

Married With Benefits

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Episode 7: How Can I Restore Trust After Pornography or an Affair?

Guest: Dr. Michael Sytsma

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Brian: From the Podcast Network at FamilyLife®, I'm Brian Goins, host of *Married With Benefits* where we want to help you love the one you're with and experience the real benefits that come with saying, "I do."

Well this season Shaunti Feldhahn has been offering some great research-based straight talk answers from all the top questions we've been getting from real husbands out there.

Shaunti: I love it. I love it.

Brian: It's been great, and it has been good to be with you on each one of these. Last episode, as you remember / as you recall, we started a conversation trying to answer the question: What do I do if my wife doesn't trust me anymore?

Shaunti: Yes, it's a big one.

Brian: I thought you and Ann—Ann Wilson—gave some great wisdom on how to begin rebuilding trust once it's been broken, whether it's through simple neglect; whether it's been broken through workaholism; whether it's been broken through pornography. We definitely wanted to revisit that last topic because it's one you can't just sugar coat. You can't just give pat answers to.

There's a lot of guys / there's a lot of couples trying to restore after sexual brokenness, after an affair, after pornography. In fact, at our Weekends to Remember—FamilyLife puts on Weekends to Remember—that is the number one prayer request that we get.

Shaunti: Wow.

Brian: So, all weekend long we have our prayer team that is out there and they're praying, and couples are writing in. So we have about 60,000 people that are coming to these events and the number one prayer request is: How do I overcome an affair?—or infidelity?—or just broken trust?

So we know it's a big issue, and before we jump in I wanted to remind our audience, especially the wives who are listening—we know you're out there—but we featured one episode last season titled "How could my good man even be tempted by porn?" And

you can hear that episode at FamilyLife.com/MWB. Because I think it is—you do a really great job at just highlighting that he's not evil because he's looked at pornography.

Shaunti: Yes. Well and it's also—we're going to be talking, at this point, to the husbands helping them understand the gravity of this, how to come back from it, there is hope, here's a way to do it. But one of the key things that we have seen over the years is that it is absolutely essential if a couple is going to come back from this, it's essential that a wife understand where some of this temptation comes from and how is it that a man could even be tempted by porn.

And in this society to be able to understand that without excusing it, it does bring to some degree or another a sense of understanding and compassion that can also be very strong. Like "You need to get help with this," but without beating him over the head and making him feel like it's absolutely impossible so why try.

Brian: Right. Shame is never been one of those things that brings you closer together.

Shaunti: That's a great way of putting it.

Brian: And being a team that we want—FamilyLife wants to help drive you together in a world that's pulling you apart. Probably nothing pulls couples more apart when it comes to sexual brokenness and sin.

So that's why I'm so excited to be joined by Dr. Michael Sytsma who is a licensed Christian counselor with a pastor's heart and has a specialty in helping couples deal with this issue. I just found out it's okay to call you Dr. Mike.

Dr. Mike: Yes, thank you. Thanks for allowing me to be here. I appreciate it.

Brian: Well we are so glad that you're on our program. Just tell our audience a little bit about what you do and what's your day job look like.

Dr. Mike: I am a, as you said, licensed professional counselor. I am a certified sex therapist and I'm an ordained minister, so I pastored for quite a while before falling in love with marriage as a—kind of as a discipleship tool.

So, my week looks like couples sitting in front of me and kind of working them through whatever it takes to help them to grow more intimate in their relationship. Probably 70–75% of my casework is post affair work.

Brian: Wow!

Dr. Mike: Roughly 20% is working with some kind of sexual issue. Often, it's sexual addiction or sexual dysfunction. Then about 10% is high conflict marriages and then a few enrichment that are thrown in. So, this is right in line with what I do every day.

Brian: Man! That sounds like a busy like year / life. That's just huge.

Shaunti: Wow. I just listen to Dr. Mike and I'm like: Thank God! God called him to do that because I would not be able to handle that.

Brian: Yes, and Dr. Mike, have you seen / have you noticed that maybe even in the past decade, do you feel like these cases have increased?

