

Ever associated forgiveness with a big price tag?

by Rick Reynolds

What is the cost of forgiveness? What does this have to do with forgiving infidelity? We'll talk about that in a moment, but first let me tell a story. Seventeen years ago, within the first two years of marriage, Sandra had multiple affairs. Doubts of whether she'd married the right man plagued her even before the wedding. A better man than Campbell she'd never find, but the spark was missing. She feared he'd be a Steady Freddie who was dull and commonplace. His impeccable character and undying love had captured her attention, but where was that romance of man and maid she'd so longed for? Those feelings never came.

About a year into the marriage Sandra's boss invited her to lunch. Those innocent beginning blossomed into a growing conflagration of passion. He understood her womanly need of small attentions and seemed to get her in ways Campbell never imagined. Justifying her affair was all too easy. She'd never felt like this before, confirming in her mind that she'd married the wrong person and now she'd found the love of her life. Besides this wasn't some spur of the moment impulsive whim, they'd spent their days at work talking about music, philosophy, religion and life. Milton knew her better in a month than Campbell had in 2 years.

For the first time in her life she felt compelled to recklessly abandon herself to another. It was like nothing she'd ever experienced, until Milton's wife discovered their affair and filed for divorce. Milton immediately resigned his job and moved his family to another state. She was shocked; they had planned their future together and now just like that he was gone? He even told her he wanted nothing to do with her and to quit bugging him. The pain was unbearable and even she was surprised at her response. Rather than grieving the loss and moving on she numbed the pain with three more short-term affairs. What was the difference; she didn't envision Campbell as any part of her future.

However about a month after affair number three ended, she and Campbell conceived and life suddenly changed. She loved life as a mom and admired the

way Campbell stepped up and supported the family. Over time she even grew to love her life and recognized she had indeed married well.

Skip forward 17 years when Campbell received a call from Milton's wife. "I told him if it happened again I would no longer keep his secrets and I just discovered he's doing it again," she said. "I thought that you might want to know your wife isn't who you think she is. Why don't you ask her about Milton?" Milton's wife was coping with infidelity in a flurry of anger.

Initially Sandra lied. She had decided to take the secret of her infidelity to her grave, but eventually she came clean about all four affairs before their first child's birth. She pleaded for forgiveness; after all it was 17 years past. But for Campbell it wasn't seventeen years ago, ground zero was just last month. Forgiving infidelity for him didn't seem possible. Seventeen years of faithfulness did nothing to ease the pain of her betrayal. In fact it made it worse. She had caused him to live a lie for 17 years. He no longer trusted his current reality, his past, his future, his wife or himself. How could he have been so blind? How could he just forgive and move on?

For the sake of our discussion let me point out there are two elements to what we refer to as forgiveness. The first is an internal matter where we choose to forgive the wrong committed against us and no longer expect justice as a result of their offence. Even more, we wish them well. The second element of forgiveness is about reconciliation. It's where we choose to continue in relationship with that person in spite of their offence. For the sake of this discussion I'm focused on the second element, reconciliation.

All too often we talk about the high price of NOT forgiving. That forgiveness is a gift you give yourself and how failing to forgive leaves you forever a victim. We extol forgiveness as a virtue and share examples of those saints who forgave much to show forgiveness as a possibility. (Even though the fact we even share such stories indicate those people may be the exception not the rule.) But forgiveness isn't natural, especially when it comes to forgiving infidelity. It flows against our basic human nature. For most, our initial response to coping with infidelity is justice, not forgiveness. We want restitution, not mercy. We want the scales of justice to be balanced.

An understanding of the high cost of forgiveness seems to go missing when an offence is committed. Far too often I see an entitlement mentality when it comes to receiving forgiveness from our mate or forgiveness from God. As humans we're supposed to forgive, right? In Christendom we teach "as God forgave us so we're to forgive." Isn't that the lesson we teach our children? But we forget that forgiveness comes at a price. Even the Christian tradition teaches that the price God has paid to forgive mankind's offences was the life of His own Son. In the same way the price paid by the betrayed spouse, if there is to be reconciliation, is high indeed.

What was the price of forgiveness in Campbell and Sandra's case? Campbell had been an exceptional husband and father, not perfect by any means, but he'd lived and loved well. For him forgiveness meant violating his personal beliefs and values. He would never have chosen to be with someone who betrayed, lied and deceived him. He believed in the sanctity of marriage and to choose to stay with Sandra came at the price of settling for something he never wanted.

