

*This is the fourth article in a five-part series dealing with the topic of pornography/sexual addiction.*

Today's column will focus on the partners affected by sexual betrayal. This often over-looked group of women and men find themselves suffering silently while they wonder and wait if the problematic behavior will go away.

Many scholars have noted that partners betrayed by pornography use experience symptoms associated with posttraumatic stress disorder. Injured partners often experience symptoms such as intrusive thoughts, numbing, depression, anxiety, avoidance of reminders, and overwhelming emotions. Many injured partners blame themselves, believing that they could somehow influence the course of the addiction. Like war-torn soldiers, these partners live in fear that something will remind them of the painful memories associated with sexual betrayal. They often become hyper-vigilant by checking computer histories, cell phones, and obsessing over details related to the sexual acting out behaviors.

The stress associated with discovering such behavior can produce sleepless nights, food issues (both overeating and under eating), traumatic flashbacks, crying spells, and feelings of hopelessness. The physical exhaustion related to these stressors can cause a once perfectly healthy individual to begin under functioning.

Dr. Shondell Knowlton, a marriage and family therapist in Farmington, UT, has compared the experience of learning of problematic sexual behavior to having one's apple cart tipped over. She explains that when the metaphorical apple cart gets dumped over, the order and predictability of one's life gets scattered in all directions. Energy previously used for other things gets re-routed to gathering, cleaning, sorting, and re-stacking the "apples." This process is fraught with disorder, confusion, and humiliation.

It's important to begin emotional first-aid as quickly as possible when a discovery of problematic sexual behavior is made. Here are a few areas that help injured partners begin the healing process of in the aftermath of betrayal.

**Self-care:** Relational trauma impacts individuals both emotionally and physically. Caring for the body in the aftermath of trauma allows the individual to have more capacity for emotional healing. It's critical to slow down, become grounded, and cut out any unnecessary commitments. This is an important time to create balance with eating, sleeping, and exercise. The emotional overload of the relational betrayal creates immediate and long-term physical symptoms, so it's vital to begin caring for the body and under scheduling yourself.

**Support:** Reach out for support and talk with people who are friends of the relationship. It's not always wise to make immediate decisions about the future, as emotions are high. Instead, find someone who is a good listener. Church leaders, family, professional counselors, support groups, or friends are excellent places to start. The relationship will also need support, so it's important to find someone who can help the couple navigate the rebuilding of trust.

**Education:** It's important for partners to learn about the nature of addiction to better understand the healing process. Many partners I've worked with feel relieved to better understand how addictions are created and what can be done to overcome them. I maintain an

updated readings list on my website ([www.LifeSTARstgeorge.com](http://www.LifeSTARstgeorge.com)) on topics related to pornography/sexual addiction recovery.

It's important to reach out instead of suffering silently. Regardless of the unfaithful partner's motivation to change, the injured partner will always benefit from getting the proper support.

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