

Getting your bearings after discovering your husband's secret world

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In Lewis Carroll's story "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland", the protagonist of the story, Alice, finds herself in a distorted world where big things are now small and small things are now big. As she tries to make sense of all of these bizarre changes, she interacts with a caterpillar that asks her about her identity. She replies, "'I – I hardly know, Sir, just at present.'" Alice continues rather shyly, "at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then..."

If this response sounds familiar, you're not alone. Discovering the secret life of your husband's addiction changes your understanding of your life so profoundly that, like Alice, you hardly know or trust anything you thought was true about yourself or your relationship story with this other person.

For some women, this discovery overtakes them like a nuclear blast that goes off on a calm morning, just when they thought things couldn't be better. For others, it's a slow realization that starts out with finding out little pieces here and there, wondering, suspecting, asking, and eventually putting everything together.

Regardless of how you discover your husband's secret life, both experiences erode your ability to organize and trust your judgment. You think you're crazy. Your body becomes activated with anxiety, tension, and even nausea. You know you're not crazy, but still you think you're crazy because you feel crazy. Even thinking that makes you feel even crazier. The spinning is almost too much to take.

You aren't crazy. You've just been lied to, which now creates the tremendous burden of trying to synthesize new information with a story you thought had already been written. Even though you didn't ask for this (who would?), please allow me to show you a few guideposts to help you get your bearings so you can find your way back to clarity and the truth about you and your situation.

1. Stop moving and be present

A friend once told me of an experience he had hiking in Hawaii years ago. When he realized he was lost, he knew he had to keep moving because darkness would be upon him within a few hours. He turned around, retraced his steps, and carefully made his way back to his last destination so he could start over. After hiking for thirty minutes, he was terrified when he realized that he ended up back in the exact same location where he originally discovered he was lost. He had essentially traveled in a loop for the past half hour. He told me this was one of the most frightening and disorienting moments of

his life. He was certain he could find his way back, only to learn that he had no idea of his true location.

What he did next was, according to him, the decision that helped him find his way home. He stopped moving. He deepened his breathing and mentally retraced the circle he had just walked. Taking time to slow down his body allowed him to carefully map his surroundings, second-guessing every turn, and eventually noticing openings and trails that were formally out of his awareness when he was plowing forward to find his way home.

Like my friend, when you discover you're lost and disoriented, the best thing you can do is stop moving so you can get your bearings. This isn't the same as sitting down and giving up. This is about stopping your forward movement long enough to take in your present situation so you can regain your sense of direction.

Sometimes the movement is external and shows up as busyness, distraction, numbing addictive behaviors (food, shopping, social media, television, etc). Sometimes the movement is internal storms of panic and chaos, even though on the outside you appear still and motionless. Regardless of how it manifests for you, being still and getting your bearings will make all the difference.

Stopping literally means stopping on a daily basis to get your bearings. Perhaps the thought of having wide-open space with nothing distracting you may feel terrifying and uncertain. You may feel like you've already been thrust into a lonely wilderness void of any hope. This is different. I'm asking you to create a sacred space built by you where you lay your foundation for moving forward in this new and strange reality.

This is not a one-time event of stopping to find peace. It's a new ritual you're creating on a daily basis to give you the strength you need to reclaim your voice, your emotions, your brain, and your heart. It's also something you can do each time you discover new information or get activated in your betrayal trauma throughout your recovery journey.

Now that you've stopped, what should you do? Here is an exercise you can practice when you make the decision to stop and find your bearings:

- Find a comfortable place to sit or lay down
- Notice your breathing. Don't change your breathing, just notice the air moving in and out of your mouth and/or nostrils. See if you can notice the rise and fall of your body as you breathe.
- Gently shift your attention to the parts of your body that feel connected to the chair, bed, floor, or wherever you're located. Notice what parts of your body are supporting you. If your attention shifts away from your body, gently bring them back to your body.
- Now that you have present awareness of your breathing and body, notice the thoughts and feelings you're experiencing. You don't need to do anything with

the thoughts. You may notice how quickly they change in intensity and focus. Feelings and thoughts are like waves that swell, crest, and break in a cycle. You don't need to do anything with them right now, just notice them.

Recognize that you are physically safe right now. Your body responds to betrayal trauma as if you're physically in danger right this very moment. When your body responds this way, it makes it almost impossible to make good decisions that serve your best long-term interest. This is why it's critical to stop, slow down, and prove to your body that it doesn't have to do anything to respond to the danger you're feeling. Even if you're in a physically dangerous survival situation, experts recommend you still learn to slow down your body and breathing so you can think clearly and make decisions that will protect you and those you love.

When dealing with betrayal trauma, you need to have access to your feelings and thoughts to consciously navigate the coming days, weeks, and months. The signals your body gives you right now can direct your attention to danger and remind you that you feel threatened and need to slow down your body and prove to it in this very moment that you're not physically in danger and want to have access to your feelings and thoughts.

