

THE RECOVERY ROOM



He Said He Didn't Love Me Anymore

Tim Tedder's interview with "Robin."

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Tim: How did you find out about your husband's affair?

Robin: My mother told me there was more to the story because he had come home one night, told me he didn't love me anymore and he wanted a divorce.

Tim: There are few things more devastating than to hear the person who promised to love you for a lifetime say to you one day, "I don't think I love you anymore." Those words have broken hearts and shattered the confidence of many men and women, including many of you listening to this podcast.

This is Robin's story. We sat down to talk about her experience and what happened after her husband told her his feelings had changed and he wanted to end their marriage. I asked her to talk about what their marriage was like before her husband said he wanted to end it.

Robin: I went through a period of a depression about two years into our marriage. I wanted out of the marriage, but we had a daughter. I completely shut him out because I was miserable. Since I recovered, I felt we had grown closer because we had gotten through it. But there was a lot of lingering resentment on his part and many things I never expressed.

When I told him I was depressed, I thought he knew what that meant, but he didn't know what that meant for me. We never talked about it; it just got better.

He tried. He would ask me how counseling was going and what he could do, but I just shut him out completely. I wish afterward we would have been able to talk through it so I could explain to him what was going on with me because depression is different for different people. We just never had that conversation.

Tim: What difference do you think that would have made?

Robin: That was the start of the disconnect in the marriage because he didn't know why I was pushing him away. He didn't know why I didn't want him to touch me. It was a physical thing. We were newlyweds in the honeymoon phase and all the sudden his wife didn't want to have anything to do with him. He didn't know what the hell was going on.

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It would have helped for him to understand and he wouldn't have gone looking for someone else to understand.

Tim: Sometimes the cracks of disappointment or disconnection that come into a marriage can open up a space of vulnerability to an affair. They are never an excuse for an affair, but it's important to have an honest understanding of the conditions if you are going to partner together in repairing all the damage that has been done.

Robin's husband said he wanted out, but seemed to go back-and-forth, wavering in indecision. It was finally Robin's mother who told her that something else might be going on. Her mother encouraged her to check their cell phone records.

Robin: So I pulled up his cell phone records and, sure enough, there was the same name over and over again.

There's an app for \$1.99 that lets you enter anyone's cell phone number and it will give you the owner's name. I found the name, looked her up on Facebook, and confronted him about it. He told me it was a business client and I accepted that.

But I went back and looked at the times again and saw conversations that took place at midnight when he had been traveling. I confronted him again and he admitted to the beginnings of an emotional affair. I accepted that and said, "You have a decision. You can either cut off all contact and we can try to move forward, or we're done." He agreed to stop talking to her.

Our relationship went back-and-forth again. I had a feeling that something was still going on. I saw that he had created an email account I didn't know about and I confronted him. He told me he didn't know what I was talking about. He then deleted the email account but I was able to recover it and recover actual emails that had been deleted.

I saw some of the messages that were written and knew that he was talking to her again. At that point I said we were done. I told him that he needed to move out.

Tim: There's a term used to describe the reluctant confessions of an unfaithful partner; we call it "Trickle Truth." Instead of letting honesty flow with "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth," the facts are only offered in little drips because the guilty person only wants to offer what they think they HAVE to admit.

Trickle Truth becomes a kind of game in which one person claims "I've told you everything" until the next significant detail is uncovered. Their insistence that "Now, I've told you everything" is emphatic until something new is revealed. This leaves the betrayed spouse in a predicament: if their only source of information is coming from the person who has been completely untrustworthy, how are they suppose to know what's really going on?

Clients in this predicament often say to me "I know I'm not suppose to snoop," but I don't always agree. Snooping can become destructive and obsessive, I know, but when there is strong suspicion of an affair and the suspected partner only offers defensive denials, a bit of investigation is sometimes necessary in order to find out what's really going on. That's what Robin decided to do when she checked the text and email records.

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About three months passed between her husband's proclamation of lost love and his moving out of the house again. Robin explains what happened next...

Robin: At this point he had moved back out. I called him the next morning so I could have my final say. I was going to explain how love was a choice and other things. I had stayed home from work. (This was the same morning I had been able to recover the emails.)

He eventually wrote me an email and came clean about everything. Not only was this a sexual affair, but he had a one night stand four to five years previous to that as well. He laid it all out on the line. He said, "I know you can't forgive me but I feel like you deserve the truth."

Tim: Do you know what prompted him to be that honest with you at that point?

