

Exploring the roots of marital infidelity

By Emily Stimpson

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And why it should not need to mean the end of a Catholic couple's marriage

Infidelity happens. Not just to politicians. Not just to professional athletes. And not just to movie stars.

Infidelity happens to Catholics. Young Catholics. NFP-only Catholics. It happens where it's not supposed to happen and to people who thought it could never happen to them.

Kathleen Knox* learned that hard truth last year, when she discovered that Peter, her husband of eight years and father of their six children, had been carrying on a long-standing affair with one of his female friends.

"I thought our marriage was founded on family and God," she said, explaining her shock at the discovery. "I had married this really great Catholic guy, who'd worked at the Vatican and walked out of smutty movies. I didn't expect my husband to lie to me as well as he did."

Knox isn't alone.

According to Greg Popcak, author of "For Better Forever: A Catholic Guide to Lifelong Marriage" (OSV, \$14.95) and founder of the Pastoral Solutions Institute (www.exceptionalmarriages.com), infidelity happens in Catholic marriages at about the same rate as in the general population.

That, he said, is because "it is not faith that increases a person's immunity to infidelity. It's character formation."

In other words, most people think infidelity happens as a result of marital conflict. It doesn't.

End of the road?

"The root of the problem is that the person cheating is terrible at dealing with conflict in interpersonal relationships and knowing how to get their needs met, so they don't say things that need to be said," Popcak explained. "Over time, they become resentful of their spouse because they're not happy. They become depressed. Then they bump into somebody who makes them smile, who it feels good to be around."

The adulterous relationship that then forms becomes what Popcak described as "an attempt at self-medicating depression."

Infidelity happens. But it doesn't have to be the end of the road for a marriage. In fact, it shouldn't be.

The Catholic Church, in Canon 1152 of the Code of Canon Law, encourages spouses to reconcile with an adulterous partner. And the Church never encourages the impossible.

That's what Julie and Frank LaBoda learned 10 years ago. In the wake of Frank's affair, the couple stayed together, but their marriage disintegrated into what Julie described as "three years of hell." She couldn't let go of what happened, and he didn't know how to undo the damage he'd caused. Finally, the two went to a Retrouvaille retreat, a decision both say saved their marriage.

Through Retrouvaille, Julie said she learned that "it's a myth to think healing has to happen before forgiveness. Rather, forgiveness has to come first. It's what makes healing possible."

She also learned she couldn't succumb to anger or the temptation to "punish" Frank: She had to stop speaking negatively about him, calling him names and playing the victim card when they fought.

"You can't give into the victim mentality," she said. "If you do, you'll always be a victim."

Frank also learned to ask for forgiveness again and again. He learned he needed to be home more, and put Julie and their children before playing sports with the guys or work.

They both learned that they had to work at loving each other ("Love is a verb," said Julie), and that they had to get back to talking about more than facts -- money, children, the house -- but also about their hopes and dreams, what Julie calls "all the things you shared when you were courting." They also remained involved with Retrouvaille, and today serve on Retrouvaille's international coordinating team.

Total transparency

Over the past year, the Knoxes have learned similar lessons as they've worked through the aftermath of Peter's affair.

Kathleen said she's found the strength to move forward in God, in the sacramental graces that come with marriage, and in her children, even on the hardest days looking for joy in the little things, like tickling the girls or chasing the boys. She said it also helped to stop thinking the affair was about her and her inability to be the perfect wife.

"Trying to be perfect isn't helpful," she said. "What is helpful is love and kindness. You need to keep remembering that your spouse was hurting, there was something wrong with him. Only love and kindness can help him and you overcome those hurts."

For his part, Peter discovered that winning back his wife's trust is a long process, a process made easier by total transparency.

"Give over the keys to your privacy: e-mail passwords, voice-mail passwords, online-account passwords. Let your spouse know you're hiding nothing," he advised men (or women) in his situation. "You must try, from day one, to begin re-establishing trust. And tell her everything on day one. Don't stretch out the pain by hiding some things; all will eventually come to light, and the damage to trust will be greater if it isn't all out at the beginning. Answer all her questions, to the last detail."

"In talking about these things with your wife," he continued, "try to understand how much what you've done has upended her world. Even if things were tough in your marriage, you were at least supposed to protect her and your children from harm. Now, you are the harm."

Undoing the damage wrought by infidelity and correcting the habits that led up to it isn't easy. Almost all couples, Popcak said, require marital therapy. But healing can happen.

"Don't be afraid of the hard work," Popcak advised struggling couples. "Don't try to put a Band-Aid on it and imagine by being nice to each other it will all get better in a couple of days. It's a hard, scary, messy process, but you can get through it. There is hope."

Stopping infidelity before it starts

Do be vigilant about your conversations and interactions with members of the opposite sex. "Infidelity doesn't happen in a flash," explained Peter Knox, who learned that lesson the hard way. "It is a series of

small things that lead you down that path."

Don't keep secrets from your spouse or form friendships with members of the opposite sex who also aren't friends with your spouse. "And if there's something about a friendship that you can't repeat to your spouse, you shouldn't be doing it," said Peter's wife, Kathleen.

Do address problems in your marriage quickly and directly. "If you're not feeling loved by your spouse, talk to her about it plainly," said Peter. "Give her the chance to be the woman you need her to be. Don't go looking somewhere else."

Don't act like you're single when you're not, spending more time on your own interests or hobbies than with your spouse. "Your marriage has to come first," said Julie LaBoda of Retrouvaille International. "Loving your spouse every day is a decision you have to make."

Do pray constantly. "Losing the disciplines of the spiritual life is often part of the road to infidelity," advised Peter. "It was for me."

Help in healing

Retrouvaille (pronounced ret-ro-vi with a long i) is a program for couples with marital problems that consists of a weeklong experience, along with six to 12 follow-up sessions. Couples work one-on-one to learn how to communicate with each other in a respectful manner during the weekends, and do not participate in group sessions. The program's mission is to be "an international community of disciples committed to the continued healing of their marriages and, empowered by the Holy Spirit, sharing their stories, talents and gifts to promote and spread the healing ministry of Retrouvaille." For more information, visit www.retrouvaille.org.

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