Dr. Mike: Well actually the research tells us that number of affairs is decreasing in especially younger men. It's increasing in younger women to where they're both running around. 18-19% of young married couples are having affairs which is down dramatically from those in my generation. My age where it was over 30% of the guys were and about half that for women.

We've got lots of theories on why that shift is occurring. Some of it is decrease in the marital contract. People are not getting married quite as quickly so it's not reported as an affair. So, there are some of those things, but we do see a decrease in it now. We do see a shift in clinical offices in the number of couples coming in where the wife is having an affair. We also see them shifting a little bit more because women have a bit more power in relationships.

Shaunti: Oh, interesting.

Dr. Mike: So, we will see husbands are a little more desperate now than they used to be 10/15 years ago or 20 years ago especially.

Shaunti: Well that's interesting because it is sort of in line with some of the stuff that we're talking about today. Because sometimes one of the reasons a husband is desperate is *because* there has been sort of a realization that wait my marriage is falling apart and I didn't realize it. This is clearly the lack of trust and having broken trust.

We're going to specifically talk today about when it's the husband who's had the affair or the pornography addiction. I'd really love to be able to dive in to some of the key pieces of the puzzle, Dr. Mike.

Dr. Mike: Sure.

Shaunti: I mean give an overview. If you're talking to a husband—they're sitting there in front of you just like they're listening to us right now as we're talking—what are the very first things you tell, those very crucial words out of your mouth, when you know that trust has been broken?

Dr. Mike: The mantra I want them to begin to own and to claim is I bought this. Whatever is going on in my marriage, whatever pain that I'm seeing, whatever pain she's expressing, whatever anger, whatever sadness, I bought this. Whether I believe that the cost that I'm paying is right or not, it doesn't really matter. I bought this with my behavior.

So that's the first thing that I'd want them to grab a hold of. Whatever the damage is that she's expressing and however she's expressing it to just accept it for what it is. Even if you think she's overreacting / if he thinks it's not as big, I bought this.

Shaunti: Let's talk about that overreaction thing—that impression that some men have—that "I don't know—"

Brian: It's not that big.

Shaunti: Yes.

Brian: And I think it's fair to say that people view porn differently than affairs. So maybe we tackle that first—

Shaunti: Let's tackle that first.

Brian: —because I think that's probably where a lot of guys might feel that sense of over—like "She's overreacting. It's not that big of a deal. Everybody else is looking at it."

In fact, James our audio engineer was just telling us about how Vicki Courtney was saying that in Gen Z that porn is not considered as high of a problem in marriages. That it's not counted as much of a big deal. There's more acceptance about it. Do you find that to be true?

Dr. Mike: Well our culture's increasingly sexualized and sexual images are just a part of it. So younger generations have grown up in a culture where you can't flip on Netflix and look at a show without seeing full frontal nudity.

So, there's a desensitization to it. There's just an acceptance of it. It used to be—like for me, my first exposure to pornography wasn't until I was almost 20 years old. Where today's kids we know that almost all of them are seeing porn by the time they are five/six years old. So, it's just a part of their life. It's a part of their culture so there is less impact from it.

Shaunti: So what do you tell the average husband I don't know if you hear this in your counseling office but I know that there are probably some men out there who are listening to this and going look I'm trying to fight this. I feel guilty. My relationship with the Lord—kind of I feel like God keep poking me at this; that this is an issue. But my wife knows it doesn't have anything to do with her. What do you tell the average

husband who has kind of that mind set, and any men who might be listening, about why this is a big deal?

Dr. Mike: Let me back up. For some couples, it's not a huge deal. For some wives, it's not a huge deal. For some husbands it's a bigger deal than for the wife is. So, each couple needs to—I invite them to sit down and talk through what does it mean for them and then do some research on what we are learning in the field as far as the impact is of it.

But for him, his job—what he committed to—he stood at an altar and covenanted to care for his wife's heart. And if her heart is wounded by it, I don't know that it needs to matter whether *he* thinks it's damaging or not. It is damaging to her. If she wants to do some work to make it less damaging, that's up to her, but to accept that's where she's at.

Brian: So, what I hear you saying with that is it's like regardless of what her reaction is, if it's overreaction in his mind, it doesn't really matter. His opinion's almost irrelevant. It's like: What is her heart saying?

