

THE RECOVERY ROOM



One Couple's Healing Story

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A year and a half ago, Tim found out that his wife, Lori, was involved in an affair. That started their journey toward recovery, although the outcome of that process was not certain for many months. Tim is a photographer, Lori is a musician. They are probably known by more people than the average couple so it has especially interesting to watch them become public with their story.

I recently sat down with them to talk about their experience and I invite you to listen to what they had to say. Tim begins the conversation...

Tim: [Our recovery] is a daily process. Is it a victory? Yes, but it's a victory in progress. I don't think I'll ever be done with the process and I'm okay with that.

What do you mean by that?

Tim: We have twenty years of history of hiding from each other. We have twenty years of not communicating in a real way with each other. Every day is an opportunity for us to be real with each other. The conflicts don't frighten me anymore because I'm free. I'm no longer dependent on her. I choose to be with her and I offer her the same choice. I've given her freedom to be who she is and do what she wants to do. That freedom has created a new comfort zone for us.

That's certainly a different perspective: We're giving each other freedom and we're learning to trust the choices each of us makes is for each other and for this relationship. The more common perspective a lot of people come to is: Marriage is the thing I'm supposed to do or have to do.

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Tim: Obligation. Both of us fight against obligation.

Lori: "Don't tell me what I have to do."

Tim: That pretty much makes us not want to do it. I've released her of the obligation. At the end of the day, when we're having dinner together, it is a blessing that she's there.

Tell the story of what happened.

Tim: I thought I had married my best friend. I felt like we had a good marriage. Not without hiccups, not without high volume discussions now and then, but I really felt things were going pretty good. I worked hard to be a provider. Even in the military, I chose a place to live where she could use her musical gifts and further that education.

Fast forward a couple of years: I went away on a military deployment and came back. I thought everything was normal, but one day we were having an in-depth conversation and I asked her, "Do you ever struggle with anything?" She got really quiet, and I got really scared. Then she said that while I was overseas she had an affair. By the time I returned home, it was over; she had ended it on her own.

My world was crushed. I wanted to get counseling but she didn't want that. We chose to keep it a secret because she was a performer and we didn't want her reputation to be harmed. I offered forgiveness and we just pressed on without counseling.

Lori: Probably a year later, we had our first son, then another son, and then we moved to Florida. There were no other incidents during that time, but my heart felt like it had a vacancy. It probably had never healed from my first affair.

I was very vulnerable to being flattered; I enjoyed the attention and I liked looking good and being noticed. There were a few more times that I became involved in relationships, anything from an emotional kind of affair to more inappropriate boundaries being crossed. Each time, we went through a similar aftermath of brokenness and then Tim would clamp down and become more suspicious and controlling. I didn't really take responsibility, either. Each time I felt like he should just get over it and I didn't really accept it as my problem.

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Eighteen months ago, Tim discovered that I had been having another affair. During the affair, I knew I was pretty much laying everything on the line—being a public figure of sorts, a performing artist, and a mom to two boys—but I chose to do it anyway.

When Tim discovered it, I just felt like my life was over... that he was really done with me.

He asked me to leave, which I didn't do right away. We later separated for about a week, and then I felt like he asked me to come back only for the convenience of helping take care of our two teenage boys. We had nothing. We had no relationship and no connection. It was gone.

Was it hard for you to break off the affair?

Lori: Not by that point. It was difficult earlier, even after I had already realized the affair was a time bomb and I didn't want it anymore. But I was still entangled. If the affair partner did reach out to me, I would reach out to him. I felt like I couldn't get free from it.

When Tim discovered it, it actually felt like I was finally free from it. From that point on, I wasn't going to respond to the affair partner at all even if he tried to contact me again, which he didn't.

Tim: It was a kind of relief.

Lori: It was a relief because I didn't have to feel entangled anymore. I didn't feel strong enough before to do that on my own.

So, Tim, how did the discovery of this affair affect you?

