

*Episode Seventeen*

# Handling The Nightmares

*Conversations +  
Journal*

*Brad & Morgan*

## Handling The Nightmares

**Morgan:** We will start today show with a listener's question and the question is: I have been struggling with my spouse's affair for a year now. I just can't stop thinking about it and I have nightmares. I still feel like it happened yesterday. How do I know when I need to seek individual counseling?

**Brad:** Yeah that's a great question. How do you know after a betrayal when you need individual counseling? I would say if you feel like you did the first month or the first two months, 6 months out, you need individual help. And what I mean by that is, you need to get help individually. What may be happening is, you may have unresolved grief or trauma from things in the past, it may be times you felt abandoned by a parent or other betrayals. Different things in the past can really keep us in a holding pattern when dealing with trauma and it makes it harder because when people experience trauma, what happens is, it changes how they view themselves. And so if you have experienced trauma in the past with a parent rejecting you or sexual abuse or another deep personal wound, it changes how you view yourself and then when you have your spouse betray you or a person betray you that you are dating or married to, it just reconfirms that. I hear so many times from people, oh I never thought my spouse would cheat on me, my parents rejected me, my family wasn't there for me but I always thought they would be there for me. And then when that happens, that just reinforces all this negative stuff that that person believes about themselves. And one of the things that limits the trauma recovery aspect of this is when you have had previous wounds and previous hurts that haven't been fully healed yet and then you are betrayed, it really hinders the affair recovery process for that person individually.

**Morgan:** Okay, so it sounds like this person like you are saying is struggling with symptoms of post-traumatic stress or PTSD. We have explained in the last show what is PTSD, but Brad will you explain the symptoms of PTSD?

**Brad:** Okay because that's something we haven't talked about really yet. There is different symptoms; there is intrusive thoughts, there is nightmares, flashbacks, difficulty sleeping. There is rage, anger, irritability and difficulty concentrating or remembering things, there is hyper-vigilance, there is an exaggerated startle response, there is avoidance and numbing and that's about it. Let me just kind of start with that first one I said, intrusive thoughts. Intrusive thoughts can take the form of-- many different forms like memories, images, perceptions about other people's behavior and they are painful. And they are so painful enough that betrayed spouses will often feel like they are reliving the discovery of the affair all over again. These intrusive thoughts and side feelings of fear

and vulnerability, they will insight rage, sadness, disgust and sometimes guilt. Individuals are the most vulnerable to intrusive thoughts when they are trying to relax and their guards are down, sometimes the trigger that reminds them of the affair will start the intrusive thoughts.

**Morgan:** We will talk about triggers here in a little bit.

**Brad:** There are also obsessive thoughts and obsessive thoughts are different and obtrusive\* thoughts in this way. Obsessive thoughts are people trying to figure it out; the story of the affair, what happened, the details and their mind is just kind of racing, trying to kind of put everything together. It is almost like that person is creating a mental scrap book of the affair and you just know the details, you know the timeline and the more that you can know, the better you can heal and make sense of this and there's unanswered questions. That's something that we all do when we are betrayed and we think about it. I had obsessive thoughts about when I was betrayed, probably felt like 100% at the time, but it was probably closer to 80-90% of the time. And then there is nightmares, that's basically experiencing some form of betrayal in the nightmare. The flashbacks are visual re-experiences. It can involve sensations, behaviors, emotions. They can last from seconds to hours. Sometimes when people have flashbacks that last for days-- that can happen, there is usually a little bit more trauma that they have than just the affair. And here-- this is important for people to know, flashbacks are commonly triggered by insomnia, fatigue, stress and drugs. Symptoms of PTSD that we have been talking about, you need to take care of yourself physically; you need to get enough physical rest and make sure you are not super stressed out.

**Morgan:** And Brad, we have a question, how do we overcome intrusive thoughts? How do we overcome that?

**Brad:** Well to be honest with you, the best way that I know how, is really deal with the-- don't avoid the affair, really deal with it and that may mean journaling. What I mean by journaling is writing down the story, what you know, feelings, letters that you want to write, but you are not sending this, when you journal, you are only journaling for yourself. Then the other thing is, doing the technique called *thought stopping*, which is basically, you get these thoughts in your head and you choose to deliberately dwell on something else or there is a psychological principal, we can only think about one thing at a time and so what we do is, is I'm not going to-- this comes into my mind, I am going to choose not to think about it right now, I am going to choose to think about x, y and z. And what you may need to do if this is where you are at in recovery, keep a note-card or note-cards with predetermined thoughts on it that you want to consciously dwell upon; it could be poetry, it could be scripture, it could be something on the news-- something to keep you distracted from that. And as

you go through out your day, it will become more second nature to reject these thoughts, handle these thoughts as they come up. But you don't-- let me caution you though, you don't want to stay in a place where you are constantly not thinking about the affair. There has to be a balance where as time goes on-- you can't do this in the beginning, it's just, it is almost impossible. There has to be a balance where you, as time goes on, you are able to get some space between you and this and you are able to control the thoughts. At that time you can kind of think about other things, it doesn't have much control over you, but you don't want to live in total avoidance of it either, then it is going to always be there. So you want to get to a place where you can eventually-- you are dealing with it, but you have control over when you deal with it and it is not just completely controlling your day.

