



Healing Advice for Wounded Couples

An Interview with Linda MacDonald, LMFT

with Tim Tedder, LMHC, NCC

Podcast #122, Recorded October 2016 | AffairHealing.com/Podcast

All side quotes are from Linda's book, *How To Help Your Spouse Heal from Your Affair*.

Tim: Linda, I first found out about your book, [*How To Help Your Spouse Heal from Your Affair*](#), from a recommendation posted in my forum. It's a book I had not come across before so I quickly looked it up. I downloaded it, read it, and was so encouraged by the straightforward, simple, uncompromising message it gives to unfaithful spouses. Since then, I have readily recommended it.

Linda: Thank you.

Tim: Is that the first book that you've published?

Linda: Yeah. I wrote a play that's been used all over the world and I've written ebooks and articles, but that was my first real book.

Tim: Of all of the subjects available for you to write about in affair recovery, why choose this one as the focus of your first book?

Linda: Well, because it's been my specialty for twenty-eight years to work with individuals and couples that have been involved in affairs, one person or the other, or sometimes both. I was getting so frustrated with people who step out of their marriages and then, when the spouse finds out, they just freak out. They're scared, they lie more, they try to cover up. They don't know what to do, they panic. I just thought, *I've got to do something that will help them not make some of these blunders that defeat the thing that maybe they really want: to save their marriages.*

They do. They need help because they're just stumbling in the dark. They've been so deluded for quite a while. Suddenly, they wake up and they want to save their marriage, or they never thought

their spouse would find out, or they thought they could get away with it forever. But suddenly “D-day” comes and they have to face the music.

They often make mistakes that really can be fatal to the chance of recovery. I've seen it happen so often and it just kills me.

I remember the example of a couple. They were starting to make some progress and I was getting her to the point where she was going to be able to really talk about her feelings. Then he pulled one more lie—it didn't even have to do with the affair!—and that was it for her. She did not want to progress anymore and she divorced him.

I just wanted to prevent those kinds of mistakes if somebody really, really wants to save the marriage and it is a marriage worth saving. Many times it is.

So I wrote an article and then I handed it out to a lot of my colleagues and then they started sharing it with their clients. Then I got more requests and more requests and it just kind of went from there. So I thought, *well maybe I'll self-publish something that I can just take with me to conferences*. I had no idea it would sell.

I did polish up the article and made it into a book. I wanted something practical, something that people that are self-help-phobic would read—short without using a lot of therapist language. And *boom*, there it went. I've been pleased because I want to help people and that was a niche I didn't think had been addressed.

Tim: So you have betrayed spouses who have an interest in reading about what they should expect from the one who had an affair? They are probably some of the people buying this book, even though the target is to those who had an affair.

Linda: Right.

Tim: What are the responses you've received from betrayed spouses?

Linda: They tell me it was a corner-turner for their spouse. They say, “He wasn't getting it until he read your book and then all of a sudden the lights went on.” That's the most common response that I get. They get hope because I try to present a message of hope—you *can save your marriage, you can become a rebuilders instead of a destroyer of your marriage*—and I've been very surprised at how many betrayed spouses have read it. I didn't expect it. They have said, “Finally, a book that doesn't blame me.”

FROM THE BOOK:

“Our personal failures can become tremendous lessons for our children and adult children when we have the courage to stick around and do the hard work of repair. But when we refuse to face the truth and run away instead, we lose our moral authority, teach our children to rationalize wrongdoing, and promote avoidance as the way to cope with life difficulties.”

Tim: Infidelity is defined in so many different ways. The statistics we read about how many affairs have occurred in marriages, or how many marriages survive an affair, depend on how the term is defined. How do you define infidelity? And what are the outcomes you see in a couple that comes to you asking for help?

Linda: I like Dr. Shirley Glass's definition. She says that it takes three elements.