Tim: After the previous incident (about seven years ago) I made up my mind that if this ever happened again, I was done. That thought was in the back of my mind. Lori's right, I lived in a constant state of suspicion, a constant state of controlling. That wasn't healthy because there was never any real healing.

The difference this time was that I moved from hurt to anger and action in about ten minutes. Up until this time, everything had all been a secret. We'd never told our closest friends. Because of Lori being a public figure, I could have plastered it all over the news and everyone would have know.

Did you think about doing that?

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Tim: Yes. The only thing that kept me from doing that was my boys. But, yes, I absolutely considered it.

I jumped to action right away. I told Lori to pack her bags and get out of my house. And after, that I went immediately to our pastors and told them because I was not going to hide anymore. I was done playing the game, pretending that everything was fine and that we were okay.

People use to say they couldn't believe we were still so happy after being married for twenty-two years. One person said, "When I get married, I want to be like you guys." Every time I heard that I just wanted to throw up; I wanted to say, "No you don't want to be like us."

Lori, what were you experiencing? What was different this Tim's reaction this time?

Lori: Well, that night after Tim had discovered everything, we had to sit down and tell our boys. I saw their broken hearts. But I also saw Tim's broken heart, over and over and over.

I saw what I had done for what it really was and I didn't want that. I didn't want our family to be broken. I didn't want our boys to have a broken home while they finished growing up. And after they married and had families of their own, I didn't want them to have to choose Christmas and holidays and all of the things that result from broken families.

I saw all that laid out and decided right then that I needed to change. I would accept whatever process we have to go through. But I knew I needed to realign some things and stop following my heart, so to speak, because my heart told me a bunch of lies. I needed to lead my heart and tell my heart where to go.

I chose to love no matter what and I chose to stay no matter what. Even when Tim told me over and over to leave, I didn't. I respected his request for me to move out for a little while, but once I came back I wasn't going anywhere. That angered him, but I know that now that it was the right choice because I was steadfast and I chose to do the work of change.

That's an interesting turn of the phrase: "I need to lead my heart and tell it where to go instead of being led by my heart." Where does that come from?

Lori: That was something in the introduction to a book I read that jumped out at me because it threw a spotlight on what I'd always done. The message that comes in from world around us tells us: Follow your heart; do what moves you. But your heart is going to lead you to a bad place if it's acting selfishly.

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We chose to marry somebody with a certain set of flaws that we had to evaluate. Am I going to accept these flaws? The strengths are easy to accept most of the time; it's the flaws that get us.

Tim: What flaws? [laughter]

Lori: Because of the anger that Tim held onto for so long, I saw the boys lose respect for him and even, in some cases, start to side with me. I didn't want that. I wanted us to be a family unit. I was very, very intentional about spending time and investing in them.

I know that paid off because even though they were initially very broken and very angry with me over what I had done, the relationship that I have with them now is better than it ever was before. It's made them feel that I am a safe place. Now Tim is having that experience, too, but they had lost respect for him while he was angry, until they saw him extend grace.

Tim, talk about the place you got stuck in for a while. Would you describe it that way?

Tim: Not stuck, I felt trapped. That's different. I had an obligation to my boys. I felt like I needed to stay there. I had plenty of support from people. Whether I chose to leave or wanted her to leave, I was fully justified. But the feeling I had was like being trapped—like I couldn't get away.

I couldn't be who I was, I couldn't let her be who she was. The trust was gone. It had been gone for a long time but now I wasn't even trying to get it back.

I was in a constant state of anger and resentment. All my life I'd been told to do the 'right thing,' and for the most part I've chosen to do it. But I felt trapped by that.

I saw changes in Lori. For example, she said I want to go to counseling. She'd never done that before. So there was just enough hope, not that we could have a great marriage, but that I could last until the boys were out of the house and then be done.

Counseling together was helpful, but eventually I reached a point where I didn't have any hope in a restored marriage. I knew I still need growth and healing, so I continued to come on my own. After a while, though, I felt like I was spinning my wheels.

