

I grew up a pastor's son in a good Christian home but where sex was rarely discussed beyond abstinence. One of my father's favorite sayings was that "you can't hold hands and repeat the 23rd Psalms," emphasizing that wants and desires would be kindled. The culture of silence did not quench my curiosity. Instead, I took it as a message to explore sexuality in secret - first with myself and then others, anyone willing or that could be coerced, male or female, since I did not know better at that time. When I reached high school, I was quite promiscuous, going from one girlfriend to another. The seed of sexual brokenness continued to grow through my college years, evolving to include porn, casual sex and anonymous encounters and behaviors.

Even after sincerely accepting Jesus Christ into my life, the pattern continued and escalated. The difference is that I now felt immense guilt, shame and condemnation. I eventually became an ordained minister and have been in ministry for 25 years, including almost 10 years as a pastor and senior leader within the church organization to which we belonged.

Through that time, I did the very thing I learned in my pre-adolescence...present a good public image, while keeping my sexual life secret. I wanted to stop, tried to stop repeatedly...prayed, pleaded with God, made countless promises and commitments. You name it, I did it. The primary problem is that I longed for freedom the same way I experienced addiction - in secret. I needed to keep up the polished public image. Second, I did not want to acknowledge that I could not do it alone. I was used to setting my mind to accomplish a thing and succeeding. This was humbling, even humiliating.

As commonly believed by those trapped in sexual addiction, I was convinced that marriage would be the cure. While dating, I shared some of my sexual struggles with Renee, downplaying the severity and presenting them as mostly past-tense. We have been married now for almost 14 years, and my wife has suffered tremendously from day one. For example, shortly after marriage, she caught me watching porn on my computer at the office, when we were preparing to launch a business.

Our marriage has been filled with partial disclosures. Each time, I told just enough and did just enough to move on beyond the immediate incident, while working diligently to keep my public image intact. I placed Renee in the unfathomable predicament to shake off her pain, put on a good public image (like I did), and keep my secrets for the sake of the church and ministry. Meanwhile, my behavior damaged everyone in our household, including our daughter who is now in college, where the relationship is only now starting to be restored. Renee and I separated multiple times at her request with primarily our family knowing. But, regardless of the consequences, my behavior continued, because I wanted to do it on my own, my way.

In 2017, we reached out to Renee's former pastor for help. He and his wife began counseling us, which included various readings and assignments, and introduced us to the Conquer Series. Since there were no in-person Conquer Series groups in our area, I joined an online group in January 2018, which eventually transitioned to Seven Pillars,

reaching the final pillar on full disclosure in December 2019. After inquiring about someone who could help my wife and I with disclosure, my group leader recommended Tom.

Through most of this process, my wife did not have much assistance or support. Her trauma from my continual betrayal was almost inadvertently dismissed, even by those in our lives. I am eternally grateful and amazed at Renee's decision to stay with me through all I put her through. She is emphatic that it was only God that brought her through and helped her realize a bigger purpose in it all. That was her hope!

In January 2020, we met Tom and Michele for the first time via Zoom. Tom walked with me through the process of writing my full disclosure, covering my childhood through the current point in our marriage. Michele began working with Renee to prepare her for disclosure and be the support she did not have previously. Although we lived in Mississippi, we decided to drive to Maryland for the disclosure process in person the first weekend in February, disclosure on Saturday and polygraph on Sunday. It was a gut-wrenching process but also such a relief to finally have the full truth out. I remember being in tears the Saturday prior, discussing the coming weekend with Renee, explaining that for the first time, I would have been honest about everything. Passing the polygraph and receiving a report that verified that honesty was priceless. Yet, it was absolutely devastating for my wife. Thank God for Michele, who consoled her through it all. Renee expressed that she only knew about one fourth of the things that I shared during disclosure. I finally had to accept a truth that she often stated...that our marriage was built upon a lie.

I joined Tom's Monday night Recovery Zone group, and my wife started working with Michele, first attending a few of her support group meetings and then joining her Betrayal and Beyond group, before needing to step away because of scheduling. She is still working through the workbook and communicating with the ladies from the group. Renee also facilitates an in-person biweekly women's group, but not specific to recovery from betrayal. Together, we meet regularly with Tom and Michele by Zoom to work on rebuilding our marriage post-disclosure, which just reduced from weekly to biweekly. Woo-Hoo!

We still have a ways to go on this journey, but God has already done a miraculously work in our individual lives and marriage. If there is one thing I could say to men (or women) who struggle, you can't do this alone. Don't make the mistake I did and suffer needless collateral damage. Break the secrecy and isolation by joining a group. The biggest lesson for me is that true healing takes place in community.

Derek and Renee Harris