

Lee: Can your marriage survive betrayal? This is Stay Happily Married episode number 204.

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: If your partner left you tomorrow, could you survive? You know, I remember back when we were in school, and we had teachers passing along lessons that we could use to manage our lives. Today though, as adults, we really don't have anyone to teach us much of anything. We sort of feel like we figure out things by trial and error. I hope to help you with that a little bit today. Let's talk about betrayal. Some form of intimate betrayal is a common fear among couples, from those who cause the pain to those on the receiving end, couples are unsure of how to battle the betrayal and come out on top. Kathy Cato is our guest today. She's been in private practice in Raleigh, North Carolina, for more than 20 years. She has a website at trivistacounseling.com that you might want to check out. She's helped hundreds of couples work through betrayal in their marriages. Today, Kathy will share her ideas about betrayal and whether it can be overcome. Kathy, welcome to the show.

Kathy: Thanks for having me, Lee.

Lee: This is a tough topic. I know that we hear statistics all the time for things like divorce, but what are the numbers when it comes to things like affairs and adultery?

Kathy: No one really knows, Lee. Attempts to measure it are fraught with difficulty. People are reluctant to admit it, particularly if their partners are present, and the way researchers define it differs the same way that couples define it between themselves differs. It also varies depending on whether we look just at married couples, or at all committed couples. That said, I can tell you some figures. The University of Chicago does an annual survey that they've done for the past 38 or 39 years, and they consistently find that 10% of spouses cheat. Twelve percent of men, and 7% of women; a little more men than women. While we can use that as an informal benchmark, we want to be careful because it would be foolish of us to think we really know the prevalence of sexual infidelity.

Lee: I can't say I'm surprised that the number of men is higher than the number of women, but do you have a theory about why that is? Are there any ideas about why men may be bigger cheaters than women?

Kathy: It may have a lot to do with traditional sex roles. It may also have a lot to do with biology.

Lee: Yeah. Yeah, biology, that might be it.

Kathy: Yes.

Lee: We're talking about betrayal today. I know that we think of betrayal on lots of different levels. It doesn't have to mean adultery. It could be a different kind of betrayal. What are the possibilities here?

Kathy: There's sexual betrayal, which we think of a lot; it's everything from sharing sexual pictures on your phone, to sexting, to emotional affairs, to secret use of pornography, to intercourse. Then there's also financial betrayal, which we see a lot of these days with the economy the way it is. Things like hiding debt, secret credit cards, hiding spending, or sometimes even hiding savings or inheritance from your partner. There are other kinds of infidelity too, like any fact a person may hide about their life. Past abortion is not uncommon with the shame that it tends to carry. An assumed college degree is also not uncommon, things like that. It's not so much what the lie is, Lee, as much as it is the fact that the lie gets found out.

Lee: Wow. If I wasn't worried about betrayal before, I'm certainly worried about it now. Who would have thought there were so many possibilities. It's like, "Huh, what did she say about that?" Let me ask you, are there warning signs when you can tell that maybe, your spouse is on the verge of a betrayal, or tempted by a betrayal?

Kathy: This is everyone's question. We want to manage the risks in our lives. But when we talk about betrayal, Lee, we talk about vulnerability to it. There are things that make couples vulnerable to betrayal of all kinds. The most common is neglect of the relationship. They may have drifted apart, living more like either congenial, or even worse yet, warring roommates, than like best friends or lovers. We call the betrayer the participating partner. It's not uncommon for that person, the participating partner, to have personal issues that make them vulnerable to this kind of thing. Things like a wounded self-esteem, or even chemical abuse to manage extreme stress.

The problem for couples is that the time before the betrayal, they were not aware that these things were a problem. They may convince themselves not to notice these things, or to adjust and accept these things. But these things were happening below their level of alarm. They can't look back and say they could have known, or should have known. They simply weren't aware. What we do with recovery work is we try to raise their level of awareness about these things, so that they can have some notion of what needs to be true for them in the future as a couple, which contributes to their sense of safety coming out of a betrayal.

Lee: Right. That makes a lot of sense. Now, you're sitting in the room with couples, one of whom has been betrayed. What's that like? What's the reaction that you see coming out of that spouse who has been betrayed?

Kathy: The most common, and I think the one we're most familiar with, is anger. But couples are really poorly equipped to respond to this kind of thing within their relationship. It is a traumatic event. No one ever pulls us aside in high school. They may teach us how to balance a check book, but they don't teach us how to manage upset in relationships, and this is a big one. For most couples, it's a lot like walking in the dark. They have no idea how to manage what's happened.

Lee: Wow. How do you see people taking it in and digesting it as they absorb what actually happened?