You didn't need any more information.

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Tim: You're right, I didn't. So I stopped coming to counseling as well.

Lori: But I kept coming because it was benefiting me. From Tim's perspective, he was glad that I was figuring out what was wrong so I could fix me. I didn't really need any more information, either, but it was just a comfortable place to come and say what was happening and for you to tell me, "This is normal; you don't have to stay in that place of sacrifice forever." There was a light at the end of the tunnel.

Tim was often angry and mean during those times. It's hard to go back and remember those feelings. Even going through last year's receipts for our taxes, remembering the different places and the dates we went on how painful it all was... it was like reliving last year.

But I thank God it's not like that now, because when we're together it's a completely different experience. It's like night and day. We really enjoy being together. We have a connection and I don't feel like it's an obligation to text him back if he texts me. I don't feel like he's checking up on me or that he's trying to track me or control me. I really do feel like I can be free to be me.

Besides counselling what else was helpful for you?

Lori: Friends. Being able to find things to have joy in. Spending time with the boys was huge. Taking intentional steps. I didn't just let things happen to me. I was steadfast. I was evaluating my intentions and making sure they were pure and that I was controlling my responses.

I was working hard, but it created really good habits. The book that I was reading was called *The Love Dare*. I didn't read it to manipulate Tim into a certain response. I did very few of the actual like action dare things. I read the book from a perspective of "I need to learn how to love my husband and love my boys and love everybody with action" and that is how the book helped me.

Embracing the chance to learn and educate myself in this was largely due to talking with you and feeling like: okay, I'll take every tool that will help me do that.

Tim, what was the process in your change from anger to grace?

Tim: On September 23rd last year, I was sitting in my office and I began to think about everything that had transpired. It was almost like I had an out of body experience, in a way, where I tried to look at everything more objectively. I made three or four realizations that day. First and foremost I realized that no matter what Lori did, no matter how many love dares she decided to do, no matter how intentional she became, she

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could not undo the damage she had done. The odd thing about realizing that was the fact that that I could stop trying to control it... I found great freedom in just letting it go. And I did.

But then you were left with the choice of what you were going to do.

Tim: That goes into the next realization: the fact that there we had friends who had experienced something similar years ago. He was one of the first men I talked to. He and his wife came into our lives and showed us what it meant to be a friend without judgment.

In addition, at the beginning of September another couple we'd known for about twelve years admitted to me that their marriage was in trouble and they didn't know what to do. I told them a little bit of my story and said, "Honestly, I don't think I have anything to offer you."

But what I did have to offer them was friendship, like our friends had shown us. So I just loved on them. I let them talk, let them vent when they needed to vent, asked a lot of questions, and chose not to judge them. I just let them be who they were.

It dawned on me that day that I don't think I had ever been that kind of friend to Lori. I had been a friend, but not a friend that accepted her as she was, failures and all. I stopped trying to manipulate her, to change her into something ideal. I thought, even after all this mess, maybe I can be that kind of friend to her.

I stopped thinking about a marriage; I just want to think about a friendship. What if I stopped trying to be a good husband and started trying to be a good friend? That was another piece of burden that fell off that day.

The third major thing I realized was that in releasing Lori, I was going to be okay no matter what she chose to do. Her decisions could hurt me, but those decisions don't change who I am or who I can be. I found that really empowering. I don't want to sound negative when I say this, but it was almost a realization that I didn't need her. I can be all I need to be, all I can be, whether she's in my life or not.

Because I already realized that I could be her friend, that thought didn't drive me away from her, it actually drove me towards her.

So I went home that late afternoon and through the course of a really long conversations (probably the best one we had in years), I said, "You're free to be who you want to be you're free to do what you want to do. I'm choosing to be your friend. If all we have in this is a great friendship, I'm okay with that." It was the most

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freeing conversation. That grace brought peace, and we started down a road of connection that we haven't had in a long time. We actually enjoy being together.