2. Call for help

It's not enough to calm your body, mind, and emotions by being aware of your present situation. Because you're disoriented, you have to call for help. You may wonder who will hear you. Will they take you seriously? Will they be respectful? Will they protect your vulnerable information? There are so many reasons you may be worried about calling out for help. Nevertheless, the sooner you can get help, the sooner you'll find your bearings.

Chances are, you know someone who has already been down this road. Attending a 12-step meeting, finding an online community of support, attending a recovery program, talking to a licensed counselor who specializes in betrayal trauma, calling your pastor or church leader, opening up to a sister or mother, or confiding in a dear friend.

Even if this person hasn't experienced the trauma of betrayal, find someone who is a good listener and full of patience and compassion. None of us are designed to suffer in isolation. We are born with a natural reflex to seek help when we're hurting. Many of us unlearn this as we grow up and have experiences that teach us to rely only on ourselves. Cry out for help. You don't need to sort out the details at this stage. You only need to know someone can see your pain and stay with you on this journey.

You don't need to script your plea for help. If this person is truly a safe individual, let them know you're struggling and need someone to talk to. Even if you're not sure what

to say, going to a support meeting and listening will, at a minimum, reassure you that you're not alone.

Thanks to the courage of thousands of women wounded by betrayal trauma, there are countless resources and opportunities to get the help you need to help you find your way back to yourself and your most important relationships.

3. Trust your markers

Betrayal trauma uproots virtually everything you thought you believed and understood. Anna Fels wrote a descriptive essay for the New York Times called "Great Betrayals", where she outlined what it's like for the betrayed party upon discovering a secret life of a loved one. She writes:

For the people who have been lied to, something...pervasive and disturbing occurs. Insidiously, the new information disrupts their sense of their own past, undermining the veracity of their personal history. Like a computer file corrupted by a virus, their life narrative has been invaded. Memories are now suspect: what was really going on that day? Why did the spouse suddenly buy a second phone "for work" several years ago? Did a friend know the truth even as they vacationed together? Compulsively going over past events in light of their recently acquired (and unwelcome) knowledge, such [women] struggle to integrate the new version of reality. For many people, this discrediting of their experience is hard to accept. It's as if they are constantly reviewing their past lives on a dual screen: the life they experienced on one side and the new "true" version on the other. But putting a story together about this kind of disjunctive past can be arduous. Understandably, some feel cynical if not downright paranoid. How can they know what is real going forward? Lack of control over their destiny makes people queasy.

A lost hiker looks for markers that help them navigate when they're disoriented. In the same way that stars, mountains, and other markers never move from their place, your life also includes things that will never move and that can help you reorient yourself.

This is one of the reasons I recommended you start with your body and your breathing. Those two things are always present and can help you orient yourself. You are alive and you have to breathe. No matter what experience you're having or what changes around you, your body and your breathing will always be there.

Likewise, there are dozens of other markers that don't move and will help you regain a sense of stability and trust. The sooner you can connect to these markers and let yourself experience their permanence and stability, the sooner you can have the experience that not everything has moved in your life and you can begin finding your

way forward.

Here are a few examples of markers my clients have shared with me over the years:

- Nature
- Children
- Music
- Scriptures
- God
- Trusted friends
- Parents
- Siblings
- Journal

Find the markers you can count on and let your body, emotions, and thoughts feel the familiarity and comfort that these immovable supports provide. Connecting to your markers will remind you that not everything in your life is a lie. They will give you much needed respite from the journey of learning and believing the truth about yourself, your spouse, and your life.

Some women find it helpful to collect physical reminders of these markers to keep in one place just in case they lose their bearings and need to get reoriented. Although looking through photo albums might trigger beliefs that everything you went through was fake because of your husband's lies, recognize that you were there and actually had those experiences, even though your husband was being dishonest. Your life hasn't been a lie and everything you've personally experienced is yours to keep. Even though you most likely would have chosen differently had you known the truth about your husband's choices, the choices and experiences you've already experienced are cemented in your history, which you can own with confidence. Don't let his hiding hide your choicest relationships and experiences.

Conclusion

This pattern of stopping, calling for help, and trusting your markers will be the beginning steps of your move from disorientation to clarity in the wake of the discovery of your husband's secret world. As you most likely already know, recovery is not a linear process that goes from dark to light in a neat and orderly pattern. Instead, you will be thrust back into darkness and confusion several times throughout the coming weeks and months. Although this forecast isn't pleasant, know that every time you work through these steps, your ability to move from confusion to clarity improves. Eventually, you will have enough clarity to know where you are, who you are, and what you need to do to act in the best interest of yourself and those you love.

Discussion Questions

1. As a group, practice the grounding exercise outlined in step one. Discuss as a group what it feels like to be fully present in the moment.
2. Are there other ways you've been able to stay present-focused when faced with the sudden shock of betrayal trauma? Share them with the group.
3. Share with the group the first names of the individuals who have helped you when you've been disoriented and why they were helpful.
4. What are specific things you did to reach out for help?
5. How can you be more available to women who may struggle?
6. Share the markers that have guided you back to the truth about yourself and your life.

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