

# **S.A.R.A.H.**

Spouses of Addicts  
Rebuilding and Healing

Richard Blankenship



PRESS

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by Richard Blankenship

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## Chapter six

# To Tell Or Not To Tell: The Disclosure Dilemma

**D**isclosure to the spouse is one of the most controversial aspects of recovery. Yet, dealing with this topic is critical in the healing journey. As a spouse, listening to the addict in your life share how they have violated the marriage covenant will be one of the most painful things you ever endure.

Sexual integrity issues are discovered in marriages in a variety of ways. Perhaps you stumbled upon credit card receipts, phone bills, or overheard a phone call. It may be that you had a hunch and went looking for proof. (I often tell spouses that they have become so good at checking into a partner's past that they may be developing careers as private investigators.) Or you might have discovered it due to a guilty conscience. Perhaps the addict in your life simply couldn't carry the burden anymore and confessed his problem with sexual integrity.

Regardless of how you found out, it was one of the most shocking, devastating, and painful things you have ever discovered. The pain of betrayal strikes at the core of your being. Questions begin to race through your mind. Why wasn't I enough? Has *he/* she told me everything? What if this gets worse? Will I have to go through this again? Would he have gone outside of the marriage if I'd looked better, done my hair differently, weighed less, or had plastic surgery?

As soon as sexual sin is discovered, you will experience a variety of emotions. The response is typically shock or anger. As a therapist, I have been involved in more disclosure sessions than I can remember. There is almost always disclosure at some level before this session takes place. By the time the couple comes to a disclosure session, there has already been some level of information shared. It may be nothing more than the original discovery of the sexual acting out. At this point, it is normal to experience the feelings discussed in chapter 2 of this book. Things like shock, anger, anxiety, and depression are normal when you discover that your husband/wife has committed sexual sin in the marriage.

Experiencing the consequences of another's sin is a hard concept to grasp. Theologically and emotionally, it is difficult to explain. The reality is that in this world, we live with the consequences of the actions of others on a daily basis. You may think, "I've thrown myself into this marriage and given **110%**. How could this happen to me? I've done everything I could possibly do. Why is God letting me down?" Sexual sin in a marriage will challenge your view of God. You might even find yourself questioning his existence. Again, it is normal to experience these emotions and questions. Don't beat yourself up or think that you're unfaithful to God because you are experiencing feelings and raising questions.

At this point, a Christian spouse may find comfort in the Psalms. A common form of literature in the western world in Old Testament times was called lament. Many of the writings in Job, Jeremiah, Lamentations, as well as the Psalms follow this form. Lament is the predominant form of literature found in the book of Psalms.<sup>30</sup> A large volume of writing in these books is devoted to people expressing their frustration, hurt, despair, and even anger towards God. These were people who lived when their lives and faith were threatened. They knew the cruelty and lack of justice in their communities. The writings of David in Psalm 32 and 51 reveal that he intimately knew the frustration and pain of experiencing marital unfaithfulness. People knew what it was like to experience the consequences of another's sins. At times they cried out as individuals and as communities for God to take drastic action and punish those who caused their pain. The people had no problem expressing to God the depths of their

pain. When you discover that sexual sin has entered your marriage, the emotions are similar to what people expressed throughout the Psalms. Odds are that even in the worst moments of your pain you have never expressed some of the things that the Psalmist shares.

Rest assured that God can handle your emotions. It won't feel like it at times, but he can take whatever you need to express. One of my favorite stories is about the late Elizabeth Kubler Ross. In the 1940's she was training chaplains to help terminally ill people and their family members, in a Chicago area hospital. The chaplains were becoming frustrated with terminally ill people and their families who were angry at God. Ms. Ross simply looked at them and told them that "God was big enough to take it."<sup>31</sup> God is big enough to take whatever feelings you may need to express. He already knows them anyway. It is much more therapeutic to be honest and express these feelings than to deny them and suffer in silence.

Do I really need to know and how will it affect me?

Sexual integrity issues result from issues with intimacy. The ultimate purpose of disclosure is to be able to participate in the healing process, and build genuinely intimate relationships. We believe that disclosure is necessary in order to experience genuine connection in marriage.