Your three points are really important ones You stopped trying to control Lori and in doing that realized that whether she chose you or not, whether your marriage survived or not, you were going to be okay. And when you talked about pursuing a friendship, there was something in you that moved to love her in a different way than you'd been loving her before. It was certainly something you hadn't been experiencing for a while.

Lori: Definitely not.

Tim: The kind of love that we're talking about, the kind of friendship we're talking about, isn't a friendship that tries to manipulate, control or judge. It's a friendship that says, "I'm proud to know you. Go be all you can be."

There's no magic answer in all this. There's no one bit of advice that you or I, despite our stories, can give to someone and say, "Oh, you're dealing with infidelity? An affair going on? Here's your solution!" It's complicated. It's messy. And we spend a lifetime moving towards healthy lives and healthy relationships. But you both, individually and together, have learned a lot through this process and you will continue to benefit from that.

As you've shared your story more publicly, I know there are people coming to you asking for help and advice. What is the important thing that you want to share with others who are dealing with the same thing in their marriages?

Lori: The first thing that comes to mind is to surround yourself with people you can confide in and talk to. When you can't really do that with your spouse yet, they can come in and support you. People who don't have a network of friends or people that they can vent to—I don't know how they survive. I think isolation is the worst thing that a person could do.

I didn't tell everyone; we kept the circle pretty small. I began to build really good friendships with girls I had known but who hadn't really known me. Those friendships became much deeper. We started sharing each other's struggles.

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It also was good to have people that I could laugh with because, honestly, Tim judged me for having fun. For a while, he felt like I should always be in a somber, groveling place. So having fun with friends was such a relief for me.

Tim: One thing that was most impactful for me, and what I'd shared with anybody who has been in my shoes, is the realization that we don't have to fight anymore. We are going to be okay, no matter what happens. When I removed the fear of what might happen from the equation, that's when I became free.

The number one thing I say to them is, "You're going to be okay no matter what happens. No matter what your unfaithful spouse chooses to do. You're going to be alright."

But betrayed spouses or partners can get stuck because they don't have that guarantee of what's going to happen ahead. "How can I be sure I'm not going to be hurt again? I already know what that feels like; I never want to feel this again?"

Tim: And that might happen with Lori.

But you're not saying, "If she has another affair, that's okay. We've learned how to do this so we're good." I'm not sure you'd stay in this marriage if she had another affair.

Tim: No, I'm not saying that. I didn't trade one mask for another.

Some people will hear what you say and think, "Really? Give her freedom? I don't get that. That would scare me to give someone that level of freedom." But I think it's an important point. What I hear you saying is: "I've given her freedom because if she chooses to betray me again I know that will hurt tremendously..."

Tim: It will hurt.

"...but I'm learning that I'm going to be okay."

Tim: Yes. I'm going to be okay. You know of the two of us. I'm the introvert, she's the beautiful extrovert with all kinds of talent. I grew in an unhealthy way by finding all of my identity in what she did. I was her number one fan. I was her number one promoter. I could hardly have a conversation with anybody without talking about her. I was proud of her.

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But I'll be honest with you, it was unhealthy. It was unhealthy for me as a person and what I finally realized was that she's not my identity.

Jerry Maguire—great movie, sometimes funny. But when he walks in and says, “You complete me,” I just want to say, “You're an idiot.” I realized Lori doesn't complete me. I don't complete her. We are a whole complete being separate from each other. The two of us together are greater than the sum of the parts, but that doesn't discount the fact that we're complete by ourselves.

I think that's tremendously significant in your own growth and change. I don't know if you remember, at the beginning of the counselling process, talking about that root of insecurity being a real tripping point for you. If I remember correctly, you reacted against that a little bit.

Tim: I probably didn't want to admit it, but that's a fact. Realizing that I have the ability to make my own friends, I have the ability to develop my own talents... I don't have to be dependent on her strengths to make me who I am.

