their marriage has been violated. It's one thing to suspect something is “off,” yet another to learn the cold, hard truth through discovery or disclosure. The injured partner's resulting reactions are not due to some unhealthy adaptive dynamic but rather, from the traumatic distress of discovering acts of staggering personal betrayal by their most intimate other. Their straying spouses' outside sexual activities have invaded their privacy, and destroyed the romantic and legal exclusivity of their marriages.

Often, unfaithful spouses are so self-consumed with their illicit behaviors that they lack the capacity to comfort their anguished partners. In turn, hurt spouses often feel demoralized and embarrassed by their partners' disgraceful behaviors. Seeking to either protect their partners' reputations or their own public image, they avoid confiding their woes with others. Thus, shell-shocked partners frequently don't receive the kind of social and emotional support they need for their minds and bodies to calm down after such revelations. Rather, they suffer in shaming isolation.

Fortunately, the counseling community is recognizing the assaultive impact of partner betrayal, and the “co-dependent” misnomer for partners is being slowly corrected. Betrayal Trauma and similar terms better explain the desperate reactions, flashbacks, hyper-anxiety, nightmares, and other symptoms seen in wounded spouses.

Much like the evolution from the pathologizing label of “Hysterical Neurosis” in the Civil War era to the more accurate term of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder after the Viet Nam War, it has taken time for therapists and researchers to recognize partners' torment from marital betrayal as evidence they've been traumatized, rather than as proof they were “codepen-

dent.”

Prolonged Agony

Just because experts have identified betrayal trauma as a real condition, does not mean that victims are immune from having some degree of codependency from their upbringing or developing a type of codependency if the violations continue. Christian folks who believe God ordained the institution of marriage are especially susceptible to putting up with repeat sexual offenses in their efforts to try to salvage their marriages. They may prematurely “forgive” their spouses’ misbehaviors, over and over, naively believing a strayer’s words while overlooking their duplicitous actions. Or they may think they can motivate them to have a faithful turnaround by dragging them into counseling, putting books in front of their faces, and pressing them to attend church. In other words, overfunctioning spouses may find themselves doing all the work while their partners remain uninvested in their own recovery.

I’ve seen folks hang on for dear life to painful marriages despite being bludgeoned by an unrepentant partner who continues a lifestyle of serial affairs or other sexual acting out. Much to the faithful one’s own detriment.

There are several reasons faithful Christians may be especially prone to clinging to an unhealthy marriage. Some sincere but misguided folks may believe they can sway another person’s will despite evidence to the contrary. Having been able to influence their spouses in the past, they find it difficult to face the fact their sentiments no longer carry weight. Others fear they would be guilty of breaking their marriage vows, even though their

partners have already broken them and have no intention of undoing the damage. Others hold on for financial reasons or in a desperate attempt to protect their children from growing up in a divorced home. Still others may live in perpetual denial because they are too scared to accept the ramifications of their partner’s chronic dereliction of duty to the marriage.

Another factor that can prolong a person’s tendency to tolerate the intolerable, is repeat reconciliations. This bears similarities to the cycle of domestic abuse: an explosive event (in our case, D-Day), the abuser’s period of remorse, the honeymoon period where the couple “reconcile,” followed by the build-up of tension that leads to another abusive (unfaithful) event.

Dr. Glass points out that folks who’ve experienced several reconciliations may hold on to hope for change because they’ve seen several apparent turn-arounds in the past. They may have even renewed their wedding vows. These surface moves by wayward spouses can fool their partners into believing they have truly changed. We will explore ways to tell the difference between genuine character transformation and mere image control, in the chapter “Charm or Contrition?”

In my reading, I found most books on divorce recovery insufficient to explain my continuing symptoms and degree of torment. As awful as James’ romantic betrayal was, I could not comprehend how my husband could fall out of love with me and change his values to the point he would choose to walk away. His decision to divorce me against my will felt even more cataclysmic to me than his unfaithfulness. Being torn away from my husband, *by* my husband, leveled me. I needed more information to explain how fractured I felt. So, I continued my research.

Trauma Bonds

Reading Patrick Carnes' book, *The Betrayal Bond*, was a good start. It helped explain why I was still so traumatically attached to a person who no longer loved me. He describes how humans sometimes develop an inappropriate bond with those who threaten or abuse them. People can form trauma-bonds with a hostage taker, an abuser, or a remorseless, rejecting spouse.