Robin: He thought it was over and he didn't want me blaming myself.

Tim: So there was some consideration for you.

Robin: That was the only consideration I felt at that time.

Tim: That is interesting. Many betrayed spouses don't even get that. The affair is left in mystery and everything is blamed on them. It remains a secret. For him to be at the place where he assumed his marriage was done, but not wanting you to carry any sense of responsibility or guilt, that was something at least.

Robin: He knew I blamed myself for a large portion of it.

Tim: Notice two things that Robin's husband did: he provided an honest explanation of all that had happened, and he took responsibility for it. These two choices--offering a true confession and accepting full responsibility--must be evident before trust and intimacy can be restored in a marriage. That doesn't mean the unfaithful partner should spill out every gory detail of an affair, nor does it mean they have to shoulder blame for every bad thing in the marriage.

But they must shift to openness and honesty and they must accept full responsibility for their choice to cheat. If not, they may avoid divorce, but they will lose their chance for complete healing in their relationship.

The response of Robin's husband offers the a chance for change.

Tim: So he comes clean, then what happens?

Robin: Well, first I read the email and then I called his mom. Both of our parents were really involved in what was going on. I told her I didn't know what to do. She said, "If you don't know if you can still love him, it's worth finding out."

So I called him and told him that he couldn't just write something like that. I told him to come home so we could talk about it. He came home and broke down crying when he walked in the door.

I had never seen him cry... not even on our wedding day; he never cried. He said he was so sorry, "I know that you could never forgive me and that I don't deserve grace." I told him I didn't know if I could get past this, but I was willing to try.

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I said we needed to go back and see the counselor but this was it, though. If I heard that he talked to the other woman one more time, that would be it and we would be done. I also told him that if there were any more lies, he needed to tell me now or we were done. That was the first day of us moving forward.

Tim: You gave him a kind of ultimatum: Be completely honest with me. If you can, then let's see what can happen.

Robin: Right. Let's just see where it goes.

Tim: That was the start of change for you guys.

Robin: Yes.

Tim: Was there ever any indication that he continued to lie to you about the affair?

Robin: No. As far as I know he has been completely open and honest about the affair and about what happened years prior to that. The next morning he did call her end things. I was not happy about it but he did tell me it happened. Actually, she called him to see what was going on and instead of having someone else talk to her like I requested, he talked to her. That was the one point where I got really angry and thought, "Well this isn't going to go anywhere," but we talked through it. Since then, as far as I know, he has been open and honest about everything.

Tim: How long it did take you to get to a place, I don't know if it is fair to ask it this way, where it felt normal again? Are you at normal yet? Whatever that is.

Robin: It's a new normal. I feel like we are not the same people we were. We are better than we were before, individually, as a couple, and as parents.

I kept getting triggered by things. When he would travel for work it was really hard. To this day that is still a struggle. I would say it was a couple of years before I could remember things and without it being a huge ordeal. I know I will always hear things that remind me of that time, but I don't always have to react anymore.

Tim: What's the difference between feeling the pain of it and being overcome?

Robin: I look back and I sometimes have to remind myself of the lessons I learned. I can be thankful for what came out of it because our marriage is better than it was. I have done so much in the past 6 years that I said I would never do, from running marathons to triathlons to going back to school, those things would have never happened. Sometimes, if I do get triggered or we have an argument or he does travel, I remind myself (a) the lessons learned and (b) I have gotten to a point where I'm okay. If he were to have another affair it would be horrible and devastating, but I would be okay because *I'm* okay.

Tim: One of the things you learned was that the healing of your marriage wasn't about you *needing* him.

Robin: No. I chose this marriage. I chose to stay and I know I'm stronger now because of it.

Tim: That's interesting. A lot of people would say choosing to stay is a weak choice.

Robin: Well yeah, I would have said that before. I would have said women or men who stay are weak. It is harder to stay and deal with everything and have to be faced with it than to just walk away and try to forget.

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Tim: That is a common struggle for betrayed spouses: wondering if staying married to someone who cheated is a sign of weakness, not strength. Sometimes, the choice to stay with a cheater IS motivated by weakness. The betrayed spouse who has no healthy sense of themselves may feel like they NEED the their partner and so will quickly overlook damaging behaviors. Or it may be simply FEAR that keeps them in a broken marriage. But sometimes the choice to stay is motivated by a kind of love that is willing to be both vulnerable and honest. There is tremendous strength in that. And it will begin to show itself as the wounded partner begins to forgive.