Lori: When he was elevating me and finding his identity in me—I didn't feel like that was loving me. He may have told everyone else how amazing I am, but he really didn't tell that to me and didn't make me feel like he felt that way. But now, with a healthier view of who he is, he can look at what I do and who I am in a fresh way. He is actually more complimentary of me and gives me more words of affirmation now than he ever did before.

Tim: I do?

Lori: Yeah, you do. [laughter]

Tim: See, I'm not even trying.

[End or pre-recorded interview.]

Tim T: You just listened to Tim and Lori talking about their recovery or, as Tim once called it their *marriage recreation*. Lori couldn't be with us tonight, but Tim is joining us by phone. Tim are you with us?

Tim S: Yes I am Tim. How are you?

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Tim T: I'm good. Tim, you listened in and heard the things that we talked about in that interview. Is there anything else that came to mind that you'd like to add?

Tim S: I actually just texted Lori I said it's a little bit challenging to hear this again because it brings it back. You know, we relive it a little bit every time we tell it. But at the same time, the catharsis is good and it takes my thoughts to new places on how I can be a better friend to her. She said there at the end of the interview that I was being a better friend to her; I was more complimentary. I really hadn't realized that I was doing that; it was more natural. At the same time, the switch went off in my mind that I can't let it just be natural, I have to make it intentional. Hearing my own story again, I was able to do a little growing.

Tim T: Well when I listen to your story I do more growing, too. I do that a lot when I listen to clients. The wonderful thing is we get to spend a lifetime figuring this stuff out and, hopefully, growing and getting better.

Most couples that go through this will keep their story private. They may tell it to a few friends and family, but other than that they won't really tell too many people. That may be an appropriate choice. You both chose to do something very different. Why?

Tim S: This allowed us to be real. We found that the friends who decided to stick with us and love on us were even better friends than they were before. I knew that there were other people out there entangled in this kind of mess, and every single one of them feels alone, isolated. Of course, they hear peripherally that maybe this may have happened in somebody else's life, but you can never talk about it.

Tim T: You know that from firsthand experience.

Tim S: I do, but we wanted to open the door.

I want to talk a little bit more about that, but we have a caller with a question.

Caller 1: I'm just wondering if you experience triggers at all. How do you handle them, or do you still experience them?

Tim S: Yes, absolutely. There are triggers everywhere. I still experience triggers. The difference is because there was a point in time where I chose grace; I chose freedom. I can go back to that time and put everything, every triggers, into the light of that decision for grace and friendship.

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Because we have openness now I can openly tell Lori that something is a trigger. I might be having a bad day or I might actually be having a bad week, but because of the openness we have, we can talk about those and then she can make adjustments as well. And I guess I can understand that not every unfaithful spouse is willing to make those kind of adjustments but when we talk about triggers now, we both act differently. We act more for the benefit of each other, not just in a selfish way. I hope that made some sense.

Tim T: It did make sense. When you have the unfaithful spouse willingly participating in bringing relief and comfort when a trigger comes up, that's invaluable. I don't know how someone gets past it if they're just left to do it on their own and the person that hurt them isn't willing to bring some relief.

You talk about grace. We talk about it so easily that maybe it sounds like a pill—that someone can get a prescription for grace. I think people struggle with that. There's so much pain and when triggers come up. They feel overwhelming and it either takes them to despair or anger. What does it practically mean when you say you're in a place of grace?

Tim S: All I can do is refer to that very first letter that I wrote to you on the anniversary of the discovery. At that time I wasn't really referring to it as grace; I was referring to this whole change as choosing freedom. The opposite of freedom is control. It's holding these choices in front of her, dangling them in front of her face and saying, "Look what you did to me. You have no right!" then going through the same crazy cycle all over again. We're not doing that anymore.

Tim T: For you, it definitely was a choice. It was a turning point where you made a choice: from that point on you were going to do things differently.