Ask yourself what information do you need in order to move forward? Do you want details to confirm your fears? Then we suggest that once your suspicions have been validated, you have enough detail to move forward. Having all the gory details may add more material that will cause you pain that you don't need in order to heal.

There are different approaches to disclosure of sexual acting out in a relationship. Over the years, I have worked with people who have experienced each of these different approaches. Pastors and counselors alike differ on this issue. Some believe in no disclosure and others in full disclosure with graphic detail. As a spouse, you may go through periods where you feel like knowing everything. At other times, you may wish you knew nothing. While initially painful, 93% of spouses are glad they went through disclosure.<sup>32</sup>

One school of thought says that there should be no disclosure. This may be based on the idea that "what you don't know won't

hurt you." Or it may come from the application of the 9<sup>th</sup> step in the twelve-step programs. This step reads, "Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others."<sup>33</sup> Carol Ross, a nationally known expert in the field, calls this the "ninth step slide." This is based upon the idea that a spouse would be harmed if they knew what the addict had done. I would ask, has the harm come from the fact that a spouse is being told the truth, or is the harm coming from the fact that the addict has sexually acted out? This approach is dangerous for an addict. Another Alcoholics Anonymous saying is, "You are only as sick as your secrets."<sup>34</sup> Secrecy is the gasoline that fuels the engine of an addiction. The more secrets an addict tries to keep, the more likely he/she is to act out.

Another approach to disclosure suggests that the addict present information in small amounts to the spouse. Not surprisingly, this approach is usually the idea of the addict. It may be their way of only admitting to what they get caught doing. This approach may appear to make disclosure easier for the addict; but it's the most painful approach to take to the spouse. Many years ago, I went to an oral surgeon who told me I had a wisdom tooth that was going bad. He suggested that we remove all four of them at the same time. The reason was that the pain and recovery time would be the same. I could go through the experience four times or I could go through it once. I was quickly convinced that I would be much better off if this was a one time event. Disclosure works the same way. It can come out in one painful, messy operation, or the pain can be experienced over and over again. For this reason, it is critical that the addict be well-prepared at the time of the disclosure session.

Another problem with disclosing in small amounts is that it empowers the addict and places the spouse at his/her mercy. It assumes that the addict is capable of knowing what the spouse can and cannot handle. In reality, it's the addict's way of hanging onto the addiction. The attitudes needed for a disclosure to be effective are contradicted by this approach. Disclosure is difficult for both spouses and addicts. The needs of the spouse at this stage of the journey are critical.

## While initially painful, 93% of spouses are glad they went through disclosure

An extreme approach is full disclosure with graphic detail. I recently had a man want to disclose to his wife in this way. The imagery it would have placed in her mind would have been horrific. We worked on how he could present this information without making it even more difficult for his wife. As stated earlier, there are times when you will feel like knowing every detail of the sexual sin. Ask yourself what is happening with you at the times you feel the need for this information. Are you down on yourself? Are you feeling the need to punish the addict in your life? Are you looking for a reason to be angry? Are you comparing yourself to airbrushed images of women in pornographic material? Chances are you are experiencing the low self-esteem that comes with being violated. It may be that the mental measuring stick has come out and you are trying to decide whether or not you measure up. Punishment may feel tempting at times. You have probably had a number of fantasies about what you would like to do to the person who has offended you. I've had spouses present many creative ideas. Or it may be that you are experiencing some feelings *about* having feelings of anger. Some Christians have been taught that they should not feel anger. When they experience anger, they begin to feel guilty about having the feeling. You don't need to justify your feelings, especially about being sexually betrayed. Your feelings are yours. They aren't right or wrong. What we do with them gets into the realm of morality. Most parents can relate to the feeling of wanting to wring their children's necks. It is okay for them to feel. It is NOT okay for them to act upon these feelings. Denial of feelings will breed silent obsession. Pretending that they don't exist will make you obsess more about the problem, and is much more likely to lead to an unhealthy response than honesty about the feelings.

The approach we recommend is that there be a full disclosure without graphic detail. In almost 20 years of working with churches and as a professional counselor, I have found that this is the approach that works best for long term recovery and for healing the marriage.