Robin previously wrote to tell me what it was like to forgive her husband. This is what she wrote: "As we sat facing each other on the couch, I told him I didn't know if I could ever get past this, but I also didn't know that I couldn't. Everyone is deserving of forgiveness, but whether our marriage could survive would depend on how he would act in the weeks and months to come. We went back to our counselor and it was like a different man was sitting next to me. He no longer tried to hide his feelings or the things he had done. He understood the reasons for his infidelity..."

"It hasn't been easy. I'm often reminded of what happened. It could be just a snippet of conversation between strangers or the story line on a TV sitcom that brings back unwanted memories. I have make the choice everyday to focus on the good of what came out of his affair and not focus on the pain those memories bring. I forgave my husband for the mistakes he made and we made the choice together to not let his affair define who we are as a couple."

I asked Robin to talk more about what it meant to forgive and trust her husband again.

Tim: How about forgiving him? Was it easy or difficult?

Robin: It probably came easier than most because I understood why he made the choices he did. I did not agree with them. Going through counseling, looking back on our relationship, and seeing what had happened at certain points made me understand how he was feeling. I could sympathize in a way with how he was feeling, not with the affair. In my mind, an affair is never okay. I could sympathize with the feelings he was having, but he chose to deal with them in a way that I don't agree with.

Tim: You're not justifying or excusing the affair.

Robin: No. Never.

Tim: You had an empathetic response to where he was emotionally. That is a hard thing for betrayed spouses to do because it feels like they are excusing and letting the unfaithful spouse off the hook if they accept any explanation of why they did this thing.

Robin: Absolutely. I can understand why many people feel that way. I just never went there, I guess.

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Ours was so backward... because we were already working on our disconnection before the affair happened, I understood why. He was able to explain what was going on, and I was able to see things from his point of view.

Tim: Was he blaming you?

Robin: No. It wasn't blame. I didn't ever feel blame.

Tim: He was just being honest...

Robin: ...with what he was dealing with through my depression—how he felt and how we never dealt with it as a couple.

Tim: Getting to a place of empathizing with that, trying to see it from his point of view, I can understand how that would help you work toward forgiveness and offer grace. I also understand why people get defensive against giving room to anything that sounds like an excuse. They're probably very guarded against having an empathetic response and it does sometimes get in the way of forgiveness.

Robin: I think there is a fear that if you forgive it and you understand it, then it could happen again. You're saying, "It's okay." And if it's okay, then that means it's okay for them to do it again. It's never okay.

Tim: I hear that from you. In no way are you justifying or excusing the affair. Everyone has a different choice they could make in those circumstances.

Robin: Yes, and he learned that he made the wrong choice.

Tim: How do you have confidence moving forward? We talked about forgiveness, but what about trust?

Robin: That was harder than forgiveness, I think. It's something that will still come up to this day, six years later. If he travels for work, I check his cell phone records. Do I think he would do it again with that same cell phone? He'd be pretty darn stupid to do it again, but... I will look on Facebook.

Tim: Does he know you do those things?

Robin: Yes.

Tim: Does he get defensive?

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Robin: Sometimes. It depends on how I approach him.

Tim: What makes the difference?

Robin: If I come at him with, "What is this number?! What have you been doing?! What is this?!" as opposed to, "I'm feeling a little nervous or scared right now. Can you just explain who this is or what was going on? You didn't call when you said you were going to call. Who were you with?" then it changes the conversation.

Tim: So if he feels attacked or accused, he gets defensive. But if you let him into how you're feeling about it, he's more willing to step in and offer comfort and relief.

Robin: Yes. And in a perfect scenario, that's what I do! [laughter] It doesn't always work that way.

As hard as it's been and even though it still comes up (and may forever), I'm thankful for who I've become because of it. I don't know if I would have become that same person. Maybe something else would have caused that to happen, I don't know.

I'm thankful for who he's become, even as a father to our children, because he's not the same person. Would we have gotten there some other way? Who knows. I'll never know that. I'm just thankful for what's come out of it. That's how I can make sense of it and give meaning to it. It's not just something bad that happened; there's meaning and purpose behind it.

We had a happy ending. I know not everyone does, but it is possible to have a better, stronger marriage if both people are willing to put in the work. Both people. But it's also possible to better yourself as an individual having gone through that, even if the marriage doesn't work. You can take the lessons learned and apply it to the next relationship, or just to better yourself in general. There are so many things I have accomplished that never would have happened, I believe, had it not been for that.