One is *emotional intimacy* between two people where they've talked about things that are personal, whether it's flirtation or personal stories about their marriage. They've crossed some sort of a line where there's an emotional connection, usually with some exclusivity (one-on-one).

The second element is *secrecy*. People don't know that they're meeting or talking on the phone or texting. There's some secrecy involved.

And the third one is *sexual chemistry*. And if those three elements are there, it's an affair whether there's anything physical going on or not.

I like what one of my ethics teacher once said. She talked about the Well-lit Room Test: if you were caught by someone with a bright light on this relationship and your spouse was listening in on your conversation or looking in on your behavior, how would that be interpreted by your spouse? I like that. I think that's a good little thing to ask a person.

Tim: Understanding that it is such a prevalent problem in marriages in our culture, what do you see as the likely outcome for a couple that has experienced infidelity in their marriage?

Linda: Well, even if the spouse doesn't know about it... let's say somebody's doing things on the side and the partner knows something's wrong but they can't put their finger on it—that still can lead to a divorce, even if they don't blame it on an affair because they don't know why their spouse was detached or disappearing late at night.

Without professional help, I maybe give people a thirty percent chance of being able to survive the revelation of an affair. With professional help, but with a non-specialist, maybe fifty percent would be the best. I think people need to go to someone who specializes in infidelity. If their problem is more sex addiction, pornography, seeing prostitutes, strip clubs that kind of thing, go to a trained sex addiction specialist. But as an infidelity specialist, I think I have about a seventy percent rate of saving marriages. [Note: Linda later contacted me to clarify her success rate. The 70% rate was her overall rate including those who drop out of therapy prematurely. She didn't want to discourage folks who seek out an infidelity specialist for help. Her actual success rate for motivated couples who stay the course in counseling is closer to between 85 and 90% of marriages who end up staying together.]

If there's a lot of emotional involvement, though, it lowers because people get more messed up by the emotional connection than they do with just the physical. Even though both light up the pleasure centers of their brain, the emotional involvement increases the likelihood that the marriage may not make it.

Tim: You probably face what I often face—couples that come in for help who have been to other counselors that are not infidelity specialists. Those counselors are probably very good at what they do, but what they do is help struggling marriages or marriages with normal problems. They're not used to handling marriages affected by trauma and infidelity. What do you hear from clients who come from a couple's counselor or a marriage counselor?

Linda: The kind of things I hear are this: in the first session, a person goes in and tells the therapist, "I'm involved in an affair" and they tell their story. The counselor believes the story, which often is distorted. If you have any experience working with affairs you know that.

A lot of therapists will hear the story, take it at face value (even though the person's rewritten their whole marital history) and they'll tell them something like, "Well, the best you can hope for is a peaceful divorce." First session! I had somebody tell me that was what their therapist said to them in the first session. I was appalled.

But it does make a difference in terms of the counselor's experience and understanding of both trauma and what infidelity can make people do, such as rewriting the marital history. Spouses are sometimes delusional in the way they look back on their marriage—completely differently than they would have before their involvement with the other person. Once they wake up, then all those negatives they have described to their spouse to justify the affair get put in perspective. Then they realize that these were just excuses.

Even marriage therapists might get this wrong. I'm a systems trained therapist. We're taught to look at the whole system and what behaviors are inviting the behavior of the other person. Well, the problem with affairs is they're a little bit more like an addiction. We all know that when you're working with a couple and one person is an alcoholic or chemically impacted by a drug, you can't do couple's work because the influence of the chemicals distort. They have to go into treatment first and then you can work with them as a couple.

Infidelity is a little bit the same in that it's like an addiction. A chemical imbalance happens in the brain. Dopamine and phenethylamine—these hormones light up the pleasure centers of the brain much like morphine and so they don't have the perspective they would otherwise have. If a counselor doesn't know that, they're going to treat these things as equal.