Sexual imagery is powerful. The imprinting upon the brain has long lasting effects. People can remember the details of their first exposure to pornography, though this experience may have been decades old. Yet they typically won't remember what was seen two days ago on the evening news. There are a number of neurochemical factors involved, but for the purpose of this discussion you do not want graphic details being disclosed. If I tell you I have a cat, you will form your own safe image of what that cat will look like. If I tell you I have a cat that has grey hair with white spots and has a hot temper, you develop a different image. When a sex addict discloses the graphic details of a sex act or explicit details of a human body, the spouse may be left with graphic imagery that they don't wish to have.

A sex addict can disclose to his/her spouse that they have a problem with internet pornography and be completely honest. They don't have to disclose which web site they went to and what the imagery they were watching involved. An addict can disclose that they have had multiple affairs, without giving physical details of the affair partner or the acts they performed. In this way, they can be honest without creating more misery than necessary for the spouse. They may need to have additional conversations with mentors, sponsors and accountability partners. But the spouse does not benefit from these details.

### What do I need to know?

What should you expect to hear from your partner during disclosure? There is information you need to have in order to make decisions about your own self-care. You need to know whether or not your partner has been physically involved with an affair partner. If so, you will need to be tested for sexually transmitted diseases. And there may be a period of time where you need to remain abstinent from a sexual relationship with your partner.

Another issue is pornography. Is the acting out limited to pornography? Was it accessed via a home computer and is there the possibility that your children may have been exposed? I recently counseled a nine-year old female sex addict. This young lady had discovered her father's internet pornography. Instead of telling her

mother, she became addicted and acted out for over 9 months. It is important that the needs of your children be addressed in the event that they have been exposed. With the average age of first exposure to pornography being age 5, this becomes a critical issue.<sup>35</sup>

Is the acting out heterosexual or does it involve same-sex activity? If an affair has taken place, is it with someone that you know? If so, you have the right to decide how you want to handle that relationship. If your partner had an affair with a close friend or someone you work with, you may need to deal with that relationship for your own self-care.

Another issue may involve money. I always encourage sexual addicts to disclose the amount of money that has been spent on the addiction. They also need to disclose how they covered up the expenditures. Was the job loss because of downsizing, or was their a termination due to sexual acting out on work time? Seventy percent of internet pornography is viewed between the hours of 9:00 am and 5:00 pm. People are losing jobs due to inappropriate sexual activity on the internet. It is rare that we ever conduct groups that don't have at least one individual who has just lost a long career due to sexual acting out on company time.

Perhaps there are cell phones, email addresses, and other forms of keeping in touch with an affair partner that need to be revealed. If the addict has incurred debts while acting out, this needs to be revealed. These methods of communication need to be terminated immediately. Contact with affair partners needs to end immediately. It takes less than 30 seconds to pick up a phone in the presence of accountability and terminate all contact with an affair partner. The feelings and relationship with the spouse are much more important than those of an affair partner. If the marriage is to become the center of your family, all contact with affair partners must come to an abrupt end.

### Rules for disclosure sessions (a note to therapists)

Preparation for the session is critical. The therapist needs to meet with the spouse and the addict prior to the disclosure session and explain what will be happening. The individual disclosing sexual sin will write out what they want to say and how it will be

expressed. Graphic details will be eliminated. Be aware of tendencies to rationalize and justify any actions. Eliminate any requests for forgiveness. The disclosure to the spouse must involve the presentation of brokenness and humility, if the marriage is to be improved. Statements like, "I'm sorry, but I was having a hard time at work when I acted out," or "I feel awful about what I've done, but you weren't being very supportive at the time," are examples of statements that reflect defensiveness and justification for one's actions. A man or woman who is genuinely in recovery will begin to reflect a spirit of brokenness and humility without rationalization. He/she will also need to learn to validate your pain and develop empathy for you. Your emotions and hurt cannot be minimized by either of you.

As a spouse, you will need to consider your own needs as you prepare for this session. You may choose to drive to this session in a separate car or have a friend bring you (though they would not participate in the session). If you have children, it is best that you not leave this session and immediately pick them up from school. Do not plan on a disclosure session right before family members are coming for an extended visit. Make sure people in your support system are notified that you will be experiencing a difficult session, and don't hesitate to use them. Hopefully you will have made contact with people who have walked this road before. They can be supportive and take the journey with you.

