

Rebuilding a Marriage in the Aftermath of Infidelity, Felony Lies and Secrets

Chris and Helen (35) have been together for 13 years and married for 7. I began working with them 3 years ago when they were the proprietors of a busy service company. They believed that much of the conflict in their relationship was down to being stressed and unhappy at work. They were not inactive sexually for most of their marriage. Helen attributed this to unresolved hurt she felt at Chris's rejection early in their relationship when he was focused on weight-lifting. Chris said his sexual desire was late to develop and now yearned to be sexually intimate with Helen.

They frequently arrived for their sessions tired and stressed. Helen was an angry, withdrawn conflict avoider and Chris was a friendly, but at times insensitive, conflict avoider. They reported being affectionate at home with each other but working with them was heavy going. The vagueness and stagnancy between them was palpable.

We worked together for six months and their progress was poor. Helen continued to be resentful at Chris for taking on new contracts as she had expressed being overwhelmed many times. Chris was trying to make the business as successful as possible to improve their odds of selling it at a profit. To add to Helen's resentment, Chris also worked full-time as a nurse which meant that Helen often worked on her own in a business she hated.

Two months ago they contacted me again after Helen discovered that Chris was having a 6-month affair with a work colleague. Chris explained that prior to the affair he had been "a little depressed" because although his marriage felt good there was no sex and that he had cried silently many nights lying next to Helen. "I didn't want to be a cheater. I had to rationalise and told myself I was a good husband outside of sex. I felt unwanted and unappreciated. I worked hard to give Helen the best life. When I brought it up she said she didn't want or need it. Then I started texting my friend, Joy. She would say 'How could your wife do that to you?' and I decided I'm taking care of myself on this side. Joy has an open marriage. She was in similar situation regarding sex with her husband. Prior to having sex with Joy I had anger and resentment. Then I found myself loving Helen more but I was too much of a coward to say it to her."

Helen said: "Around the time Chris started the affair I had been working out at the gym and getting in shape. I had good friends and more confidence. I asked him, 'How can I be a better wife?' I was looking for a ray of hope. That was all I needed. His reply was 'nothing'."

I met them five days later. They said they had talked continuously and were able to acknowledge and let go of most of the unresolved issues between them. Helen admitted having two affairs early in their marriage. She said "Chris let me off easy. I feel super thankful about that".

Chris felt positive and had renewed hope: "It seems strange to say I feel better now than in 13 years as a result of locking ourselves in the house for a 5-day detox."

Helen said: “We were grappling with our own assumptions and letting go of things we were holding onto. We had sex last night and it hasn’t stopped. I want to believe it’s not fake.”

As we continued meeting both partners reported that the breakthroughs kept happening. They were telling each other secrets they could have taken to the grave. Helen said: “Chris saved us by having the affair. I would have held onto those secrets. I wanted to tell him too. I’m working on controlling my reactions, not being judgemental, so he’s not afraid to say it to me. I still have lots of questions. Sometimes it’s painful. Sometimes I get frustrated. If I forgive him he won’t understand how big this is for me. I have trouble believing he wants to be with me. If I open myself up for hurt. When I’m tired I regress and say you don’t want to be with me. When I’m open and vulnerable I know my life would be a shambles without you.”

Chris said he was listening without defence or judgement: “I get scared she won’t want to keep going. I have a needy part that couldn’t live without Helen. I’m afraid this part would pull back to my old self with no friends or family contact. I also have a strong part that says live every day, be the best you can, don’t try to control. No matter what happens I have the choice to be happy.”

In early December Helen asked for an individual session. She wanted to know that it was ok for her to ask Chris for reassurance or to speak up when she wanted to know where he was. Chris was stepping up a lot. He was video calling, telling her when he’d be home late and accompanying Helen on more trips.

I felt positive about the progress they were making. I respected the efforts they were making to grow as individuals and as a couple. I wondered if I had missed opportunities to confront them during our initial therapy and if this would this have helped them to open up sooner.

Two days later I received this message from Helen: “I need another meeting with you. I have just found out that Chris has been continuing to lie about some things and I am really questioning and struggling with staying in our relationship. My fears are coming true that he is still lying. He doesn't know why and I don't know why I should stay. How soon do you have something available? And, do you recommend a single session for me, single for him, or a joint session?”

I was taken aback. I wondered if both Helen and I had been “had”. I am not gullible but I’m inclined to take people at face value. What were the lies Chris was telling? Was he still meeting the affair partner? I replied that I wanted to see them together.

When we met I asked Chris to tell me what he had been keeping from Helen. He said: “I decided to come clean. I knew I could lose Helen. If I kept the lie there was no guarantee I wouldn’t lose her. Even though it’s only been 6 weeks I tricked myself that the crisis phase is over. I don’t think I was complacent but I thought I can hold onto this little thing. The first thing was I had Joy over here and she stayed one night. In the past I said I didn’t have sex in house. The other lie I held onto was having two abortions. Initially I told Helen we had one. There’s something else I should tell you, Nancy. I periodically use psychedelic mushrooms to bring out the subconscious. It helps me to grapple with my emotions. The large experience is hard to get through

and it helps me let out these truths. My friend had told me that ketamine and psychedelic mushrooms help people through things like my marriage. I started just before the affair. I wanted to know why is my marriage as it is and what is it about me that I'm not willing to change and have the marriage I want."

