

Lee: This is Stay Happily Married Episode 201: Help, I'm Married to a Sex Addict!

Announcer: Welcome to Stay Happily Married; your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

Lee: I am Lee Rosen, and I am your host today. Welcome to the show. Is your spouse's behavior a sign of sex addiction? The suspicion may have been mounting for some time now. You find you questioning their comments, their late nights at the office or business trips or perhaps, even the long hours they spend in front of a computer. Infidelity or the suspicion of it can break a marriage. Physically or online, infidelity could be a symptom of an even larger issue; sex addiction.

Our guest today is Dr. Michael Howard. He's the Founding Director of Healing Solutions Counseling Center in Charlotte, North Carolina. Michael is a licensed professional counselor and clinical addictions specialist. Among his long list of qualifications, Michael is a certified sex addiction therapist and supervisor with the International Institute for Trauma and Addiction. He has published two books; "Pathways to Intimacy" and "Intimate Betrayal".

Michael, let's jump right into it. How prevalent is infidelity in relationships today?

Michael: Well, some researchers put infidelity as high as 50%. In one recent study, researchers found that 60% of married men and 40% of married women admitted to having had cheated or having had an affair or some form of infidelity. The difficult aspect of putting a number to infidelity or cheating is that the term is defined very differently from person to person and couple to couple. Regardless of the exact number or percentage however, infidelity is a problem in many relationships today.

Lee: Yeah, it sounds like it. I mean, you are talking about huge percentages of people. What I am wondering is sort of the chicken or the egg question. When you talk about infidelity, is it typically a reaction to the marriage coming undone or something is wrong in the relationship or is it the cause of the relationship falling apart?

Michael: Well, the short answer to that question, Lee, would be yes! Infidelity is often the result of problems in the marriage; the couple is having trouble communicating, they are not spending any time together, they simply are not there for each other physically, emotionally or even spiritually. As a couple spends less time together, they grow apart and often times get to the point of coexisting, feeling more like roommates than spouses or lovers. There is a lack of connection or intimacy in the relationship. At this point it's fragile and vulnerable. When another individual comes along and shows the lonely spouse some attention, affection and even a little intimacy that they have been wanting and desiring and needing, the key elements of the beginning of an affair or some type of betrayal is present.

In other cases though, the marriage may have seemed good, but the discovery of an infidelity, such as an affair, causes the trust to disappear and the couple is left wondering if they can or even want to try to salvage the relationship. I would like to point out that rarely is a relationship truly good when an infidelity takes place. It may seem like it is, but in reality the couple is likely disconnected and simply unable to see the problems or are ignoring them. In some cases, this dynamic may have been going on for months and even years.

Lee: Okay. I see why you answered yes to that question. It makes sense once I hear you elaborate. When you answered the first question, when we talked about how common infidelity is in a marriage, you said that part of the reason it's hard to give a statistic on that is because people define infidelity differently. What is the difference between, let's say, physical infidelity and online infidelity, which we are hearing about so much today?

Michael: That is a great question. Physical infidelity is a betrayal that involves another person in real life. This can be something, such as an affair, even taking another person to lunch or dinner, kissing, fondling or even hugging another person of the opposite sex, again, if the spouse sees that as infidelity. It is important to recognize that infidelity is defined by the individual and ideally the couple. It does not have to involve intercourse or even sexual behavior.

Online infidelity is betrayal that takes place using the Internet or even other forms of communication technology. This may include chatting, texting or sexting as it is called, Internet pornography with or without masturbation, online dating sites or even emails. Online infidelity occurs when a person is interacting with someone typically that he or she has not met outside of the cyber world. Another example of this would be communicating with someone on Facebook or even other social media.

Lee: Wow! So, a very broad definition when you get into this whole online infidelity.

Michael: Definitely.

Lee: What do you look out for? You are an expert on this and you know the signs, I suspect. We all have our different suspicions about one thing or another, but what are the clear markers for infidelity?

Michael: Some common signs, and it is going to a little bit different from case to case, but some common signs include such things as rapid changes in mood, becoming more secretive, disappearing for periods of time. That could be hours or even days, unplanned or sudden trips, business or personal, suddenly taking calls in private, becoming irritable when unable to get online or when the others are around the computer, expensive purchases like clothing and jewelry, increased gasoline consumption, dressing up nicer. Working longer hours, having more business meetings or functions, having to participate in more work projects and unexplained cash decreases or credit card charges are some of the common ones, but there are others as well. I think the person has to look for changes in behavior and follow some of their hunches as well.