Dr. Carnes defines this condition: "Trauma bonds are the dysfunctional attachments that occur in the presence of danger, shame, or exploitation." ⁷

Danger? Shame? Exploitation? Sound familiar? During our marital crisis, I felt as if my very life was in *danger*, as though my husband was dangling me over the side of a ship at sea, while he debated whether to let go. As a woman scorned, I felt *shame* over my inability to recapture his love. And it felt like he *exploited* my trust by dabbling in an affair, tormenting me with his back-and-forth ambivalence, assuming that if he changed his mind, I'd likely accept him back. It felt like he held all the cards, and I was at his mercy.

I believe the abusive impact of unfaithful rejection can sometimes cause us to grip our spouses (or our memory of them) for dear life, as if our hand is locked onto a cord that is electrocuting us. We may feel powerless to let go, despite the pulsating currents of pain. In my case, the danger of losing him increased my attachment to him and elevated his importance to me to an unhealthy degree. And my feelings of rejection-shame gave me the feeling I was nothing without him.

Are you holding onto an untrustworthy, straying spouse? Hoping for reconciliation despite multiple red flags, your gut instincts, your common sense, and the advice of friends and

family who hate seeing you hurt so badly? Do you keep longing for your partner to one day wake up and come running back to you, even though he or she has left you, moved in with another lover, or treats you with contempt?

Dr. Carnes’ book offers inventories for betrayal-bond sufferers to assess how many signs of PTSD they are exhibiting, as he clearly believes betrayal-bonds can cause PTSD. Unwinding this kind of unhealthy attachment requires a type of de-programming, much like for those who escape a cult. I will discuss this in more detail in later chapters.

Abandonment Trauma

Besides romantic betrayal and trauma-bonds, I learned that spousal abandonment can also cause symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress. When a beloved spouse changes from loving to heartless, it’s a shock wave to the system. For myself, the jolt from the sudden loss of my husband’s affection was an agonizing source of traumatic grief for me. Even though my two of my therapists did not recognize my symptoms for what they were, I kept hunting for resources to explain my bizarre feelings and experiences. I found two additional helpful resources that explained how partner heartbreak can cause post-traumatic-like symptoms.

In one book, *The Love Trauma Syndrome*, psychiatrist Dr. Richard Rosse discussed a variety of relationship ruptures that can cause trauma symptoms in the brokenhearted. He said, “A love trauma is the result of a perceived threat to a desired love relationship. The greater the *desire* for the relationship to continue, the more severe the love trauma. The more “in love” someone is, the greater the risk of a resulting Love Trauma

Syndrome if the relationship dissolves.”⁸

Dr. Rosse went on to describe the signs of what he calls “The Love Trauma Syndrome” on pages 14–15. My heart raced as I noticed these “signs” appeared identical to the symptoms I was suffering. Plus, they coincided with the symptoms of PTSD. Wow. Maybe I wasn’t overreacting after all.

I found another helpful resource, written by an abandonment-grief specialist, Susan Anderson. Her book, *The Journey from Abandonment to Healing*, became a comforting and validating source of insight for me in my recovery process. I highlighted nearly every page. Here she explains,

“During the shattering stage, abandonment survivors experience many of the same symptoms as victims of other types of trauma, such as rape or physical attack. The problem is that abandonment survivors are not often recognized as such.”⁹ She calls this, “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder of Abandonment”¹⁰

Did you catch that? She says that abandonment survivors often develop symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress, something she believes is not recognized enough in the professional community. In hindsight, I heartily agree, especially back when her book was first published in March of 2000.

According to the research on attachment, it is *unnatural* for us to have our primary attachment person intentionally betray and break away from us against our wills. Evolutionary biologists believe that fundamental attachments have a protective role in nature and developed among humans for the survival of our species. When a spouse or parent abandons us home base, it causes a visceral terror within us. In the natural world, danger lurks when we are left alone to fend for ourselves.

As a protective mechanism, we were designed by God to bond with a parent and, later, with a life-partner. Human beings are hard-wired for a safe primary connection, a linked teammate with whom to fend off the potential perils of life in a fallen world. We feel grounded when our spouse provides a safe home-base from which to function. It’s all about survival and creating a protective family unit for raising the next generation.

And when that attachment is threatened, stress hormones flood our brains and muscles, causing our flight or fight or freeze response to kick into gear—which explains some of the desperate, irrational ways some of us behave in the aftermath of discovering betrayal and increases with the threat of loss. And when those hormones keep sending the message that we are in danger through triggers, flashbacks, and nightmares—and sometimes our trauma symptoms can become chronic.