Dr. Mike: It's relevant but I don't know that it's horribly helpful at this stage in the process.

Brian: There you go.

Shaunti: Oh, there you go. Okay.

Dr. Mike: Because the trust is so wounded, she almost needs to overreact. I started my career in working with drug addicts and alcoholics, and the concept of denial is huge in working with them.

Denial is where we lie to ourselves and other people get to hear the lie. Many times these husbands are lying to themselves about the impact that it has to them and their wife is hearing the lies.

He needs to understand that he's likely in denial and he's doing some minimization which makes her traumatized reaction seem that much more grand, and the reality is probably somewhere in the middle. Him telling her to join him is not a good plan at this stage.

Shaunti: Yes, exactly. Talk about minimizing or deflecting; that's a big one.

Brian: Right.

Dr. Mike: Right.

Shaunti: Well one of the things that—as you probably know, Dr. Mike—you know some of the events that Jeff and I do—we do marriage conferences—and we’ll have couples come up to us at the book table. Often, there’s a wife that’s pretty traumatized by this and the husband is kind of scratching his head going “Yeah, I’m trying to not do this but it’s not that big of a deal.”

One of the things we always try to help men understand—which I just want to jump in here on behalf of all of the spies listening in. That’s what we call the women who are listening to this podcast. [Laughter]

On behalf of all the spies who are going “Wait a minute,” the key here is that most of the time when a woman is sort of normally traumatized—I’m not talking about the people who are way off on the end but the normal trauma from finding out that your husband is looking at porn is the feeling that: that means I’m not enough.

That means that I’m not enough for him and one of the things that we were telling men in an earlier episode is that all of those visual images that are out there that are tempting you as a man—you know where you turn on Netflix and you see full frontal nudity, right? We know we don’t look like that, right? We don’t look like those actresses and we think now that you’re looking at this in secret, that’s what you want and it can be incredibly demoralizing for a woman—just from an emotional perspective not even a broken trust perspective.

Brian: Right.

Dr. Mike: Add to that, many men—and I’m going to be really stereotypical here and there’s going to be a lot of variation between men and women, but many men have the ability in their brains to truly compartmentalize sex and making love with their wife, looking at pornography as recreation, and adoring their wife’s bodies.

Because of the beauty of how women’s brains are designed, many women / most women in my experience, don’t have that separation and they’re more wholistic in how they view sexuality. So, if he is engaging in sexual recreation is how he would see it, she doesn’t see it as sexual recreation. She sees it as a wound to the core of their relationship. I think there’s good in her view of it that way and can he lean in and understand that whether he believes it is or not, it is wounding the core of their relationship.

Brian: I think that’s a great segue into the whole verse behind this series, Dr. Mike, has been from 1 Peter 3:7 which is live with your wives in an understanding way. So how can I understand how my wife is viewing sexuality? How can I understand how my wife is viewing herself and how much that plays into my relationship?

I also want to pause and just say you know we’re putting this at a place where the couple has come to a place where the husband has admitted, or she has found out.

Especially in the cases of he's admitted, we should applaud the man for the courage to come out. Let that what's been in darkness come out into the light—

Shaunti: Come out into the light, yes.

Brian: —and say that is one of the most courageous things he can do knowing that: Okay, now she's got to start processing. This is when her story begins and it's not going to always be easy. She's probably going to react in a way that's going to make him feel shame feel hurt feel pain.

So, talk to us about that Dr. Mike. How could a husband—you know the first point you said was just to say "Hey, I bought this." And then I think you were going to go on and talk a little bit about: Where does he go next?

Dr. Mike: Let me address that; just a minute. I do agree there is huge courage in it, but many times guys will hear a podcast or message or something like this and just feel the guilt of what they've been carrying sometimes for their whole life. I mean this is a story they know well, and they go home and they kind of throw up all over their wife.

Brian: Wow; good point.

Dr. Mike: They feel much better because now it's out and she's standing there covered. She doesn't know what to do with it because she didn't know it was there.

So, I encourage couples to get some help. Talk to a marriage therapist or a pastor who's good at this that can help them do containment with it, help her to hear the story, help him to tell the story well. We know how to help people do this to minimize the trauma and the damage.