Forgiving infidelity would mean sacrificing his dreams of the type of marriage he'd wanted. He'd never have the opportunity to brag to his children about the fidelity of their marriage. To stay meant sacrificing a marriage that was free from doubts. How could he ever again believe a word that she said if she'd been able to deceive him for 17 years? Staying meant sacrificing of his dignity. He personally knew two of these men and he now imagined how they'd seen him as the fool. To stay he'd have to sacrifice of his rights. Didn't he have the right to leave and find another who would be faithful to him? Staying and coping with infidelity meant sacrificing the ability to be honest with family. He couldn't share his struggles for fear of more complications. To stay would cost him pride. He'd always believed people who stayed were too weak to leave. To stay would cost his self-respect. He couldn't believe things he'd said and done in his fits of rage. It would be so much easier to be away from her and not be triggered by her presence. To forgive seemed to make a mockery of all he'd sacrificed for the sake of their marriage. Instead of being proud of what he and Sandra had built he now felt he'd been played the fool and taken advantage of.

All Campbell ever wanted was to love unconditionally and to be loved by someone special, but now his heart was so full of pain and distrust he wasn't sure whether he could give himself to Sandra or anyone else again. Could he walk

through the pain of her betrayal and face the demons he'd encounter if he ever gave himself to her again? For him choosing to stay would cost him dearly.

Grace isn't cheap; it comes at a high price. Failure to appreciate the high price paid by those choosing to forgive minimizes the magnitude of their sacrifice. The currencies used by the betrayed spouse to pay off the debt incurred by their mate's betrayal are pride, ego, and suffering. Forgiving infidelity costs their dignity when they choose to stay rather than leave. It costs them their just due when they choose to forgo justice for the sake of the relationship. It costs them their sanity because they don't control the painful thoughts invading their mind. Their present-day reality is constantly interrupted with painful memories of the past. It costs them their dreams because this road isn't one they'd ever planned on traveling. It costs them health because the pain of the offense consumes their life. And I'm only beginning to scratch the surface.

As one who believes in the value of forgiving I never want to be guilty of cheap grace, where I think it's something to which I'm entitled. If justice is the standard, then the consequence of betrayal is the loss of relationship. Anything short of that is mercy indeed. Failing to consider the price paid by others for my sake causes me to be careless with my behavior. Forgiveness and reconciliation are expensive gifts purchased through great suffering and sacrifice on the part of the offended. Failure to understand that reality makes me blind to the love displayed by those who choose to continue on in relationship.

What Are The Challenges of Forgiving Infidelity?

Last week when I wrote on the pain of forgiveness I didn't anticipate the outpouring of heartfelt comments. I grieve over the pain expressed by those who had been injured and pray your mates will come to understand and appreciate the price you paid on their behalf.

In light of those comments, I thought it might be good to talk about one of the challenges of forgiving infidelity. What I spoke of last week is only one of many challenges.

When it comes to reconciliation and forgiveness in marriage, the ongoing consequences of betrayal may present the most difficult challenge to forgiveness.

When a rock is thrown into the still waters of a pond, shock waves travel outward from the point of impact in ever expanding circles. Infidelity's impact is much the same. Frequently people question whether they've actually forgiven when they continue to struggle with something they chose to release.

Most offenses we face in life are one-time events such as hurtful words or something stolen, but infidelity carries an additional element. The challenge of forgiving infidelity stems from the fact that it's not just a one-time event; like that rock thrown into still waters, the impact of betrayal expands in ever widening circles. That's why a critical aspect of forgiving infidelity has to include an agreement to accept the ongoing consequences of your mate's betrayal. Each time an intrusive thought interrupts a good moment it's another consequence. Just the mention of the affair partner's name can be another consequence. Anniversary dates present painful reminders creating yet other consequences. A call or text from the affair partner is another consequence. Even when your marriage is transformed into what you've always wanted, betrayal's consequences continue interrupting your life for a season.