Lee: I'm going to be looking at my wife in a whole different way tonight. I am going to be studying everything you have said and I will have my little check list like, "What are you up to, woman?" You are going to make us all suspicious.

Michael: I hope not.

Lee: Now look, you are an expert on sexual addiction and we are talking about infidelity, but give me a sense of where the element of sexual addiction falls in when we are talking about infidelity. What's that all about?

Michael: Okay, well sexual addiction occurs when the individual's sexual behavior is compulsive; it's out of control or where they are simply unable to stop the sexual thoughts, the fantasies and behaviors. Like alcoholism, drug addiction or compulsive gambling, sexual addiction occurs when the sexual behavior, again regardless of what that behavior actually is, where it controls the person instead of he or she controlling it. It is also about the sexual behavior leading to unwanted consequences, such as relationship, financial, legal or even health problems.

Lee: So, how can you tell, if you figure out that your spouse is having an affair, how do you know if that is just an affair or whether that is part of a larger sex addiction?

Michael: Well, the first indication would be if it keeps happening despite consequences or the likelihood of negative consequences. For example, I once had a client who had been having physical affairs for his entire 30 year marriage. His wife had suspected it at various times, but he always had an explanation, and in her mind she really had no reason not to trust him. Another client, he was in his 20s, he had disclosed to me that he had had sex with more than 275 different women and that he had participated in more than 50 group sex scenarios. I also had a female sex addict client that slept with a family friend while her husband was asleep in the other room and then proceeded to have five or six affairs during his six month deployment to Iraq.

In each of these cases, the individual was addicted to sex. It had become compulsive, it was out of control, and they could not stop themselves. A great resource for people wanting to know if they or someone they know or care about is a sex addict is the sexual addiction screening test, which is actually available on the website at www.sexhelp.com. The test is free, it consists of about 45 true/false questions, it can be taken online and it takes about 15 minutes to take. Once the person submits their responses, they get instant results, and that can be very helpful in, at least, identifying whether there may or may not be a problem.

Lee: Okay, so we go to sexhelp.com and take the test.

Michael: Absolutely.

Lee: Fifteen minutes and I will find out if I am a sex addict.

Michael: Well, at least, you will have an indication and the likelihood is you already either feel that you do or do not have a problem, but this allows a layer of validity or allows you to confirm that there may be a problem.

Lee: Okay, so you have got me curious now, how does sex addiction get started? Is that like a genetic thing? Is it something based on your experiences in your life? How does one become a sex addict?

Michael: Another great question. Well, addiction, regardless of the type of addiction is a disease of the brain. What that means is that some people do, in fact, have a genetic predisposition towards a particular substance or behavior that does not become a problem, however, until the person actually engages in that behavior or partakes of that particular substance. Like alcohol and drugs, sex can and does create a high in the form of a feeling of euphoria or pleasure. As the brain experiences the sensation, the brain itself realizes that it feels good and it likes that feeling. The brain then decides it wants more of it, to experience that feeling more often, and as this occurs, the brain continues to tell the body to get or do more of it.

As this happens and the behavior is repeated over a period of time, tolerance develops and a person continues to want more and more and may even decide to shift to other behaviors or different behaviors in an attempt to achieve the same or even bigger high. If the body can't engage in that behavior or to the extent demanded by the brain, the person will experience withdrawal, which can include both psychological and physical symptoms. These symptoms can be so unpleasant that the person will do just about anything to rid themselves of them to satisfy the enormous craving and get the fix that the brain so desperately wants.

Lee: So, do you see other compulsive behaviors in sex addicts that could impact the marriage, the relationship?

Michael: Well, research shows that approximately 45% of sex addicts have other addictions, and this can include alcohol, drugs, gambling, online gaming, food, spending, debting. There is a whole wide variety of different addictions, but it appears that, at least, half or close to half of sex addicts have other addictions.

Lee: That's very interesting. When a spouse discovers infidelity, what are the typical reactions that you see happen? How do people respond when they figure out that their spouse has been sleeping or, I guess, not sleeping but physical or online infidelity? What are the typical reactions that you see?