Shaunti: So are you saying, for example, let's say we have a man listening who has felt guilty about this for years / who recognizes that this is really important that he come and bring this out into the light. He's listening—

Dr. Mike: and I would agree with that.

Shaunti: —and he's listening and he's going "Okay, so I shouldn't walk home tonight and go into the kitchen and say 'Honey, I have something to tell you.'" So, what you're suggesting, I think I'm hearing, is first maybe he should talk to a pastor or counselor about *how* I do this.

Dr. Mike: Have somebody that can be the in between with them because the story is very likely going to be too overwhelming for her, and somebody that helps her to hear it, somebody that helps him to sort through what needs to be shared and what doesn't early in the process. Many times—while I believe strongly in transparency that the

whole story needs to be told for a complete healing to happen. That doesn't mean that it's all pulled that first time that they begin to tell the story.

Brian: That's good.

Dr. Mike: And somebody that helps them to pace it so that she can absorb it rather than it just overwhelming and crushing her.

Brian: Yes, because as much as the guy will feel good it's because a massive weight has been taken off his chest—

Dr. Mike: Right. Right.

Brian: —and now he just threw that weight on her. I'm just picturing a guy lifting—you know, doing a bench press and then he hands it to his wife and says "Here honey, can you hold this now for a while for me? Because I've been holding it for a long time."

Dr. Mike: Except it's toxic. It's icky. It's not only crushing her, but it is eating at her soul.

Brian: Wow.

Shaunti: Yes.

Brian: I think this is something that goes—and as speaking at events—I know you guys all do this—we often lead guys to this place where they're ready to confess and we probably don't do a great job of going "Okay, how do I handle that confession?"

Because it's true that it says in James: Confess your sins one to another and you will be healed. But maybe that first person you confess to isn't your wife. Maybe it's a pastor or a counselor that can go "Okay, how do we then talk about this?" Because it goes back to all the verses in Proverbs about—

Shaunti: Right.

Brian: —with many wise counselors your plans will succeed. So, I think this is great advice, Dr. Mike, about: Okay, even before you start going down this thing of rebuilding trust, bring an ally into it.

Shaunti: There's a pre step.

Brian: Yes, to help you do this.

Dr. Mike: Now when they begin the process, the first thing I'm looking for is: Is there a spirit of contrition, a spirit of humility, a spirit of penitence? Contrition is when we approach something filled with a sense of guilt along with a desire for atonement.

So, we're really truly saying "Man, I bought this, and I broke something that is really important." I look at the wives and I say—and I know this is the husbands, but I look at the wives and I say "He didn't intend to break it as badly as he did. He has a better heart than that. He's a better guy than that and it may be tough to see that right now, but he is."

But then I look at him and say, "But dude, you broke it big time and you've got to own that." If he can be always in that state of contrition / in that state of humility, her trust will build much faster because she'll see him as much safer. If he goes into the: "You need to be over this. I've apologized. It's done," that really keeps it in an unsafe place and her trust can't grow well. So "I bought this" and follow that with a strong sense of contrition.

Shaunti: So now, let's just say that they've gone through those steps, right. Hopefully, they've gotten a little help with the confession—figured out how to do that well. Hopefully, "I bought this." The guy does have that sense of truly being so sorry for what he's done to his wife's heart.

What are the next couple of steps? What is the next step for ultimately circling the two as a team and bringing them back to a place where she feels like trust has been restored?

Dr. Mike: I tell couples that at this stage we've got to reverse the pattern. This damage happened within a particular pattern in the relationship. Almost always the husband is hiding a part of his life. He's hiding this acting out behavior. Whether it's hiding the affair / whether it's hiding the pornography, he's hiding something, and he has to choose to be transparent and that transparency is the opposite of what was happening in the past.

I tell them you have to be over the top in your honesty because there's a sense to where there is no trust for what you say and your wife is probably revisiting the entire relationship and wondering what is and is not true in it.

Shaunti: Yes.