Once I understood this dynamic, that it was normal to feel so threatened by spousal abandonment, it helped me feel less crazy for the way Betrandonment jolted me off my foundations.

Regarding unwanted divorce, most books on divorce seem to frame the loss as similar to a death. But death is not usually personal. A partner’s passing away may be painful, but it is seldom perceived as an attack on one’s worth. When spouses choose to desert us, we not only lose their presence, we also lose their love. The insult, shame, and violation of our will make the post-affair divorce particularly egregious. That is why I believe Abandonment Trauma and Abandonment Grief deserve their own recognition, distinct from the loss of a spouse through death or a less traumatic divorce. More on that in the next chapter.

Overt and Covert Abandonment

Traumatic partner rejection can be both overt and covert. Overt desertion is when a spouse openly leaves the marriage and files for divorce. Yet covert abandonment is just as painful. This occurs when a disaffected partner withdraws emotionally, disengages from the relationship during or after infidelity, yet remains physically in the home or lives separately without a legal divorce.

Why would disengaged partners choose to stay married? Sometimes they are worried about what others would think of them if they left. Or they may want to avoid looking like the “bad guy” by filing for divorce. Some folks are afraid of the financial fall-out of splitting hard-earned assets. Others want to continue their sex addictions or affairs, selfishly expecting their partners to put up with their shenanigans. Or they think they can get away with continuing to lie and hide these offensive activities.

Spouses who have narcissistic tendencies may not want to lose control over their wounded spouses, so they use mind games, mixed messages, and other manipulations to maintain their dominance despite their lack of exclusive commitment to the marriage.

Still, other Betrandoners simply refuse to do the hard work of repair, expect their hurt partners to just “get over it,” show no interest in getting outside help, and make little effort to make amends with their devastated family members. They may be present physically, but they are absent emotionally.

That is often because the affair or addiction has changed them. They have detached from their life-partners and lack the necessary motivation to seek the emotional, relational, and spiritual renewal necessary to recapture their first love and reverse the effects of their destructive ways. Their bodies may

be in the home, but their hearts are not. They’ve abandoned their faithful spouses in a more insidious way.

This situation often forces injured spouses to file for divorce by default. Someone has to make a move out of a destructive stalemate, and sometimes this pushes the very one who most wanted to salvage the marriage into legalizing the obvious—the relationship is irretrievably broken. Just because a betrayed spouse files for divorce does not mean he or she wanted to end the marriage. It merely means they have faced the fact they cannot save it alone.

Summary

Most of us feel doubly traumatized when our spouses betray us romantically and then overtly or covertly reject us by failing to fight for our marriages. We feel shamed and mortified when they throw us away as if we meant nothing to them.

I’ve come to believe that betrayed and abandoned spouses are particularly susceptible to developing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. A person’s experience of Betrandonment often mixes betrayal trauma, trauma-bonding, and abandonment trauma altogether—a perfect recipe for disaster.

Naming our injuries, symptoms, and their diagnoses is critical to finding the right antidotes for recovery. Before healing can begin, it is important for those of us who develop PTSD symptoms after Betrandonment to have our symptoms correctly identified and our traumas validated. We need to know relationship traumas are real and not uncommon responses to such fundamental threats. It helps to recognize that our stress reactions are not out of line with the experiences of others and align with the research associated with betrayal

trauma, trauma bonds, attachment wounds, and abandonment trauma.

I heard one simple definition of PTSD at a conference: “A natural reaction to an unnatural experience.” We were designed for secure attachment, not for life-altering assaults on our primary bond.

While not everyone experiences full-blown Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder after the calamity of partner betrayal and rejection, I’ve met and talked with many who do. There wasn’t a lot of information available 21 years ago when I went through my own experience. Thankfully, today, there are many articles, books, and videos that discuss interpersonal trauma in even more depth than I can include in one or two chapters.

Have you been traumatized by the reverberations of Betrandonment? Has your spouse turned on you, sneaking around behind your back, and followed this affront by walking away, literally or figuratively? Are you wondering what to do?

David, fleeing for his life from his betraying friend and rebellious son, suffering many PTSD-like symptoms, ends Psalm 55:22 “Give your burdens to the Lord, and he will take care of you. He will not permit the godly to slip and fall.”

The fact you are reading this book tells me that you are hoping for God to come through for you. The Lord uses many avenues for healing our hearts: biblical truths, the support of safe friends, the skillful help of professionals, and the love of God.

