

Your marriage can survive an affair:

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Dear Dr. Bill,

I cannot believe I am writing this letter. Two weeks ago, I discovered suspicious looking e-mails written by my wife to a man at her work. What I found were dozens and dozens of love letters, many containing very explicit sexual content. Yes, my wife had been having an affair with a guy at work for almost a year. She says she is very sorry and has ended the relationship. I am devastated, angry and afraid. I can't imagine ever feeling secure in this relationship again. We have two beautiful children. Can we ever get past this? Signed: Devastated.

Dear Devastated: My heart goes out to you and your wife. An affair is a tsunami to a marriage. The damage is incomprehensible. While it will be hard work, the good news is that it has been estimated that two-thirds of marriages survive affairs. My guess is that of those that survive, far too many eventually sweep the affair under the rug and never really deal with it. Try not to make that mistake. Trust and affection can be restored.

I think you have two major tasks. One is recovering from the affects of the affair and two is taking a hard look at your marriage itself. Be honest. How strong was your marriage before this happened? I would like to be very clear on one point. The state of your marriage prior to the affair does not justify your wife's decision to have an affair. The previous marriage condition is never an excuse for that. But after helping couples in post-affair recovery for some time, I've never seen a great close marriage in existence prior to an affair. I always see years of decay.

Recovery will take time. I've seen estimates that it takes two years to process through all the issues. Take a look at the website www.dearpeggy.com. There is a ton of information about affair recovery and support groups. A great book on the topic is After The Affair by Janis Spring. Its important that you understand what is happening to you and your wife as you recover. Your wife feels a sense of relief that the burden of her secret has been lifted. She feels intense guilt and shame and is ready to be forgiven and move on. You on the other hand have just awakened to find that the world is not what you thought it was. You are just adjusting to this new reality. Your brain is trying to make sense out of a world that was not what it seemed. You likely have a million questions. You will think of a day when she came home late from work and wonder if that was one of the times they met. I think your wife should be prepared to have patience and answer all of your questions. That will be hard for her. It will get old in a hurry. But part of restoring trust with you is being willing to tell you the truth. My suggestion to you is that you ask general questions but don't get into gory details. There are certain images that you do not want to plant in your mind. The first three months will be very hard for both of you. But it does get better.

And the second task is to take an objective look at your marriage. It will be easier to do this in a few months. I suggest you consider a marriage weekend like Retrouvaille or Marriage Encounter. Both are listed in the phone book. I just love the title of this book: My Husband's Affair Became the Best Thing That Ever Happened to Me by Anne Bercht. She is careful to add that it was also the hardest thing and for a while she thought she might not to be able to get through it. But the point is they did more than just recover. They rebuilt their marriage. So can you.

Let me close by saying this. God is bigger than the problems in your marriage. Pray for hope. Learn how to forgive. A healed marriage is the greatest gift you can give your children and you.

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