Dr. Mike: So, letting her know that everything is true except this piece. I tell them if you go to the store/the grocery store and you tell her you're going to the grocery store but then you need to drop by the drugstore on the way home, that's not okay. Text her and say "Hey, they didn't have it at the grocery store. I'm going to swing by the drugstore instead."

In a healthy marriage that level of transparency is not needed but when the trust has been so wounded and is fragile, that overdoing the transparency is a good plan until she says "I don't need that level anymore. We're good."

Brian: Stop texting me. [Laughter]

Dr. Mike: Yes, and at that point he's been freed to not be—but see what he's doing is reversing the pattern. Before she found out, he was hiding stuff from her and he wasn't really checking in with her. Now he takes responsibility for it.

One of the big things I see husbands do is: “Well I told her. I'm going to step back and see what happens and she'll bring it to me if she's having a bad day.” I look at him and say “No, do not do that. Check in with her daily. How are you doing today? Anything I can do today to help build the trust? How's your fear today? How's your anger today?”

Whatever question makes sense for the relationship. That he's saying “I care about you. It's not all about me. I care about you and yes, you're going to get angry at times. I bought this. I'll absorb that. You'll be sad sometimes and I'll comfort you and tell you I choose you.”

He's regularly checking in with her and that speaks care until she says “I don't need you to do this anymore. I know you care for me.” Then he's kind of released from it and he can slowly step that back. But to begin with, he's got to do a complete 180 in reversing the pattern of it.

Shaunti: That's so good.

Brian: I like that image, too, of just reversing the pattern and it strikes me that we—you know we like to use that passage in Matthew about how much we forgive: 70 times seven, and we tend to put that on the person who was offended.

But in reality, what if we started thinking more about: Hey, in order for them to forgive me, I have to apologize. It's almost like a preemptive apology that I'm doing and saying “I'm going to help her diagnose where she's at. I'm going to ask those questions: How are you doing? Are you angry today? Is there anything I can do to rebuild trust?”

It's giving her the opportunity to keep that forgiveness going.

Shaunti: I loved the way, Dr. Mike, the way you put it as over the top honesty and over the top efforts to rebuild trust, which is sort of, I think, all of a piece of the guy realizing just how big of a deal this is and not minimizing the time. I'm assuming this takes time—not minimizing the time that this takes and not letting himself get exasperated.

Brian: Right.

Dr. Mike: If he does, I look at him and say “Dude, you're not understanding the damage that you did because you have no right to stand and tell her how to be something. You gave that up in this behavior.”

Shaunti: Ooh, that's good.

Dr. Mike: So, helping them to really own it with that that strong contrition.

Brian: Do you often call guys dude in counseling because I think if I were called a dude in counseling, I'd listen up. [Laughter] That's why I like Dr. Mike.

Shaunti: I really, really like that.

Brian: Dude, you need to—anybody that can throw that in counseling, I'm going to listen, so I appreciate that, Dr. Mike.

Dr. Mike: It helps that the guys that come to see me are really, really good guys. They have good hearts. They want to love their wives well. They're just—they made a stupid sinful choice that snowballed on them.

You know sin lied to them and said it wouldn't be a big deal. Sin lied to them and said it's not going to cause much damage. Sin lied to them and said you'll be able to hide it. Then they find out that sin lied, but they're good guys at the core. So, I believe in them and the challenge is to help their wives get back to that.

Brian: I hear the hope in all of that and I just want to remind just all of us right now, almost like a pause, and go we tend to think of affairs / infidelity as that's how I get out of my marriage free card. That's the one—I can throw that down because it's an exception in scripture. Jesus talks about it.

What I hear you saying is a marriage can recover and not only can recover, but could you say, "Could it thrive even in the midst of somebody that's had an affair?"

Dr. Mike: Part of why I love working with post affair couples is most of the couples that I work with not only recover well but they go on to have admirable marriages.

The person who committed the offense, whether that be the husband or the wife, has to learn contrition and penitence. They have to learn an honesty and a transparency. They have to learn these qualities that scripture is continually inviting us to learn anyways.

The person who is offended has to learn a grace and a forgiveness and a mercy that is not human. That nobody should have to learn. Once they learn those as a couple, there's nothing that's going to get in between them.