Disclosure sessions need to take place in the presence of a therapist or pastor who is specifically trained in dealing with sexual integrity issues. A minimum of 2 hours needs to be allowed for this session. A session might begin with a brief feelings check. The sexual addict will share his statement with the spouse. The spouse needs to have freedom to express whatever feelings come up and to ask any questions. The addict needs to be willing to share anything that the spouse needs to hear. The therapist may need to intervene at this point and help the spouse determine if the answer to the question would do more harm than good (Le. graphic details). Depending on where the recovery process is at the time of the session, the grieving process will either begin or move to a new level. The spouse will enter a time of disorientation, confusion, and mixed emotions. Safety arrangements must be made. A

spouse may need a medical evaluation at some point in the process. The session needs to end with each spouse affirming their commitment to personal healing. The addict needs to take responsibility for his/her actions, and present their plan for how they will manage their sexual integrity issues. As a spouse, you will need to make the same commitment to healing. At the time of a disclosure session, you will probably not be able to articulate a specific plan. That's ok. At this point your job is to grieve the losses you are experiencing. Your therapist will work with you on specific plans at a later date. For now, it is important that you commit to the journey of healing. At this point, you are making that commitment for yourself. Regardless of what the addict in your life is doing, you need to heal your own wounds. Even if the addict chooses not to get sober, you still have been wounded and need to go through the process.

#### Disclosure on the part of the spouse

In earlier chapters, this book talks about getting in touch with your coping skills as a spouse. Through the years, I have seen spouses cope with the stress and pressure in their marriage with everything from overeating and compulsive spending, to chronic raging and initiating a revenge affair. In our pain, we often get desperate for relief. It is easy to seek false solutions when we feel desperate. Or perhaps you have been emotionally dishonest with your mate. Have you told him/her that things were okay when in reality you were hurting? Many spouses have been guilty of emotional dishonesty. Have you run up credit cards that your partner is unaware of? At some point, you may need to disclose some of these issues to your partner. In no way does this put blame on you for the actions of your partner. You are not responsible for them. You are responsible only for how *you* choose to react and cope with the devastating pain. Part of the journey will be learning healthier coping strategies.

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of your partner. You are not responsible for  
them. You are responsible only for how *you*  
choose to react and cope.

Honesty is foundational for healing intimacy issues. This will require an effort on the part of the husband and the wife. Recovery in marriage involves honesty on the part of everyone. It may be that as a spouse you need to make amends with your children. Perhaps they have been neglected during the insanity. It may be that while being emotionally shut down from your partner, you took your anger out on your children. Disclosure is like surgery. Cutting out the infection is painful and will require a long period of recovery. It is also part of the road to healing.

### Rebuilding intimacy

As you journey through the crisis, it will be hard to imagine that the painful disclosure session may become one of the foundational acts of intimacy in your marriage. Like surgery, you would never volunteer to go through it again. Yet it may be something you look back on, as a time when you and your partner became completely honest with one another for the first time.

Intimacy can be a tough word to define. As you are beginning this journey, make a commitment to not define intimacy as sex. Nonsexual intimacy is a key to a great sex life anyway. First things first. The best definition I ever heard of intimacy came from a young man who was 16 years old. When asked to define intimacy, he said that it was "the ability of two people to be real with each other." I have yet to hear anyone produce a better description of intimacy. This involves being real on a mental, emotional, and spiritual level. Depending on your family of origin baggage, you may struggle more in one of these areas than others. Intimacy involves connection at multiple levels.

Jesus gives a description of intimacy with God that we as his children can imitate. In Mark 12, Jesus is talking to teachers of the law (who probably had intimacy issues themselves).<sup>36</sup> In a typical intimacy avoidance game of one-upmanship, they ask Jesus which is the greatest commandment. The answer he gives is probably not what they expect. He begins by reminding them of the unity of God. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." (v. 29) The oneness of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are clearly seen in this text. They have a unity that far exceeds the one flesh union that we strive

for in marriage. And their union has not been violated. In looking for a role model for intimacy, do we seek to imitate imperfect people who have intimacy struggles, or do we look to the God who has perfected intimate relationship? Jesus then presents a holistic look at people and the concept of oneness. He tells them to love God with all of their heart (emotions), soul (spirituality), mind (mental processes), and strength (physical being). This might be a way of describing the perfect oneness and unity of God. Please don't get distracted into theological arguments about this text. We miss the point in the process. Jesus gives us a model for balanced, healthy relationships. As the connections grow on all four of these levels, intimacy will develop in your relationship with God and with others. Look at all four of these areas in your life. Take time and make a list of things you can do to help yourself continue to develop emotionally, physically, mentally, and spiritually.