Here is one of the comments from last week's article:

"This article is the best description of what the betrayed feels. I have re-read this several times and wept just to know someone understands and explained it so well the intense cost, pain and gut wrenching challenge it is to stay and choose reconciliation. Not one single day has gone by where I don't think about what he did. Making love is almost impossible without visions and horrible thoughts overwhelming you. In a world where so many women struggle with body image how in the world can one ever make the marriage bed special again. It has been defiled. It's next to impossible....one has to compromise all their feelings and dreams of what a marriage is when you choose to reconcile instead of leave.... 'Pain...I have chosen to stay and forgive over and over each day and power through for my children and family. But the isolation is so intense because you see they don't know and I protected their dad and their hero...Only reminding myself daily what Jesus did for me can I even take one step in front of the other..."

For this woman, each day presents reminders and therefore additional consequences to grieve and release. Each day, as those consequences invade her life, she has to choose. Forgiveness in marriage, let alone the infidelity, has cost her so much. She can either rail against them shaking her fist saying, "this is

unfair. I did nothing to deserve this,” or she can recognize it for what it is, just another consequence, and choose to grieve it in an attempt to move beyond it. For her, forgiveness requires coming to a place of acceptance where she can say, “it is what it is” and let it go along with the countless other consequences that have rocked her life as a result of her husband’s betrayal.

The good news is, like the waves created by a rock entering the pond, the consequences of betrayal eventually subside, but it takes time. Eventually, if we’ve chosen to forgive and choose to work through the consequences, we come to the other side. I can honestly say I don’t know anyone who has truly grieved the betrayal who hasn’t come to a place of peace. I stress the “truly grieved” person. However, having safe people to talk with is essential as you strive to move forward.

At the same time, a positive outcome for the marriage largely depends on the one who was unfaithful taking responsibility for their actions and displaying an understanding of the pain they’ve caused. This includes being remorseful for the harm done. They need to take responsibility for their own healing and take steps to make sure this never happens again.

To move forward, couples have to make a commitment of not making things worse. There has to be an agreement to work through the issues and to create a safe environment for healing to occur. Both parties need to create goodwill by being respectful and considerate, allowing for positive moments together. Creating a culture, which allows the couple to work together as they face the trauma created by the betrayal, is of utmost importance.

Forgiving infidelity takes time and perseverance, but it is possible to find a new life that you cherish and will forever protect. Forgiveness in marriage is possible.

Forgiving Infidelity: Practical Suggestions to Move Toward Forgiveness

Sunday evening as Stephanie read though last week’s newsletter on the challenges of forgiving infidelity, she said, "You've got to give some practical suggestions." My first thought was forgiveness isn’t practical, it’s rather extravagant, but she was willing to offer some do’s and don’ts for those who have been betrayed. I’ve rounded out the discussion by offering suggestions for those

who were unfaithful. For the sake of our discussion, allow me to clarify who this is intended for and to define the terms.

To begin, let me stress that these suggestions are for couples who have moved beyond discovery and are trying to determine how to live with what has happened. It is not for those still trying to find the truth.

We believe there are two components to forgiveness as it pertains to forgiving infidelity. First is the internal aspect of forgiveness, which has little or nothing to do with the other person. It is a personal choice to release the other person from retribution or harm as a result of their offence; it's coming to the point where you can wish them well. It's not based on their repentance or merit, since it's an internal matter. It is a gift you give yourself, which sets you free and allows you to live at peace with your memories. The internal aspect of forgiveness in marriage where infidelity is involved is important in that failing to achieve this type of forgiveness leaves you forever the victim.

The second aspect of forgiving infidelity is about reconciliation. This component of forgiveness is primarily based on safety. Does the unfaithful spouse see what they've done, do they take responsibility for their actions and are they grieved over what their actions have cost others? Anything short of that response potentially makes them unsafe for reconciliation. This aspect of forgiveness determines whether the relationship will continue. If they are willing to make amends for their failure, then reconciliation might be a good choice.

Practical Suggestions For Forgiving Infidelity For The Hurt Spouse: (These are from Stephanie)

1. Separate forgiveness from the process of reconciliation. Make reconciliation optional and forgiveness not optional. People often do this backwards, choosing to reconcile rather than forgive. This leaves them trapped in the pain of the betrayal, never able to move forward to a new life. If your mate isn't safe don't reconcile. In the first year of recovery don't pressure yourself to decide about reconciliation. It may take over a year before you know whether it's safe to reconcile. Reconciliation depends on your mate's ongoing recovery and your ability to heal from the trauma of the betrayal.