Michael: The first reaction is usually shock or disbelief. They cannot believe what they have discovered and are actually hoping to find a rational and believable explanation. They hope that it is just one huge dream and that they will soon wake up. This quickly changes into feelings of anger and rage as the spouse fixates on what this person did to them and to their family. They start to fear the loss of the marriage or the relationship.

They are wondering who they can tell. They are embarrassed and ashamed and will usually feel very alone and isolated.

They will also begin to question their own self-image and ability, asking what is wrong with me? Am I not pretty enough, beautiful enough, a good enough lover? They may try desperately and perhaps, even taking on dangerous measures to lose weight or enhance their own looks. They may leave or ask the other person to leave. They may decide they will stay but insist on separate bedrooms. Or in some cases, they may even become excessively sexual with the person and that may be in attempt to win them back or keep them so worn out that they are unlikely to be with someone else. This is not healthy and almost, if not always, fails.

Lee: Right. What do you think when you've got infidelity and you are able to diagnose the unfaithful partner as having a sex addiction, is there anything that can be done to save that marriage, or are you better off just splitting up if you are married to a sex addict?

Michael: I believe that almost all marriages can actually be saved, if that is what the couple actually wants to do. I have seen probably hundreds of couples rebuild their marriage and stay together following the discovery of an infidelity. That does not mean it will be easy and the road to recovery, so to speak, is long and arduous. A couple will first need to find a good therapist with experience with infidelity. If sex addiction is present, the therapist also needs to be experienced, trained and ideally certified in sex addiction. The person who has had the affair or was unfaithful needs to end the affair relationship and any associated or problematic behaviors. If there is an affair partner, that person should not be a part of their life any longer. This, however, gets complicated when it is a work associate or relative.

The couple needs to be in counseling together, and both of them may even need to be in individual counseling as well. Group counseling, particularly for the spouse, can be especially helpful as well. If sex addiction is involved, then group counseling for both is likely to be essential to their success. They both need to learn that they are not alone and begin building awareness of the problem as well as developing practical tools that can help them to begin healing.

Lee: You know, it seems like the people that have committed infidelity in some way; they want to talk about it. Once they get into counseling, my sense is they want to cleanse their conscience and tell what happened. Do you think that the people should reveal the details or should they keep that stuff to themselves?

Michael: Well, secrets are rarely good, but the disclosure process can also be a very traumatic one. To answer your question, I generally believe that disclosure should be complete but that both individuals need to work with therapists familiar with infidelity and addiction as appropriate to prepare them emotionally for the disclosure. Both therapists should be present when the disclosure takes place, and it may take weeks, possibly even months to prepare for this.

The problem with disclosure is that it is extremely traumatic for the spouse hearing the information. If the information is left out and that could even be by accident, and it is discovered later, then the person is essentially being re-traumatized again. The trust is once again destroyed, and they start to doubt whether they can actually trust anything the person says or does.

I would like to also emphasize that the disclosure is a process. The person needs to be prepared for that to occur, and what I have seen in my counseling is that oftentimes a partial disclosure is made and they may even think that they disclosed everything and then a month, a week, even a year later, the spouse finds something else out and it just destroys the relationship.

Lee: Yeah. Well, when you are treating someone that has a sexual addiction and they have been having affairs, what are the odds that they will stop? What are the odds that they are going to have another affair even after they have been going through treatment?

Michael: Well, as with any addiction, relapse is always a possibility. This is what scares most spouses and heavily influences their decision whether to stay and work on the marriage. I tell my clients that you can stay and work on the marriage, spend an enormous time and effort in the process only to have it not work out for a variety of reasons or discover that it isn't worth the sacrifice.

On the other hand, you can stay and work on the marriage and possibly have the most incredible, satisfying, loving marriage that you can imagine. There are no guarantees. Some addicts do relapse. Recovery is a lifelong process. Addiction is treatable, it is not curable. Once an addict always an addict, and recovery is about learning to make healthy decisions and become a healthy person physically, emotionally and spiritually.

A person who is truly in recovery, making the conscious choice to be sober and work a solid program of recovery every day will likely remain sober, provided they are working the program, which although different for each person, includes things such as counseling, group work which could include 12-Step groups such as Sexaholics Anonymous, Sex Addicts Anonymous, talking regularly with his or her sources of support, working with a sponsor, eating healthy foods, sleeping regularly, getting plenty of exercise, enjoying time with friends and family and engaging in productive work and enjoyable hobbies. In essence, Lee, it is about balanced healthy living. If a person is truly doing these things, the likelihood of relapse is minimal.