Share your list with a mentor, sponsor, or accountability partner. You may even choose to share it with your marriage partner whenever you feel comfortable. Use this as a tool to share your journey with someone else. You will find that many positive connections and relationships can develop along the way.

## Chapter eleven

# Pearls of wisdom: Learning from the voice of experience



**I**t's been over a year since the writing of S.A.R.A.H. began. Writing this book has been a journey that has had victories, defeats, traumas of invasion and abandonment, satanic attacks, frustration, joy, laughter, and tears. It comes to an end much as it began, with a vision and dream to provide something hopeful and useful to spouses of sexual addicts. Only, the dream and vision are greater than ever before. Experiencing the journey has led to greater resolve to stay with this mission. Tonight a new spouses group began at Faithful and True Atlanta. Once again, the pain, fear, insecurity, and agony of spouses beginning the journey were so clear. I grieve with those who experience the agony of discovering their partner's sexual addiction. I experience it with them as I look at the sheer agony on their faces and the tears in their eyes. As group leaders, we have cried with and for many of the spouses in our groups. Many times I have wished that there was a magic wand I could wave and make the pain go away. Magic wands only exist in fairy tales. Fairy tales make for great dreams. After the last "they lived happily ever after" there is a return to the real world. The movie ends and reality returns. There is no princess that lives forever and the good guy doesn't always win.

Throughout the work on S.A.R.A.H., I have been blessed to share in the journey of many spouses. Some of them have shared

their stories in this book. I'm forever grateful to these ladies and gentlemen who were willing to be vulnerable and share their journey with you. They do so not knowing how it will be received. What made them take a risk like this? They care about every spouse who is reading this book. Their lives have been transformed and they are at a place where they want to share their journey. Each one shares in a mission to bring hope and healing to as many spouses as possible.

As I was graduating from college, I was also preparing to get married and enter full time ministry. When Vickie and I talked about these decisions, we decided that it would be good to talk with couples who had ministry experience. We wanted to find out what worked and what didn't. We were ridiculed by some for wanting to do this. We were able to talk to a couple of families who were in ministry, but we wish we had talked with more. It's rare that I will make a major decision today without listening to the voices of experience. I am a survivor. Some days I survive better than others. Whether the decision is related to career, family, parenting, money management, I want to hear from people who have been successful. Successful doesn't mean perfect. I want to know what worked and what pitfalls to avoid. Wisdom has been described as a great pearl. It needs to be highly valued.

The spouses who have shared their journey have given us great pearls of wisdom. Within their stories are the tools needed for a powerful journey of healing. While their victories have come at a great price, all will tell you that it was worth everything they invested and more. In my own journey of recovery from trauma, I want to learn from the voice of experience. Spouses are trauma survivors. We are survivors of devastating trauma. Some days we survive better than others. Let's reflect on the voice of experience in this journey. Consider what people like Debbie and Melissa can teach us about taking the journey of a spouse. As you reflect on their stories, are there things that you can identify with? Have you found yourself trying to make it on your own, only to wind up frustrated? Alcoholics Anonymous has an old saying that goes, "your best thinking is what got you where you are." When we find ourselves beating our heads against a wall it's time to listen to people who have experienced this road and are willing to share the lessons learned.

Think about the themes that come through the stories of Melissa, Debbie, and the others who shared their journeys in this book. They provide pearls of wisdom for the journey. They paint a picture of what this journey can be.

### Pearls of wisdom

*Don't blame yourself for the addict's problem.* You didn't cause it, you can't control it, and you can't cure it. Put the mental measuring stick in the trash can. Comparing yourself to pictures and people won't heal your wounds.