**Morgan:** Yeah absolutely. Yeah, I remember just like laying in bed and thinking and not being able to turn it off you know and just...

**Brad:** Morgan\*, you were betrayed...

**Morgan:** Yeah, just laying there and just going over and over and over, just these thoughts. And like 3 a.m., I have to get up because I can't sleep and you go in the living room and you just write and write. I mean I come away with like 10 pages, just writing and it's sometimes random, but it's intrusive and it is very difficult to stop.

**Brad:** Yeah. There are other symptoms of PTSD I want to get into. And again, I am not diagnosing anybody who has been betrayed with this, but this is a common theme and common pattern of individuals who have been betrayed. They experience symptoms of PTSD and that's what we are talking about right now. There is that difficulty sleeping. You know sometimes sleep is characterized by twitching, moving, sometimes you just wake up with nightmares--we talked about that. Then there is rage, anger, irritability--this is more evident in the form of smashing things, heated arguing, extreme behavior, screaming, intensely criticizing others and demonstrating a lack of patience. Having unresolved anger can quickly tire someone out. This anger can be mixed with shame, frustration, betrayal or other uncomfortable emotions that lead to moodiness and explosions of pent up anger. Speaking of anger, usually this is a very common with people who have been betrayed, it is almost like they have an undercurrent of anger just below the surface and they kind of just snap at any minute. And you know little things set them off and you will see as people go on and if they don't deal with the betrayal, this anger is there and this is usually the betrayed person. If it is a woman-- and I'm not being sexist, but they become more critical. If it is a guy, they become more critical and that will be probably what ends up really hurting the marriage after-- obviously the affair did, but they didn't deal with the affair when it happened and so they may go years. And then that

person just has a chip on their shoulder, they are very bitter and that bitterness, that criticalness, that anger, that angry response to things really kind of causes the rest of the marriage to continue towards destruction. Then this is important for people who have been betrayed and this can last for months afterwards, difficulty concentrating or remembering things. That occurs when the injured spouse is battling for control over intrusive thoughts about the affair. You spend a lot of time trying to block this out of your mind, then you later have difficulty remembering or concentrating.

**Morgan:** It's really interesting.

**Brad:** Yeah. Another common symptom is, what I would call hyper-vigilance, this is where the injured spouse will be on guard against intrusive memories of the affair. Usually, many betrayed people or spouses are very cautious to ensure that the affair doesn't happen again. So many spouses after being betrayed are very sensitive.

**Morgan:** Yeah like to make sense...

**Brad:** Yeah, called human lie detectors. They have a way of knowing if what they are hearing about the affair makes sense to them. So some of the ways that hyper-vigilance is just demonstrated is, they feel vulnerable or fearful that the affair will happen again and they look for ways to ensure it won't happen. They act over protective or over controlling of the spouse who had the affair and they really have difficulty feeling calm.

**Morgan:** Oh yeah, so it's just really-- I mean just not being able to calm down and I can imagine that that would be...

**Brad:** Yeah it is very hard and kind of just a mental picture of somebody who has been betrayed, think of somebody who has just gotten out of prison or jail. They cannot sit still, they are jumpy, they are...

**Morgan:** Fidgety maybe.

**Brad:** Fidgety, always looking over their shoulder.

**Morgan:** Worried.

**Brad:** Worried that somebody is going to come up and may be stab them in the back or come an attack them or that kind of thing.

**Morgan:** Yeah, it is really interesting. Something that you mentioned in the book, just a nervous system response, it is almost like-- it's like oh! Like a-- you know...

**Brad:** Yeah, they are kind of jumpy, twitchy. And part of that is actually the next symptom, it is exaggerated startle response. That's a fancy way of saying the injured spouse is very easily frightened. They have a sensitive nervous system which will over react to thoughts about the affair.

**Morgan:** It is what they call the nervous system override.

**Brad:** Yeah. This often manifests itself as jumping, flinching or tensing up when someone appears suddenly.

**Morgan:** I wonder if that's because of just, in the discovery phase, it is so shocking. It is like that major shock just freaks you out.