FROM THE BOOK:

"Although your faithful partner may have played a role in your vulnerability to an affair, that is not the same thing as causing it. Your spouse did not hold a gun to your head and insist that you get involved with someone else. You chose to step out of the marriage on your own. Your job is to take responsibility for the affair, work hard to rebuild your partner's trust, and offer comfort and reassurance. Then, once your commitment to honesty has been re-established and the initial turmoil has subsided, your spouse will be more willing to address any troubling marital issues that pre-dated the affair."

I have people who are going through this and well-meaning relatives will say things to them like, “It takes two.” Well, not really.

Sure, I think you can make a person vulnerable to some sort of acting out. If you're super critical or if you have an alcohol problem or if you're neglecting your relationship, the other person can be made vulnerable. But they certainly have a lot of other options besides an affair. They could drag their spouse into therapy. They could start eating too much. They could do a lot of other things besides have an affair. So the unfaithful person, or the therapist, don't have the right to blame the faithful spouse for what's going on.

Tim: Every story that comes into your office is slightly different, even though they have a lot in common. If you knew you had only a moment to talk to a couple that was experiencing a reaction from infidelity, what would be the most important things for them (the unfaithful spouse and the betrayed spouse) to understand?

Linda: Let me tell you an illustration. I always tell people the very first time I see them that it's a bit like a broken bone. In the marriage, there's been a break. In the commitment, in the trust, there has been a horrible break. If the bone isn't set right, it's not going to heal. But if it's set right and the right supports are put around it, the break will eventually become stronger than the whole rest of the length of the bone.

I think that's true in marriages. When they get the right kind of therapy, support, and insight... when they connect well and have all the support around them that they need, they won't be vulnerable to infidelity again as a couple. They will understand themselves better and understand the dynamics in their relationship. They will have resources to work with that they didn't have before.

Tim: So that's the hope they can have for an outcome, instead of the devastation they're feeling immediately.

Linda: Yes, so I try to instill that right away.

In terms of individually... for the unfaithful spouse, I would just emphasize a hundred percent cut off with the affair partner. If that means changing jobs, if that means blocking them from your phone—do all of that. One hundred percent cut off.

That can be difficult, but I have never seen it work if the person continues to have any kind of interaction with the other person. If they feel like they have to have some sort of closure, I always encourage an agreement between the faithful and unfaithful spouse as to what to say and how to do it. Then the faithful spouse gets to witness this, it in some way, whether it's a letter or a phone call.

FROM THE BOOK:

“Successful Rebuilders are willing to suffer the accompanying losses because they decide to value their marriages more than their ‘rights’ to maintain contact with the other person—no matter what.”

The next important thing is to be really committed to telling the truth. It's the lies that are most damaging in affairs, as awful as the physical or emotional violation may be. It's the lies—the feeling that *you could lie to me*. It will threaten the marriage the most in the future.

The next important thing is to have deep remorse and empathy. Sometimes it takes time, but without it the spouse is going to feel totally isolated and alone in their sorrow and pain. They need to be able to heal together. When the couple works at it and if they're guided correctly, the unfaithful person becomes like a healing person. They will listen to the pain. They will try to comfort and soothe their spouse.

But if they're not there to do that, the betrayed spouse has to do all of that by themselves. They have to undo the rationalizations without having their spouse do it. They have to somehow find a way to reclaim the truth because they've been told so many lies. They have to go through post-traumatic stress reactions all by themselves without having comfort from their partner, so they rely on a therapist. A therapist can help, but it is not nearly as impactful as having a spouse say *I am so sorry that I did this to you*.

Tim: What about the things you would say to the betrayed spouse?

Linda: I would say first of all: don't underreact. If we react too glibly, too casually, that is a signal to the other person that they can continue it or that it's not that big of a deal or it didn't hurt you that badly.

On the other hand, we don't want to go on the other end of the pendulum and overreact: flip out, tell everybody about it, file for divorce, or put up your home for sale. Don't jump to huge reactions. I recommend a firm response that shows hurt and anger to the degree that you're feeling it without it being abusive. It needs to be a very strong reaction to show that they've been hurt. The hurt shows how much you love your spouse—a loving toughness.

