

Affair Can't We Just Forgive and Forget?

Forgiveness is a subject that comes up quite a bit in marriage. Offenses are common, and the offender usually wants to be forgiven. But the offended is usually reluctant to forgive, particularly if the offender hasn't learned anything from the ordeal. But if forgiveness is difficult, forgetting can be downright impossible for many spouses. How can people be expected to forget some of the most painful experiences of their lives?

I approach the subject of forgiveness from the perspective of someone who believes in forgiveness, but also believes that marriage should be fair. Since, in many cases, forgiveness is unfair, what should be done? I support just compensation for some marital offenses, so I don't always recommend forgiveness. It should be an encouragement to those of you who have been feeling guilty about being unable to forgive and forget. But, at the same time, it should also encourage offenders, because the compensation I propose will earn you a terrific marriage, and it won't hurt at all.

Forgiveness is something I believe in with all my heart. I forgive others and have been forgiven many times. God wants us all to be forgiving just as he has forgiven us. And, as you have noticed, when you don't forgive someone, it can "eat you up." It's not healthy to keep resentment bottled up inside of you.

The vast majorities of couples I work with who have been through the horror of an affair, have better marriages after the affair than before. It's because the affair jolts them into recognizing the need for building an affair-proof marriage, and the safety precautions they use help them create compatibility and love. But has the offended

spouse forgiven the offender in these marriages? Yes and no.

First let's try to understand what forgiveness is. One illustration is telling a person who owes you \$10,000 that he won't have to pay you back. You "forgive" the debt. In other words, forgiveness is eliminating an obligation of some sort. But we generally don't think of money when we think of the need of forgiveness. Instead, we are concerned about inconsiderate behavior that has caused us great pain and suffering -- the pain that an affair causes, for example.

Forgiveness in these situations means thinking about the person as if the offense never took place. That is extremely difficult to do. The offended spouse usually thinks what he or she can do to make it up to me. How can I be compensated for the pain I've suffered?

To make matters worse, whenever a wayward spouse sees me for counseling there is rarely regret and rarely a willingness to compensate the offended spouse. They usually ask to be forgiven, but that doesn't mean he or she is deeply remorseful. It usually means that he or she doesn't want us to bring up the subject anymore, or require a change in behavior.

In other words, the wayward spouse wants the pain suffered by the offended spouse to be ignored or forgotten. Like a \$10,000 debt, they want it forgiven, and then they want to borrow another \$10,000.

I'm in favor of forgiveness in many situations, but this isn't one of them. In the case of infidelity, compensation not only helps the offended spouse overcome the resentment he or she harbors, but the right kind of compensation helps restore the relationship and prevents the painful act from being repeated.

In most cases, an offended spouse would be stupid to forgive the wayward spouse. It's like forgiving a friend of the \$10,000 he/she owes you, when it's actually in the friend's best interest to pay you in full because it would teach him how to be more responsible with money. As it turns out, in every affair there is a way to adequately compensate the offended spouse that is good for the offender and good for the marriage. At first, the offended spouse may not want to be compensated. He or she may try to get as far away from the offender as possible to avoid further pain. But if the spouse asks for forgiveness along with a willingness to compensate, the offended spouse is usually willing to entertain the proposal.

So let's talk about adequate compensation. What could the offending spouse possibly do to compensate for an affair? After all, it's probably the most painful experiences anyone could ever put his or her spouse through.

I've made the point that spouses usually have affairs because their emotional needs are not being met in the marriage. **The way to affair-proof a marriage is for couples to meet each other's most important emotional needs.** So whenever one spouse has an affair, the other should try to learn to meet the unmet needs that led to the affair.

That's a tough sell to someone who has just learned about their spouse's unfaithfulness. "I'd sooner kill him than meet his needs," is the most common reaction. Besides, we haven't talked about compensation at all. Instead, we've gone and blamed the offended spouse for the affair! But in most cases, neither spouse is meeting the other's needs prior to the affair. The reason that there were not two affairs is often a lack of opportunity for the offended spouse. And sometimes when there is that opportunity, there actually are two affairs. The point I'm making is that

in most cases **both the offending and offended** spouses' emotional needs were not being met by each other prior to the affair.

A compensation for the affair, therefore, is for the offending spouse **to learn to meet the emotional needs of the offended spouse.** But if I can also motivate the offended spouse to do something that should have been done all along, **meet the** offending spouse's **emotional needs**, the arrangement seems more fair to the offending spouse. There is not only compensation for the affair, but the conditions that created the affair (unmet emotional needs) are removed. The marriage is restored and the marriage is affair-proofed.

Forgiveness comes much more easily in these cases because the change has compensated for some of the pain that was suffered, and the offender is usually forgiven by the offended. Technically, it isn't really forgiveness. It's a compensation for the pain of the affair. But I don't quibble. If they want to call it forgiveness, that's fine with me.

Using this meaning of forgiveness, the person asking to be forgiven must:

1. First demonstrate an awareness of how inconsiderate the act was and how much pain his or her spouse was made to suffer.
2. Second, he or she must express some plan to assure the forgiver that steps have been taken to avoid the painful act in the future.

As it turns out, it's the successful completion of that plan that's the compensation that leads to **"forgiveness."** Learning to meet each other's most important emotional needs is the plan that usually does the trick.

But, unlike the repayment of \$10,000, where payee suffers a \$10,000 loss in order to provide compensation, in marriage, the compensation does not lead to a loss. He/She

should learn how to meet your important emotional needs, but do it in a way that would not cause him to suffer. The Policy of Joint Agreement guarantees that. Whenever you follow that policy, you learn to please each other in ways that are mutually enjoyable. I'd say that's reasonable compensation, wouldn't you?

POSTSCRIPT TO FORGIVENESS:

Speaking of the Policy of Joint Agreement, there's another important point that I should make regarding forgiveness. When you discovered your partner's affair, you learned two things about him/her that you had not known before. You learned that he/she would make decisions that did not take your feelings into account (having the affair), and you learned that he would lie about his behavior to cover it up. In other words, you learned that he was not following the Policy of Joint Agreement or the Policy of Radical Honesty. That discovery was undoubtedly very disillusioning to you. Who wants to be married to a spouse who is inconsiderate and dishonest? Now you are trying to create a new understanding with your spouse, where he/she will agree to follow the Policy of Joint Agreement and the Policy of Radical Honesty. Good for you!

But forgiveness will be much easier after you are convinced that your spouse considers your feelings whenever he makes a decision (follows the Policy of Joint Agreement), is completely honest with you about everything (follows the Policy of Radical Honesty), and is meeting your important emotional needs. For you to be convinced, he/she must not only agree to these changes, but he/she must also demonstrate his/her commitment by living them for a while. Forgiveness may still require a bit of generosity on your part, but if he/she makes these changes, I think you'll be

able to handle it. When that happens, the burden of resentment you are carrying will be lifted, and the love you have for each other will be restored.

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