When they learn that I can say the most difficult things to you / allow you to have a human reaction, but then you're going to heal and recover from it. You're going to lean in and choose me. When they both are able to do that, they have just a phenomenally strong transparent open marriage. I love watching couples grow to that point. Yes, there is great hope.

Shaunti: That is beautiful. You know what I am picturing right now? I'm picturing a man listening to this in tears. I mean, truly, I'm picturing that there are some men who are listening to this with tears running down their face and going "I have so screwed up. My wife doesn't know, or she has just found out and she's threatening to leave, or she has left."

You know something, let's move into not just pornography but an actual affair, which to me is a whole other leap. Because that's a choice that feels way more even damaging because it was choosing another person and to me as a wife, it would be very hard to get beyond that. And yet, what you're saying is when you do—because you can—when you do, there is so much more beauty in the marriage if both people move it.

So if you are talking right now to that man who is so contrite and he has tears on his face right now and he is wondering if he can ever get his wife's heart back, just what would you say to him to say, "Keep going"?

Dr. Mike: Yes, he chose her for a reason and all of those reasons are buried in there. She's worth fighting for and he is too, whether he believes it right now / whether she believes it right now or not.

The reality of it is though, sometimes people commit adultery as a marital suicide act. They're trying to kill the marriage. But most of the time that's not true and it is a truly, they've messed up but it's too heavy almost for the two of them to carry. That's why God gave us the church to reach into others, to find therapists, to find care givers who can help them to carry this and can guide them in the process of it. There is definitely hope out there. Don't try to do it on your own though.

Brian: I think that's why I love FamilyLife. It's all about trying to identify those families that are wanting to make impact in their community. We call it FamilyLife Local. Just having people around you. You don't do the Christian—Christian life might be a personal decision, but it's never a solo. You never do it in solo.

Shaunti: No solo decision.

Brian: It's not a private path. You're constantly getting other people around you and this is one of those key areas that if you are that man, as Shaunti's saying, that is crying, that's feeling this and feeling the weight and maybe even about to approach his wife, you can do this with someone else. Someone else is going to be able to help you and the church is a great place to start, or a counselor.

Dr. Mike: And not just can but need to. I tell, especially guys that I'm working with that are struggling with porn, sin is bigger than you are. Anybody who thinks they can go up against sin by themselves loses. You've got to have a squadron of guys or even a battalion of guys that stand beside you and help you to fight this battle and I don't see it as much different with this.

Shaunti: You've given us several steps that are really crucial about getting sort of that help to confess, getting the someone around you who can help you do that, having that spirit of contrition in the "I bought this," and then reversing the pattern.

All of that over the top transparency so she knows everything and that you're showing that she knows everything, but there's another step it sounds like which is to gather people around you. Not just a counselor but other men.

Dr. Mike: Very definitely. I talk about over the top transparency. Some wives can't handle or shouldn't handle a particular level of detail. That she knows he's looking at porn. She may not want to know. It may not be healthy for her to know exactly what he's looking at, but he needs to be telling somebody.

If Todd is a good buddy that both of them respect and the husband says I will tell Todd all of that story and she trusts Todd to be the receiver of it. Spouses make really unhealthy accountability partners, but he likely needs an accountability partner and it needs to be somebody that the wife trusts. So, she knows he's telling somebody all of the details and she doesn't have to be the one that carries them.

Brian: What I love about the fact that God has put in—the way he built this whole, you know, the human race is that to be in community and creating the church is—it gives you an opportunity to have people for this because He knew we'd mess up and knew we were going to fail. This just gives you an opportunity to experience God's grace in your own life and to say I know what forgiveness feels like.

Then it takes great amount of grace and the power of the gospel to actually give forgiveness. We've always said that you can't really love like Christ until you forgive someone. You can't forgive someone until you've been hurt.

In this case, hurt deeply, right. Now you have given us some great things. You mentioned right before we came on something about a trust bucket. What is this trust bucket that couples need to use? Is that something you sell at your shop? [Laughter] What do you do with the trust bucket?

Dr. Mike: No, it's just an image that—and if people search for it, they may be able to find me doing it in video a couple of different places online—but that when we marry we give each other this bucket of trust and just out of grace I choose to believe in you. I choose to trust you.