**Brad:** Yeah well, but here's the thing, you are trying to ensure this doesn't happen again. And so you are using all your adrenaline and that's the other thing with this exaggerated startle response; you have a sensitized nervous system and you have elevated stress hormones in the blood, you have an elevated heart rate even when you are resting, you have hyper-ventilation, you have tight chest or stomach, you can have light headedness, sweating and tingling, cold and sweaty hands. And this is all just I've been betrayed, I want to ensure this doesn't happen again. And it is that fear of it happening that sends you into that exaggerated startle response. And so that's common. Here's the other thing and this is also really common, there is avoidance and numbing. This is part of the symptoms of betrayal because the intrusive thoughts and arousal that follow an affair are so unpleasant, the injured spouse will desperately try to avoid all reminders of the affair. Sometimes they refuse to talk about it; this isn't everybody. This is something that really occurs a lot with the betrayer, but sometimes you get spouses like this. They might block out from their mind, the thoughts, images or feelings surrounding the affair, along with the activities, places, people or personal items that bring up, that insight thoughts, that bring up these thoughts about the affair. Some injured spouses become house bound after an affair and attempts to avoid fearful encounters with those who have knowledge of the affair. Sometimes injured spouses turn to drugs or drown themselves in their work to avoid these painful feelings. Others simply shut down all feelings to avoid the pain of the affair and then others will live in a fantasy world trying to go on with their life like nothing bad has happened.

**Morgan:** If they don't want to talk about it, you know how do you encourage them to talk about the affair?

**Brad:** Well here's the thing, part of affair recovery is trauma recovery. Avoidance is usually something that occurs early on, kind of during-- I would say even during the shock phase, but if people don't want to talk about it, I can't make them talk about it. And so part of affair recovery is really helping the injured spouse let go, forgive, rebuilding the marriage, the communication, the breakdown, helping the betrayer become more emotionally expressive and being able to ask for what they want and need. And so if they don't want to-- and it's about 7% of the population who has been betrayed, when they have been betrayed that doesn't want to talk about it. So this is a small group, but they often feel it, they often at times desire it but there is a fear there.

**Morgan:** If they are numbing that pain, if they are avoiding that pain, then they are also having to numb and stop feeling even the good feelings. So all of those things are tied together, but do you want to go ahead and talk about the triggers?

**Brad:** Sure yeah.

**Morgan:** Okay, well there are different things that can trigger a trauma response in the betrayed spouse and kind of transport them back to those painful feelings. Will you talk to the listeners about the different triggers and what they are?

**Brad:** Yeah just briefly on how the mind works. Let me say this, this is why the triggers are so--there are so many of them. There is 12 different categories.

**Morgan:** Wow, that's a lot.

**Brad:** And it's because the way the mind works. When we go through something in our life-- my drive to the radio station today, nothing traumatic has happened, I am going to forget about it. Nothing unusual happened today, but if there was a deadly car wreck or even a fender bender, just that getting my adrenaline pumping, I am going to remember it more than I would other events. And so what happens is, when we experience trauma or deep personal wounds, life hurts because we do go into avoidance and numbing because it is painful to deal with. What happens is, is our mind will experience disassociation. Let me explain it this way, normal memories, we are able to just file away logically in just our mind's filing cabinets. But with painful memories, hurtful memories, what we'll do is, is we tend to avoid it and not deal with it, not really get closure on it, not really heal from

it. And so what happens is, is our mind will remind us that there is unfinished business here and so that's why we experience flashbacks, that's why we experience all these different things and those symptoms of PTSD that we talked about. And these are triggers that trigger you to thinking about the affair again and these are the things that activate memories of the affair.

**Morgan:** They maybe haven't been dealt with.

**Brad:** Yeah, well they are showing you that the affair hasn't been completely dealt with yet. Some of these are things that can cause betrayed spouses to have a flashback of the affair, activate memories of the affair. The first is sight; obviously seeing someone who looks like the affair partner will do it, seeing the location where the affair took place, seeing visual reminders of the affair--that will do it. And that-- you know occasionally I will get people who will still see or view things that are reminders of the affair. Occasionally they may still see that person, maybe it's a member of the family or they go to the same church, you know things like that. That keeps that person stuck when they are still around that person who is a part of that betrayal and they see the affair partner, we'll just see reminders of the affair. So you really, in my opinion, you need to get rid of that kind of stuff. You need to take some steps to not have that constant reminder because it keeps triggering you to think about the affair. The other thing is sounds; hearing the affair partner's name, hearing other people talk about an affair on T.V or in movies or overhearing conversations between co-workers and friends, things like that-- just hearing certain things.