Kathy: I liken intimate betrayal to something traumatic and horrible, like a home invasion. Imagine you're safe at home in bed at night, Lee, when a couple of people with guns break into the house. They're wearing hoodies and they have guns. They tie you and your spouse to chairs and they rob you. They take all her grandmother's jewelry and all your granddad's World War II artifacts. Afterwards, when the police leave and things seem to return to normal a little bit, there are predictable things most people would do. Because it's an extraordinary unanticipated event, most people feel traumatized. The emotional response to trauma is typically numbness, blunting, which is a feeling like, "I don't feel anything, I just feel kind of dead inside," depression, which is sadness, crying, upset and anger. We can have intense rage about being violated that way. It would be understandable to wonder if your neighborhood had ever been as safe as you thought it was. Did you make a mistake buying this house in this area? We thought this was a safe neighborhood. You might also install a burglar alarm or flood lights, and think about moving. Each night before you went to bed you might check the locks, to make sure all the doors and windows are secure. If you're out shopping one day, and you have your grocery cart in front of you, and you look down the aisle and see someone in a hoodie, you might have a panic response. We wouldn't consider any of this abnormal in the light of the trauma of a home invasion. Everyone understands that this is traumatic for us.

Intimate betrayal is experienced in much the same way, and that analogy helps us understand a lot about what happens to us when this happens. It's a trauma, so the emotional responses are similar and can include numbness, blunting, depression, and lots of anger. People often wonder who their partner really is, and how they could have misjudged them so badly. They may wonder if any of the love they thought they had or felt in the relationship from their partner was ever really real. The burglar alarm and window checking might take the form of frequent checking on the spouse, looking at phone records, emails, things like that. The person in the hoodie might be anything that triggers a feeling in the non-participating partner of "Oh my gosh, oh no, this is happening again." It might be a business trip, the sight of a city in which the infidelity occurred, being able to reach the participating partner on the telephone or email, could be a song on the radio. Lots of things may trigger a panic response.

Lee: That's really interesting. I will tell you that I'm just imagining what my first response would be. I think what I would do is almost instinctively say 'I'm out of here. I'm out the door, and I'm gone.' Why isn't that the first response?

Kathy: Lee, everybody thinks that's what they would do. I'll tell you, a lot of people feel stupid or foolish, like a patsy or a doormat, when they decide to stay, but deciding to stay is an honorable decision. You have built a life with this other person. You didn't do that not investing anything of yourself; you have a significant emotional, logistical, and life investment in this person. People have a very tender memory of the connection that they once felt with that person, and they want it back. When we stand on the outside and look in, it is easy for us to say, "Well, I would just leave if someone did that to me," but the reality of it happening to you with your intimate partner who you share these tender memories with is a different ball game.

Lee: Very interesting. I think we see the person who was betrayed as the victim. That's usually the way that most of us respond to that person. But you see the betrayer as someone who is struggling as well. Give me a little bit of insight into what it is that they're trying to manage? What's that struggle about?

Kathy: It's easy to see the non-participating partner as traumatized by the betrayal. That's easy for us to do. Your partner betrayed you and you feel traumatized, obviously. But the participating partner is traumatized, too. Most of us have had the experience at one time or another in our lives of letting down someone we love. Imagine turning that up to the volume of ten. It's a horrible experience to betray someone who's counting on you and loves you. It's a horrible experience. Although it isn't abnormal for the participating partner to want the non-participating partner to get over it fast, like we all do when we make mistakes, and put it in the past and let it go, it's really counterproductive to expect the non-

participating partner to get over this any more quickly than they get over it. It is a traumatic experience. It's a horrible way to feel about yourself; that sense of having let down someone who's counting on you and loves you.

Lee: Is it possible to get back to the way it was before the betrayal? Once you've broken the trust like that, can you ever get back to what you had before?

Kathy: I'll tell you, Lee, the simple answer to that is that you can do better than that. If we do our work together well, the events that led this couple to seek help can also lead them to a stronger relationship. They can help each other feel understood, valued, respected, safe, trusted again, and special in a way that they may have been neglecting to do, even before the betrayal. They can develop a deeper understanding than they ever had before, and an acceptance of each other that they lacked in the past, and a much more balanced view of the relationship and human nature. It can be not only a growth experience for the couple together, but it can be a personal growth experience to have everything I thought I knew be shaken up and turned upside down like a snow globe.

Lee: OK, I buy that. I can see where you're going with that. As hard as that would be to achieve, I can visualize where it does bring you closer instead of destroying the relationship. Let me ask you this. I know a lot of couples that try to talk through, and try to work it out, can they do that on their own? Is that a possibility?

Kathy: Everything is always a possibility, but I would tell you this: nobody ever pulled us aside and taught us how to do this, and this is an overwhelmingly traumatic event that happens to people. Lots of couples multiply the damage that's already been done by the betrayal by the way they respond to the crisis of it. Sometimes, a poor response will lead to a relationship dissolution that wasn't initially the goal of either partner. Couples can wear each other out talking endlessly about what happened, and the non-participating partner can have questions that at some point become just like harassment to the participating partner. They often wonder why this hasn't help them recover; this going back and forth and getting more details, more information, and trying to figure out "How could you do this, what were you thinking?" They often miss the healing presence of remorse and falsely believe the additional information about the betrayal, like where did it happen, when did it happen, did it happen on this day, did it happen here, that that stuff will help them heal, and it really isn't going to help them heal. Couples can do a lot of damage. They can either become defensive about it, or they can become kind of sneeringly contemptuous about it, and it's exceedingly difficult to try and navigate that by yourself. No matter who you turn to for outside help, and a lot of people, if you have a close family you might be able to turn to a relative who can help you stop vilifying your partner and take a closer look at this, or you

may be able to turn to clergy, or you may be able to turn to a counselor, or you may have a really good friend with a really level head who may help you work through it, but most of the time people don't get a lot of support staying.