I joke with wives that over the course of the early marriage, especially us as men, we do stupid male things and we drain a cup off. But then we do some pretty cool stuff and we add a cup back in and it's a dynamically flowing up and down with each other—how much we trust each other on a day.

Sexual sin, especially, is like taking a shotgun to the bottom of the bucket. We just blow the bottom totally out. At that point, it doesn't matter how trustworthy I am, I can't refill the trust. The wounded one has to step in and choose to put a bottom on the bucket.

Many times, I'll look at a wife and I'll say "Is there anything he can do that would prove he's trustworthy?" And they honestly say, "No, because I can think of all these ways he can get around it exactly."

So, it reaches a point where you have to choose to trust and that's very fragile. I tell them it's tissue paper thin at the beginning and if you do something stupid, just out of accident, you think it shouldn't have an impact but it's a BB to that wet tissue paper and it just blows a hole in the bottom again and all the trust you built drains right back out.

She has to go back in there and she has to re-patch that hole and then you slowly start rebuilding the trust again. It takes a long time for that trust to build up. You have to treat that bottom as really fragile for a long time.

In time it will harden and in time the bucket will fill up and stupid stuff can be absorbed again but to begin with you just really have to understand it's fragile.

Shaunti: That's a great analogy / a great word picture.

Brian: It is. I don't know if you've got that on your website IntimateMarriage.org,—

Dr. Mike: I do. I do.

Brian: —but that sounds like it needs to be a video.

Shaunti: Yes, absolutely, it does. We'll have to put that in the show notes, too.

Brian: So Shaunti, what for you—what do you feel like are the aha moments?—that you're going "Let's sum this up," and go "Okay, there's guys that have confessed / there's guys that are about to confess. What am I walking away with on how I'm going to rebuild trust?"

Shaunti: Well I think it's to some degree it's those four or five steps, and I'd love Dr. Mike to confirm that we've got this right, where it's the get help to confess if you need it, right? That's step number one.

Dr. Mike: Yes.

Shaunti: The step number two is to really realize I'm going in this recognizing I bought this. I did this. It doesn't matter whether her reaction is big small. Whether I think it's overreacting or not. I bought it. You break it, you bought it right.

Dr. Mike: Yes, right.

Shaunti: And that there needs to be an ongoing spirit of contrition that does not allow for exasperation, right?

Dr. Mike: Correct.

Shaunti: With her process that she needs. Like you said to the guy “You have no right to get frustrated, dude.” [Laughter]

Dr. Mike: Right.

Shaunti: Then number three is—I love that—reverse the pattern. Whatever it was that was being hidden now has to be in the light. Maybe not everything because some of those details need to go to the accountability partner but to the over the top—

Dr. Mike: It all needs to come out. It all needs to come out just maybe not all to her.

Shaunti: Right. It needs to come out; not all to her—

Dr. Mike: She decides.

Shaunti: —but to her, whatever—right—whatever that over the top transparency is that is needed that will help rebuild that trust. Because she’s wondering now about the whole relationship. She’s going back 15 years—

Dr. Mike: Correct.

Shaunti: —and what would happen when you were on that business trip five years ago?

Dr. Mike: Exactly. Who are you?

Shaunti: Who are you? What’s going on there? So that sort of over the top level of “Okay, I actually didn’t find it at the grocery store so I’m going to go to the drugstore on the way.” “Yes, you can put a tracking app on my phone.”—just like with our kids. It’s just all that same kind of stuff and checking in with her daily. “How are we doing today? Is there any way I can sort of make you feel more loved today and rebuild that trust today?”

And then at the same time have an accountability partner—this is number four—have an accountability partner that *she* trusts. Somebody who she respects to be the person that you share some of that stuff with who will be checking in with you as the husband. And then is there a number five about keep the end in mind. Keep hope in mind.

Dr. Mike: Yes, that's what I was going to say, tenaciously hold on to hope. Even when it does not seem like there is hope, there is. Our God is an amazing God. I've watched Him make the most beautiful rose gardens out of the worst trash pits. There is nothing He can't heal if we're willing to.