The person that's been involved outside the marriage sometimes needs to be shocked into reality. When they see the look on their spouse's face (the look of horror, pain, sorrow), reality can suddenly hit and shock them out of the bubble they've been in during the affair. It can be very effective. So it's just important to have an honest emotional reaction without going over the top.

Tim: Linda, the response from betrayed spouses who have read your book is often: *That's exactly what I need my partner to do! If they would be attentive to those things I think I would be able to move forward and eventually get through this pain and restore my trust.*

FROM THE BOOK:

“Successful Rebuilders don't evade questions when asked. They don't hide information or spend energy on damage control. They are forthcoming. Honest. Contrite. And, if they do lapse into a cover-up of some kind (usually from the fear of hurting the betrayed spouse), they confess it immediately without waiting to be 'caught' or interrogated. Successful Rebuilders recognize that the painful truth is far less damaging than more lies.”

But not all of them are in a relationship where their spouse is being attentive to those things. Still, many of them want to save their marriage; they don't want to divorce. What do you say to a betrayed spouse who wants their marriage to be restored but looks at the things you've written and says: *My spouse hardly does any of those things. They said they're sorry, but they just want to move on and get back to normal and not talk about this anymore?*

Linda: That is classic. That does happen. Couple of things...

One is, I tell them give their spouse a little bit of time. Sometimes it takes a while for people to pull out of denial. But I sometimes recommend kicking them out. Just saying, "You need to go stay somewhere else for a while, while I think about whether I'm going to stay with you or not." Even if they really want to stay they need to have what I think Bonnie Eaker-Weil, one of those great authors, talked about: giving them *the brush with death*. It's that feeling like they really could lose the spouse.

Sometimes it takes a tough love approach to wake them up if they're lulled into thinking, "She'll get over it." or "We just need to move on; that's old news." No, that can't be acceptable. So that's the first thing I'd tell them: do a tough-love move.

Tim: Do you recommend that even if there's a risk that they'll go back and reconnect with the affair partner?

Linda: Yes, because if they're going to do it, they're going to do it. I don't say to always do that. Sometimes in-home separation can be enough. There just needs to be some sort of consequence that says, "I'm not going to tolerate this. As much as I love you, I'm not going to tolerate this." Otherwise, it leads to co-dependence and doing all the work while the betrayer is doing none or very little. They have to recognize that they have to be tough as much as they don't want to lose the marriage.

I think of an example of a gal I know. She married someone and it was his second marriage. She found out he was an alcoholic so she said, "Look it's me or the alcohol. You either go get treatment or we're done." Now, she didn't want it to be done, but he did go get treatment. So sometimes something that makes a betraying person feel like *I could lose this relationship if I don't do something* needs to be that kind of a consequence.

A family law attorney I once consulted with said to me, "I never see these things work out unless the straying person is totally broken and willing to do whatever it takes to restore the marriage." If the

FROM THE BOOK:

"The most important quality that an unfaithful spouse needs in order to successfully regain their offended partner's trust, is that the betrayer 'gets it.' 'Getting it' means that straying spouses understand the wrongness of their behaviors and the depth of the pain they have caused their spouses. Rebuilders need to effectively renounce their old behaviors and develop a keen sense of what it must be like to be in their partner's shoes."

hurt spouse is not seeing that and they do the tough-love thing and it still doesn't work, then it never was going to work.

Tim: I've seen marriages stay together without that. They sacrifice intimacy and trust but they somehow manage to avoid divorce.

Linda: Well, I just think what quality of relationship do you want? Do you want an honest one? Do you want connection? Or do you want to just live in misery together while you go through the motions?

Tim: You obviously have a passion for helping people find healing and not just recovery. In the way you're talking about it, you obviously want to move them towards the experience of a new kind of marriage based on what they're learning. What is most discouraging to you in the work you do with these couples: And what is the most encouraging?