*Don't minimize the grief and pain.* Take what you are going through seriously and seek all of the help you need. Don't try and pretend that it doesn't hurt when it's one of the most agonizing things you will experience in your life.

*Face your own trauma.* You have wounds that need to heal, many of which were there before you married a sex addict. These traumas will continue to cry out for healing if they are ignored. Take them seriously.

*Extend trust slowly.* Allow yourself to test the waters. Wade in without diving headfirst into deep water. Let the addict court you again. Let him/her earn your respect by presenting themselves as trustworthy. Make decisions about how much to trust and when to do it. Take responsibility for your decisions to trust. Don't see trust as "all or nothing."

*Stay in community.* You will need your sisters on this journey. If you are a male spouse you will need other men. Recovery requires a group: a team of people who will provide support, hope, honesty, and truth.

*Don't make a decision on the relationship for at least one year.* Take time to heal. Consider what led you into a marriage with an addict. If you make a fast decision without looking at your own issues, you will probably regret whatever decision is made. Learn all that you can about yourself during this critical time of healing.

*Acknowledge your powerlessness and surrender control over the disease.* You aren't the cause of the addict's problem and you can't control his/her journey. Surrender control over the uncontrollable.

*Identify your coping skills.* Look at the healthy ways you cope with stress and pressure. Identify the unhealthy ones. Go through a period of abstinence from your primary coping skill. It's possible that the way you cope may have become an idol.

*Be honest about your emotions, even with God.* God already knows what you're feeling. Go ahead and say it out loud. Your emotions are created by God and you need to be honest with them. Don't say things are ok when they aren't. Emotional truth is as important as facts.

*Give up the martyr/savior complex.* It's hard to give up rescue fantasies. They feel so noble. However, the end result is more pain for you as a spouse. The energy that goes into saving someone while destroying yourself is exhausting.

*Destroy the emotional measuring tape.* Don't compare yourself to airbrushed images, models, and prostitutes. You're too good for that. The addiction is not about you. You are enough. The addiction existed before you were ever introduced to him or her.

*Retire the private eye badge.* There is no relief in search and seizure; only misery. Intimacy can't be built through spying. The time, techniques, and energy that go into checking phone records, credit card statements, brief cases, and the like will ultimately drain you. No amount of detective work will keep you from feeling vulnerable.

*Self-care is critical.* The first six months of this journey will be exhausting. The meetings, phone calls, reading, therapy, support groups, and workshops will wear you out. Try to get good sleep, eat right, and take care of yourself.

*Your recovery is important.* Make it a top priority. Yes, the addict in your life must be in recovery as well. This doesn't mean that yours is less important. We now know that when a spouse enters recovery, the chances of the addict succeeding in attaining sobriety go up significantly. You are worth it. You have been wounded and need healing. Make your meetings, phone calls, and therapy non-negotiable.

### Closing Thoughts

As we place this book in your hands, we do so with the hope that it will do more than help you survive. Spouses of sexual addicts can thrive. The wounds can heal. Marriages can thrive with renewed intimate connections. Listen to the words of experience. Think carefully about the stories you have read in this book. Men and women who take this journey are some of the most inspiring people I have ever known. Their stories are challenging and inspirational.

*"A bold, loving woman is a warrior who is willing to risk and fight for an intimate relationship with the one she loves. She moves toward her husband, going to battle at her husband's side.<sup>44</sup> She refuses to remain a co-addict and does not enable her husband to comfortably continue being a sexual addict. She does not allow him to abuse her, and takes her own safety physically, emotionally, and spiritually as seriously as she does his. She does not retreat in pain, cowering in fear and hiding in half-truths and illusions. She does not attempt to control her husband, but instead sets and keeps healthy boundaries for herself. She forgives as Christ forgives, loves as God loves, and is always aware of her own need for mercy. Her dependence on God's mercy and strength in her brokenness allows her to step into the future with hope, ever rejoicing in the Lord's bounty toward her. Such a woman drives back the darkness of the evil one and brings in the kingdom of God. She is truly beautiful; the Light shines brightly; the angels sing; Adam cries out; she is Woman."<sup>45</sup>*

May God give you a clear vision filled with hope and strength as you experience your personal journey of healing.