So, I tell them tenaciously hang on to hope. I tell them if you don't have any for today, I've got it. You probably have a friend or a confidant that will hold hope for you on the days that you don't have it.

Shaunti: That's good.

Brian: We got a great question from Jim. We do have some spies that are listening / some women that are listening. What would you both say—and we're not looking for a long answer here but just your quick responses—What if a wife is listening now and has some suspicions, what's her next step?

Dr. Mike: That's really tough because if he's still in a state of denial going directly up against him may wind up getting increased wounding but I'd say much the same thing of reaching out and finding kind of a third party that she can talk with.

I will often ask wives: Is there any man in his life that he really trusts that he will hear his word when he speaks to him? Maybe it's an uncle or maybe it's a close friend that could be drawn into the process that is trustworthy.

Or I'll have a lot of couples come in and she hires me. He thinks it's just for marriage therapy and she's able to confront him in the office with me. So that again we have that containment that can help.

Brian: That's exactly what Jill Savage did. She's been on *FamilyLife Today* and she's a great author speaker and when she found out about her husband's affair she waited 'til the next morning and they were going into marriage counseling for just a routine visit and brought it up.

Dr. Mike: Yes. I've had that happen a lot in my office. I think that's a wise way to go.

Brian: Creates a safe place there.

Dr. Mike: It's tough to say some of these things and having somebody help us to say it and it's tough to hear it, having somebody help us to hear it.

Brian: But what I loved about what you said, Dr. Mike, is that just tenaciously hold on to hope. We have had countless couples, whether it's at the Weekend to Remember, whether—and then, Shaunti, I know with you and your conferences, and Dr. Mike, obviously in your counseling profession where you speak / where you see God restoring and making beauty from ashes.

I would just for any guy / any couple that is out there that's listening to this that has gone through that—has shot a hole in the bucket—you can repair it. God can repair it.

Shaunti: Yes, absolutely.

Brian: And you can actually tap into the thing that not a lot of people get to experience which is the depth of God's grace. There is no pit that He cannot go deeper still.

Shaunti: And I think that that right there is priceless for all the marriages listening to this. Whether it's something huge like an affair or even some of the stuff we were talking about with Ann where you know a workaholic situation where she felt "He just doesn't care." I mean all of those things. When you come through those, it's horrible in the middle of it sometimes. Hold on to our Lord. He is able to handle this. He's able to hold your broken heart.

Brian: Yes, and not just for you, but think about the fact that God never wastes pain. Whatever your sin / whatever your issue is, once it's been restored, it's amazing how many people you can help. So, you become the very person that you needed—

Shaunti: That's a great point.

Brian: —when you were going through this and whatever your greatest sin is tends to be your greatest ministry. So I know for me that was my issue, early on was porn and to be able to have—not only get forgiveness from my wife and to have that—and I would not have had it without that squad of guys that were in my life to help me move through that and to wake me up and to be the guy going "Dude, what are you doing?" Now that's one of my passions is to help guys get through that and to move through that.

We hope this episode has been helpful to those of you listening and for those that are in that moment just hold on to hope. Take some of these steps. Take these show notes and follow them and watch God do some amazing work.

Well Shaunti, of course, it's great to be with you, and Dr. Mike, man, we hope we can bring you on again.

Dr. Mike: Thank you. It's been an honor.

Brian: That was fantastic. Well if for some reason this episode raised more questions than it answered, that is perfectly okay. You can go to FamilyLife.com to explore more audio. You can go to IntimateMarriage.org to go to Dr. Mike's website as well.

And we also want you again to consider reaching out to a trusted friend, local pastor, or a Christian counselor in your area for help if you need it. It's one of the best choices you can make.

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I do want to give a shout out to James, CJ3 our audio producer, the entire *Married With Benefits* team. We could not do it without you.

We hope you'll join us next time when we'll be answering a question that's plagued husbands for years: Why aren't decisions ever really final? At least, that's what I think we decided to discuss for next time. [Laughter] Right, Shaunti? You keep bringing it up; we'll decide.

Shaunti: I'm not going to change my mind.

Brian: Alright. We'll find out next time. I'm Brian Goins. Thanks for listening.

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