The other important point is that relapse is not an event. It is a process. It can take hours, days and even weeks to play out. A person that is truly in recovery will recognize small changes in thinking, feelings or behavior and will change course and implement recovery tools to avoid the relapse. A person not in recovery will miss or ignore these things and eventually give in to temptation and then eventually act out.

Lee: So, if you are approached by an individual or a couple that are dealing with a sex addiction situation, they are dealing with some infidelity, tell me what you are going to do, what you are going to recommend, how should these people proceed?

Michael: Well, first be prepared for a long and difficult journey. The emotional ups and downs are significant and will really feel like a roller coaster ride at times, and I'm not talking a fun roller coaster ride. They need to determine who their sources of support are, individually and as a couple. I also tell them to try not to select other couples as individual sources of support as it will make it difficult for that husband and wife as they struggle with remaining neutral.

Find good therapists. Each should have an individual therapist, and they should have a couple therapist as well. I would initially recommend couple counseling every week and individual, at least, twice a month. If an addiction is present, then the individual work will also be weekly, particularly for the addict. It may also be necessary to consider having the addict attend a 60 to 90 day in-patient program, or even a one to two week intensive out-patient program. There is a website for the International Institute for Trauma and Addiction Professionals at www.iitap.com that actually has a list of these programs and therapists.

I also believe that it is important for the partner to get into a group, and if the person that had the infidelity is an addict, they must also be in a group as well. Couples groups are also very good, but I would wait until they are both at a point emotionally where they can tolerate the experience. The individual and/or couple therapist can help guide this decision. At Healing Solutions Counseling Center where I am, we offer an addict recovery group, a partners group, both for infidelity and sex addiction, and a couples group, again, for both infidelity and sex addiction.

If addiction is present, I would expect the person to be attending 12-Step groups, at least, once a week and working with a sponsor probably two to three times a week, and that can be in person, via Skype or by phone. I would also encourage the couple to assess their spiritual life and make changes as appropriate to re-establish or deepen their connection with God. This can include things obviously, such as prayer, scripture study, going to church or Sunday school or other services, small groups and a lot of personal reading and reflection. I also like to see my clients working with their pastor or clergy on spiritual issues and spiritual development.

Couples need to spend time together talking and having fun. They need to start getting to know each other again and essentially allow themselves to fall back in love with one another. They need to learn to reconnect, to forgive and to trust again. These things will be difficult, but it is possible.

Lee: Wow, it does sound difficult, and it doesn't sound impossible, but it does sound like a lot of work. How long are we looking at in order to get this issue behind us? Is there any sense? Can you give us any sense of that?

Michael: Well, if addiction is present, the individual addiction work can and will likely take, at least, a year, possibly much more than that. Couple work will likely take 12 to 18 months, depending again on the presence of an addiction. If an addiction is present, the addict will likely need or want to be in some type of group work, therapy or 12-Step, perhaps for much of the remainder of his or her life. That is simply part of healthy recovery. Individual and couple counseling can then be augmented on an as needed basis, possibly once a month or even every several months. If we are not dealing with an addiction, counseling may be complete in the 12 to 18 month time frame, but it just depends on the issues, the couple's availability and their commitment towards recovery.

It is also worth noting, Lee that with sex addicts trauma is a big part of the problem, and in approximately 75% to 85% of cases there is some form of physical or sexual abuse and trauma from the person's past that also needs to be part of the recovery and part of the counseling process and that takes time to heal.

Lee: Yeah. Well Michael, I really appreciate you taking the time to walk us through all of this today. It is a complex issue, but it does sound like there is a lot of reason to think that it is something that people can work through if they are committed to that. So, thank you for taking the time to talk with us.

Michael: Absolutely, Lee, it has been a pleasure being here.

Lee: To find out more about Dr. Michael Howard and Healing Solutions Counseling Center you can visit their website at www.charlottetherapy.com, I will put a link to that in the show notes. You can also reach their office at 704- 944-5530.

Thanks so much for listening in today. I hope you will join us again next week. In the meantime, if you have any feedback, comments or questions, we would love to hear from you. You can email us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com. You can also call our listener comment line at 919-256-3083. I am Lee Rosen, until next time stay happily married.