Linda: The most discouraging is when people are not humble. They feel like they don't have anything to learn, or no need to grow.

I knew a couple. He was totally repentant and totally sorry. Deep down what he wanted was affection from his wife who was starving him out in terms of physical touch. She was critical and because he did this awful thing, she blamed all their problems on his unfaithfulness. She was not willing to grow. She just was so fragile that she had to be the perfect one and he had to be the devil. They didn't make it.

So I get discouraged when I see a lack of humility because both people have something to learn and grow from in a crisis like this.

I also get discouraged when I have a straying partner bring their spouse in for couple's counseling, then I find out what's going on and the unfaithful person disappears. They just dropped their spouse off for me to fix because they were going to leave. That's highly discouraging. So those are the two biggest things, I think.

What encourages me is when people are really wanting to work it out. They have humility and they're willing to stick it out because it takes time. Therapy has to be pretty intense for quite some time. I say, "You won't even know if you're going to make it as a couple for six months," and so I try to lengthen their perspective of how much counseling they're going to need. It's probably going to be a couple years.

FROM THE BOOK:

"Successful Rebuilders realize that the reason for their spouses' current lackluster appeal is usually the betrayer's own fault. They know that their harmful acts—before, during, and after the affair—have demoralized their wounded partners. They accept responsibility for this and recognize that their selfish entanglements have stolen their spouses' sense of security, value, and emotional safety. Rebuilders say to themselves, *No wonder my spouse is moody, tearful, and insecure. I did this to him/her.*"

I love it when a straying partner gets it, when they realize *Oh my gosh, I'm repeating what my dad did* or *I have injured my spouse so much and really can see the pain* and is sorry... so deeply sorry. That just moves me. Sometimes I cry after people leave when I see that kind of humility and recognition on the part of the person who stepped out. I just love seeing the lights come on.

I do get discouraged when betrayed spouses plan to put the white hat on themselves and the black hat on the betrayer for the rest of their lives. That attitude: I'm always the perfect one, you're going to be the bad guy and you're going to pay the rest of your life. Some people are insecure enough that they have to do that in order to feel okay. I get really sad about that because there has to be the idea of eventual forgiveness, eventual repair, where they're not going to be torturing the other person all the time. That doesn't mean they won't have triggers, but they will lessen over time. They both have to be realistic that there will be triggers, but it doesn't have to be this long drawn out torture fest for the rest of their marriage.

Repair is possible if people are willing to do the work. A lot of times, for the person that was the betrayer, there were things that predated the marriage: a parent that was unfaithful or unresolved grief. Many times an affair will happen at a point of strain or stress.

I can't tell you how many times I've had clients come in and the point where he or she decided step out was when a parent died... a parent they had a lot of unresolved issues with. They experience this complex grief like *I'm never going to be able to repair things with my father, I'll never hear I love you, I'll never hear that affirmation that I've longed for my whole life*, and rather than deal with the grief they find an antidepressant by stepping out of the marriage. Then, all of the sudden, "I feel better!" Right? Because they like how they feel with an outside, exciting, secret relationship. What they're really doing is medicating themselves. If they're willing to look at those kinds of things and work through the grief realistically, the repair that was needing to happen can happen.

I like to get to the root of things. What was it that made you vulnerable at this time? And then to teach them how to connect, how to be empathetic, how to become more "emotionally intelligent" and aware of the other person's feelings. The only way they can do that usually is starting with their own feelings. Once they can do that they can connect with their partner. So I just like the idea of repair for the long haul, including whatever factors precipitated the situation.

Tim: Linda, I'm very appreciative not only for what you're doing to help couples but that you've taken part of it and put it out as a resource that has been helpful for me and for many other people, too. Thank you.

Linda: Thank you so much Tim. I really appreciate it. I'm so glad that you have the passion too. The world needs a lot of us, I'm afraid.

Tim: Yes it does, unfortunately.