2. Make a conscious choice to forgive. For freedom's sake don't hang on to bitterness and resentment. Forgiveness is always in your best interest and in the interest of those you love. Only time will tell whether reconciliation has a place in your relationship.
3. Choose to focus on what's helpful. Once you know what's happened there may be diminishing benefit in continuing to focus on the past. Have the sense to ask yourself if how you're spending your time (conversation, thought life) is helping to move you forward in your recovery. If it's something that's keeping you stuck, let it go. You want to choose life, not death.
4. Maintain an attitude of compassion. If you can look at your mate through a lens of compassion and concern you may find it easier to let go of the offence. Forgiving infidelity is not a sign of weakness and it doesn't minimize the magnitude of the betrayal, rather it allows you to move forward, free from the hurtful actions of another. Forgiveness in marriage, even without infidelity, requires compassion.
5. Don't hang on to entitlements. As Charles Dickens says, "In every life, no matter how full or empty one's purse, there is tragedy. It is the one promise life always fulfils. Thus, happiness is a gift and the trick is not to expect it but to delight in it when it comes and to add to other people's store of it." Your mate may have destroyed your happiness, but life is hard and often unjust. Try to keep realistic expectations.
6. Take care of yourself. A lack of sleep, isolation, or severe depression only makes forgiving infidelity more difficult. It's not fair since you aren't the one who cheated, but you're the only one who can take the necessary steps to heal from the wounds created by others. Be willing to get help.
7. Be aware of your own humanity. As CS Lewis says, "All saints must keep one nostril keenly attuned to their own inner cesspool." Be willing to consider what you've been forgiven. Maintaining an awareness of what others have had to forgo for your sake will help you find patience for others. A self-righteous attitude will cut you off from the very thing you seek.

Practical Suggestions For Forgiving Infidelity For The Unfaithful Spouse: (These are from Rick)

1. Don't be defensive. Defensiveness makes it about you. Take responsibility for what you've done and listen to how they feel.

2. Develop empathy. Seek to understand how your actions impacted your mate and clearly communicate your understanding of their reality. Let them know that you are attempting to move beyond yourself and see things from their perspective.
3. Let your mate know you appreciate the fact they've chosen to stay with you and explore the possibility of reconciliation. It's not what you deserve. Looking back at my betrayal I can clearly see I deserved for Stephanie to leave me. I certainly left her during my addiction and my affair. I genuinely appreciate that she chose each day to try to work through my hurtful actions. It was far more than I deserved.
4. Stop hurtful behaviors. Forgoing activities which cause your mate anxiety communicates your willingness to partner with them in recovery. Stressing your rights regardless of their pain reveals your self-centeredness.
5. Take responsibility for your recovery. If your mate feels they are your motivation for recovery it will be difficult for them to believe you're committed to making sure this never happens again.
6. Allow your mate the opportunity to forgive by letting them know what you've done. Most likely your mate will find it easier to forgive your actions than they will your deceit. It is the deceit that makes reconciliation difficult.
7. Don't minimize your behavior. To do so will make a mockery of your mate's efforts to forgive.
8. Forgive your mate for their failures. As Jesus says, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone". Forgiveness in marriage is something you can do too.
9. Be patient. It will take 18 to 24 months for the two of you to move beyond the crisis created by your choices. The least you can do is be patient as they try to work through what you've done.

Practical Suggestions For Forgiving Infidelity As A Couple:

1. Set a time limit as to how much time is dedicated to discussing what happened. Begin to build positive experiences for the marriage. Learn how to enjoy your time together.
2. Take breaks from recovery. I love the approach taken by one of our mentor couples. She told her husband that she needed him to take her out for a good time. She was sick and tired of always working on their recovery. "Don't make the mistake of thinking everything is okay in the morning," she

told him. But at least they were able to take a vacation from recovery and find a good time together.

3. Spend time remembering what was good about your relationship. Both parties need to be reminded of what was good about the two of them. Pain has a strange way of burying the good. It's hard to make a wise decision about the future if you only consider the negative and never look at the good.

Enough with the suggestions. I told Stephanie I was worried about trying to write a newsletter of this sort. I realize that everyone's situation is different and what works for one may be an abomination for another. Making suggestions is far too simplistic, but she insisted they are sometimes helpful. Please take the best and leave the rest.