**Morgan:** You know when you talk about sight, getting rid of things that-- I mean obviously, you don't want to burn down a building, but if you have a little, like a sock or an object that reminds you of that person, that's maybe when it is a good idea to go out in the backyard, have a bonfire or bury it.

**Brad:** Yeah just getting rid of some of these...

**Morgan:** Reminders.

**Brad:** So you can go on. And sometimes you maybe-- you have done work, but because you have these reminders, it keeps you stuck there. The 3rd triggers to thinking about affairs, is smell. I know this is really interesting because smells can trigger memories. So smelling the perfume or cologne of the affair partner, you know smelling-- maybe even the smell of when you discovered or perfume this person was wearing as they were trying to get themselves to more, grooming themselves to be more attractive to the affair partner, they no longer wear it all the time now.

**Morgan:** Or you walk through the department store and oh my gosh you smell it.

**Brad:** Yeah. So I know that's a little different but I think it is interesting. The other is even taste. I know that's kind of silly, but eating food that was consumed around the time you were betrayed or even food that your spouse had with the affair partner, so taste can do it, just these reminders during this time; body-- sensations of movement, tension or body positions. Let me explain that better. Being sick can cause betrayed spouses to feel a flashback if they were sick when the affair was happening or when they discovered the affair. Touch sensations, being touched in certain ways can trigger intrusive memories. Injured spouses envisioning their spouse touching the affair partner, while they are touching you can cause them to feel triggers of the affair. Feeling physical pain can also remind injured spouses of the emotional pain they have been enduring. And so there is other things that I could add to this list that I am going through as far as examples of each section. Significant dates or holidays is number 6; the anniversary of the affair is very hard, the day the children left home, holidays that are typically family events, Christmas is hard, valentine's day is hard-- those events are going to be hard, anniversaries, holidays are going to be difficult, family get togethers may be difficult. Stressful events and arousal is number 7. The symptoms of PTSD and arousal can definitely trigger memories of the affair; just being stressed, being tired, fatigued.

**Morgan:** Definitely take care of yourself like what I'm saying.

**Brad:** Yeah you got to take care of yourself. Eight, feeling strong emotions can trigger you to thinking about the affair and here's what I mean by that. Heightened emotions can trigger a flashback even when they are caused by completely unrelated factors. Let me give you an example of this, when you feel strong emotions, some people feel like they can't even be happy because they feel like being happy reminds them of the affair. And what I mean is, somebody had a great day at work, they just closed a sale or they did fantastic. Their boss was praising them and they felt really good about themselves and what could have happened with somebody is, they later discover their spouse's affair and they are floating on cloud 9 and then they get this worst news possible. So every time they feel happy, it's just a reminder of that and so that can happen. So strong emotions and that's just one example of how that can happen. The 9th trigger for thoughts about the affair is really just thoughts; any thought that you have of the affair after discovery can cause you to go into self preservation mode. You may feel like your normal self and then experience a thought of the affair and become completely withdrawn or irritable. And I'll go through this real quick, we're almost out of time, but behaviors-- any behavior that reminds you of the affair can cause a flashback, but behaviors can trigger flashbacks. The things your spouse did while they were involved in the affair, like being preoccupied with their appearance or accepting late night work phone calls. So certain things that they do can kind of trigger you to thinking about the affair.

**Morgan:** Staying up late.

**Brad:** Staying up late.

**Morgan:** And on the computer.

**Brad:** On the computer, text messaging-- all these different factors.

**Morgan:** That they were doing while they were...

**Brad:** Yeah and then 11 would be out of the blue flashbacks, can occur randomly for a logical reason combinations. Many times triggers contain several memory aspects at once, but you know you can have a visual plus location, plus date and season, like such as going to the grocery store on a dark night in the winter--you know like all those things can trigger...

**Morgan:** Perfect storm now.

**Brad:** Yeah. So let me say this to wrap up our show, choosing to forget about the affair can be helpful and provide genuine relief, but continually blocking out thoughts about the affair requires enormous amounts of energy and probably leaves you feeling fatigued and irritable. As I mentioned earlier, when you numb out painful memories, you also lose pleasant and good memories as well. I had somebody tell me recently, they were actually the betrayer, they don't feel happy because they try to block out, they feel so much guilt and shame about the affair that they try to block out those negative feelings. So they end up blocking them all out. And it's a fact of life that betrayed spouses will have intrusive thoughts about the affair, but choosing to ignore, forget about those thoughts will only delay or prevent the healing you need because it keeps you from dealing with the trauma. Dealing with the affair until it makes sense is key for affair recovery.

**Morgan:** Interesting, that's a very good point. So dealing with it until it makes sense is the key to affair recovery.