Lee: Yeah, that seems to be the reality. Most of us just don't have the skills to have those conversations. You're describing exactly what I've seen happen with friends over and over again. What can be done? How can someone really navigate the situation if this ever happens?

Kathy: The first thing I would tell them is get some help. Turn to somebody. It can be a relative that you trust, again, a clergy member, it can be someone in your family, a dear friend, someone with a level head who's not going to tell you to get the heck out of there and leave. Somebody with a little bit more on their shoulders than that. The first thing I do with couples is I tell them to get that help and to stop attempting to process the betrayal themselves. It's too overwhelming for the two of them. They can't help each other. I explain the concept of doing further damage. Further damage would be if I try to get you to help me, or I try to tell you I'm sorry, and you respond with some kind of contempt. We've just made everything a step worse with that response. What I try to do is get couples to stop making it worse. I instruct them to immediately stop doing the further damage by dealing with it only in the presence of that supportive other person. If they have trouble doing that we meet a little more often until they can manage it. If they can only go three days without doing damage, then we meet every three days. Try to get them between those meetings without doing damage in between. Once they've stopped trying to solve it at home, they usually report a lot of relief from being able to take a break from dealing with it and just doing something like, make a spaghetti. It's a relief to couples that they don't have to deal with this 24/7 anymore. In our meetings I work with them on recognizing that they've been through a trauma like the example I gave you earlier of the home invasion, what their feelings and symptoms are, that it's not abnormal for them to be reacting the way they are.

Lee: Right. It sounds like, at least initially, you're trying to help them get over that initial sting, all of that hurt. Where do you go next? What's next?

Kathy: Yes. It's crisis management initially, a little bit. The injured partner learns how to express the depth of their hurt without re-traumatizing the participating partner. We do a lot of work on how we talk to them about what this was like for us and making ourselves acknowledge their remorse because their remorse is important in our healing. Once that initial work is done and things have calmed down, there's less emotional triggering and less overwhelming. At that point we start working on understanding the context without excusing the betrayal or blaming the non-participating partner. We work to identify ways to return them to a sense of emotional security or safety. The participating

partner's going to learn to understand the injured partner's need for information, which may be rubbing them really the wrong way. The injured partner's going to learn to let go of checking things and get their needs met with affirmation and reassurance instead. That's a huge part of our initial work.

Lee: OK. That sounds good, and I can see light at the end of the tunnel. Let's say you've been working with a couple, and you really have gotten them on track. A couple of years pass and the marriage is thriving, but one night it's date night, it's Friday night, and they go out to the movies. The movie they sit down to see is a story of one spouse betraying the other.

Kathy: Sure.

Lee: Gosh, doesn't that bring it all back?

Kathy: It sure can. Once you identify with that, you're always going to identify with that. The difference becomes, with healing, I may feel those sad, hurt feelings as you and I are sitting there and watching that movie, Lee, the difference is going to be instead of that making me feel angry at you, it makes me turn to you. You now know that what I need is for you to put your arm around me and hold my hand, and let me know that I'm not alone in knowing that this applies to us.

Lee: That sounds terrific. That really does. It gives us all hope for the possibility of surviving. Kathy, we've covered a lot of ground today. Is there anything else you can share with us to enlighten us on surviving betrayal?

Kathy: I would tell you that betrayal is like any other traumatic event in this life. Twelve step groups call them opportunities for spiritual growth. We say that with a little bit of anger sometimes when the things we're going through are so tough, but a betrayal really can lead a couple to a stronger relationship. It doesn't mean a relationship has to end. As overwhelming as it is in the initial stages, it is normal to feel like I can never get past this. That doesn't make it true.

Lee: Right. Terrific final words there for folks, I really appreciate that. Kathy, thank you so much for talking with us today and for being on the show.

Kathy: Thank you for having me, Lee.

Lee: To find out more about Kathy Cato and her practice, you can visit her website at trivistacounseling.com. I'll put a link to that in the show notes. The office number is 919-710-7145. You'll also find some really interesting information about a program that Kathy leads called The Holding Hands Program. The website for that is holdinghandsprogram.com. Thank you so much for joining us today, I hope you will join us again next week. In the meantime, we'd love to hear from you. To give us any feedback at all, you can reach our comment line at 919-256-3083, or you can email us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com. I'm Lee Rosen, until next time, stay happily married.

Announcer: Thank you for joining us today on Stay Happily Married. If you'd like more information, please visit us on the web at stayhappilymarried.com. We would love to hear your feedback or comments. Please email us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com or call us at 919-256-3083. Until next time, best wishes.