Tim S: I said the old marriage is dead. My biggest problem through all these years was trying to save and have what could no longer be because once there's been an affair the marriage forever changes. We can't go back.

Tim T: For some people, that's just devastating. When what they had before and what they expected to have for the rest of life has been blown out of the water, they don't know where else to turn and don't know what else to hope in.

Tim S: What changed in me is the fact that I was going to be okay, even if the marriage didn't survive the old marriage was gone. Whatever we create now has to be something different, with the understanding that no matter what happens both of us are going to be okay. We're okay as individuals and we're okay together as a couple.

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Tim T: You're saying what I say to couples that come for counseling: "My job is not to heal your marriage or to save it. I want to come alongside each of you and help you understand your broken parts and what it means for you to move forward in a healthy way. Two people who have experienced intimacy and trust in the past, if they both start figuring that out will naturally find their way back to intimacy and a new kind of relationship. I think that's what's happening with you guys.

Caller 2: I'd like to ask about someone who is saying they're remorseful but they don't show remorse. How can one ask that person to show remorse in a more meaningful way?

Tim T: Let me first ask Tim, how did you know Lori was remorseful or sorry? Was there anything different this time around? You mentioned that she was willing to go to counseling; what other evidence did you see?

Tim S: I'll be honest with you I looked for remorse in her based on what I felt remorse should look like.

Tim T: And did she meet up to that standard?

Tim S: Absolutely not. She's an outgoing personality. For me, handling remorse would mean I would probably mope around. There'd be a lot more tears and withdrawing, but she's just not like that. I realized I had to let go of that expectation too. Remorse for her looked like action steps like going to counseling—something she had never done before. Remorse was being willing to come out into the open with this, especially our closest friends. Lori as a performer was very, very concerned about her image, but I saw her being willing to let that image go and take the risk that what we share now could literally undo whatever she had done or accomplished as a performer. I saw the remorse as her being willing to take action.

Tim T: Sometimes the betrayed spouse may have a certain expectation of remorse that may not be exactly what the unfaithful spouse experiences, even when they are committed to change and are really are sorry for what's happened. Lori is one example of that. I did see the evidence in her. She was steadfast and single minded in her intent to make this right. She was sorrowful over what she done. I saw tears; you saw tears, too.

But you're right, she's bubbly personality. She's more outgoing and so expressed remorse in different ways. We have to make allowance for that. But to your point, Tim, she gave evidence of it because she was making the steps necessary for a change to happen. That showed you that she was sincere.

I encourage the betrayed spouses to observe the actions of the unfaithful spouse. More than what the emotions that they are displaying, look at the consistent choices they are making. It will be helpful to you if

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they ever get to that place of deep sorrow and obvious remorse for what they did. That will help you heal, but you may not experience it to the depth that you would like. Or it may take time for them to get there. It took me two or three years before I broke completely. I was always sorry for my affair, but it took two or three years before I think it finally crashed over me, realizing how much pain and how much consequence my affair had cost others.

Tim S: Lori did reach a point where that happened. I just wasn't there to see it. She told me of a day where she came undone and spent most of the day in tears. In the past, her attitude to me was always, "I wish you would please get over this," as though the problem were mine. Lori doesn't do that anymore. Lori no longer has the "Get over it mentality". She continues to say, "I'm sorry I did this."

She once told me in, "Why don't you go and get some counseling because you need to recover from this stuff." The problem was always mine in the past. This time around she continues to tell me that it's not my problem, that she's sorry that she caused this.

Tim T: You both have a story. It's going to be exciting to see how you will continue to grow together and how your story is going to be an encouragement to other couples down the road.

The Recovery Room podcasts, along with many other recovery resources, are provided through AffairHealing.com. If you need personal help in your affair recovery, you may want to consider making use of the following services:

- **Phone Coaching** (AffairHealing.com/phone-coaching)
- **Couple's Recovery Retreats** (MarriageICU.com)
- **Counseling in Central Florida** (AffairHealing.com/affair-counseling-orlando)