That is why I created a Betrandoned Workbook to go along with this book. Even if you only answer the questions on your own, it will help you dig deeper for your personal recovery journey. Yet, ideally, I hope you can join or form a “Betrandoned Partners” group to share around the exercises found in the upcoming workbook.

As a professional counselor, I am aware of many newer therapies that are useful in reducing the torments of PTSD. Yet, when these are combined with the power of scripture and of the Holy Spirit, there is even greater potential for wholistic healing.

As awful as our circumstances may be, it is the *meaning* we attach to the insults of spousal betrayal and rejection that do the greatest damage. The losses are bad enough. But when someone we love and depend on injures us in such personal ways, we naturally lose our sense of worth, our identity, our role as spouses, our purpose, our trust in ourselves, and our sense of safety in this world.

Who else but the Lord can help us replace the awful messages behind the torment of betrayal trauma with the healing power of Truth and the Love of Christ? In the next chapter, I will explore some tools for healing trauma.

End Notes

1. Glass, Shirley, NOT “Just Friends,” (1998) 96
2. <http://traumadissociation.com/ptsd/history-of-post-traumatic-stress-disorder.html>
3. <https://drjillmanning.com/betrayal-trauma/>
4. Risner, Vaneetha R. *Walking Through Fire: A Memoir of Loss and Redemption* (Nelson Books: Nashville, (2021). 123
5. AAMFT brochure, 2002, Item #1053, written by Dr. Shirley Glass

6. file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/61a5399eb4455c2a32f84d60_The_Secret_Sexual_Basement_Nov_2021.pdf
7. Carnes, Patrick, (2019) *The Betrayal Bond: Breaking Free of Exploitive Relationships*. 67
8. Rosse, Richard, M.D., *The Love Trauma Syndrome: Free Yourself from the Pain of a Broken Heart* (1999). 12
9. Anderson, Susan, *The Journey from Abandonment to Healing*, (2000), 48, 49
10. Anderson, 39

Epilogue

APPENDIX A

Look over the following symptoms of PTSD (adapted from the DSM IV and V, diagnostic manuals counselors often refer to) and check the boxes of what you experienced when you were betrayed and abandoned by your spouse:

LIST OF COMMON SYMPTOMS OF PTSD

Intrusive Symptoms:

- Reliving the event, over and over again
- Uninvited flashbacks, intrusive and distressing memories, recurrent images
- Frequent nightmares, frightening dreams
- Emotional and physical duress when traumatic memories are triggered
- Haunting grief, shame, or guilt over how you reacted to the trauma event(s)
- Guilt for surviving what others did not
- Obsessing about the trauma and being plagued by fears of further danger
- Intrusive, uninvited thoughts that seem to come out of nowhere

Arousal Symptoms:

- Hypervigilance (feeling on edge or on “guard,” even when in safe situations)
- Easily startled or jumpy
- Shaky, jittery inside, or trembling hands
- Difficulty concentrating
- Outbursts of anger or extreme irritability
- Sleep disturbances: difficult getting to sleep, staying asleep, lack of restorative sleep
- Intense fear of the event happening again; terrified of repeat traumas, physical or emotional
- Reckless or self-destructive behavior (including misuse of drugs, alcohol, or suicide attempts)

Avoidance Symptoms:

- Avoiding people, places, conversations, or situations that remind you of the event
- Going out of your way to not see or hear about any reminder of the event(s)
- Avoiding thinking about the trauma or feelings associated with it

Negative Changes in Thoughts and Mood Symptoms:

- Some loss of memory about the event
- Easily lose track of what you are doing
- Feeling hopeless or helpless about the future
- Decreased interest in enjoyable activities
- Persistent and exaggerated negative feelings and beliefs about self, others, or the world/life/God
- Distorted, negative beliefs about the cause or impact of the

traumatic event(s)

(Optional) Dissociative Symptoms:

Feeling like you are outside your body watching what is going on

Feeling detached or estranged from others

Feeling like you are walking around in a daze or a dream

“Spacing out” or “zoning out” while at work or home

Feeling emotionally “numb;” things seem surreal; feel as if not living in reality

[NOTE: this is not intended as a substitute for a professional diagnosis. If you checked many boxes, be sure to seek the help of a trauma-informed therapist.]

Afterword

If you enjoyed reading this chapter and would like to be notified when the full book comes out, sometime in 2024, be sure to sign up for Linda's mailing list on her website, just scroll to the bottom of any page: www.lindajmacdonald.com