Helen said: "I've been using them as well. The first time my intent was to double my performance in CrossFit. I laughed and felt happiness. It was a healing standpoint. The first time I took a large dose was the week after Chris's affair. It was in a ceremony and my questions were do I want to be with Chris or not and do I want to get over his affair?"

My initial impression, which I did not share just yet with the couple, was their use of drugs was an indication of their lack of differentiation. Each partner was unwilling to trust that they would stick with showing up and working on their problems. Instead they were putting their trust in a drug to unlock an inner wisdom they believed they were unable to access on their own. I needed time to let my thoughts settle so I asked if Chris had made any more revelations. He said he hadn't so it appeared that his lies and omissions were not about recent events. I said "Helen you said you have a lot of questions. What do you want to ask Chris?"

Hel: Why did you keep lying?

Chr: There were a few reasons. First of all fear. I knew the magnitude of what I did, our house being so sacred to you, I hadn't lied on anything else but by telling you I'd be ripping this away from you.

Hel: You didn't love me at the time.

Th: Helen, that's what you're telling yourself. Why don't you check that out with Chris?

Hel: You didn't love me at that time.

Chr: I did and I don't know how to reconcile doing something so shitty. I was being shitty to someone I love.

Hel: You realised your relationship with her wasn't that great. Our marriage had a superficial level of happiness. We both knew something was missing and didn't know how to fix it. You got fed up and in an influenceable mindset. I wanted a deeper connection and sex. (Turning to me) I was working on it but not telling him.

Th: You describe your marriage as having a superficial level of happiness. You both knew something was missing and didn't know how to fix it.

Hel: I always wanted him to show he wanted to fix things. I asked him what can I do to impact our relationship? I wanted 100% honesty.

Chr: It's not like these are small lies. I have a lot of embarrassment and regret about doing it and lying about it. It takes a big person to come clean about that. Ultimately I made the right decision but your expectation is I'll be perfect.

Hel: Every time I asked I gave you a chance to tell me.

Chr: Regardless of it a fear jumps up into my throat. I just have a split second and sometimes the fear wins and I might give a lie. Either case it takes courage and I want to show courage and be this new honest person.

Th: Chris, I can see that you are worried because Helen is angry and you don't know what she is going to do now she knows you have been lying to her. And even though this is what's happening, is there a part of you that has any positive feelings because you decided to take a risk and tell Helen what you have been holding back from her?

Chr: Yes definitely. Overall I feel good about my honesty. I feel really good not holding back. I'm not hesitating. This is a major breakdown but I'm glad I told her.

Th: Tell that to Helen.

Chr: I feel really good that I'm not holding back anymore. I'm glad I told you.

Th: And imagining you could step into Helen's shoes and describe what this is like for her... Tell Helen about what you understand about her position.

Chr: I know this is excruciating for you and I appreciate being able to come clean about this. I want to acknowledge you're showing a commitment to being a new you. You're showing extraordinary effort and skill working on our marriage. You're doing it so well.

H: Being honest I don't give a shit. I'm angry and hurt. I don't know if I have the patience. I don't want to compromise. I keep thinking how can I support myself? Should I be looking for jobs and an apartment? Going to the furniture store and tearing apart our bathroom? I've been trying to get her out of our lives.

I could see that continuing to talk directly to each other was too much so I stepped in.

Th: So let's get clear that this is what we are going to work on in our next session, processing the revelations that Chris just made, which he has been holding back from telling you about for the last six weeks, and how this new information impacts on the decisions you are each making about your marriage.

A lot has come out since our last session and what I want you both to do now is to take some deep breaths and settle back so I can share my thoughts with you...

Helen, I get how disappointing it is for you to find out there was more Chris wasn't telling you. You're angry that it has taken him six weeks to tell you two important pieces of information about his affair.

He told you he did not bring Joy into your house when in fact he did and that they had sex there. He told you they had one abortion when they had two. It

took him six weeks to tell you about this. That's all the stuff that's on Chris's side and is what he will be working on.

The next part is on your side, Helen, and it might be hard for you to hear so are you ready? You have been asking Chris for the truth and it took him six weeks to tell you what you have been asking for so it makes sense that you have some hard feelings about him not telling you sooner, and now, this gives you a choice. You can act on those hard feelings. Definitely that's something you can do but before you do I want you to understand that you will be giving Chris a mixed message. You will be saying yes I want the truth but I am going to punish you when I get it because you didn't give it to me when I wanted it.

Does that make sense? Chris decided to tell you after six weeks. Would it have been easier for you to accept after six days? What would it have been like if he had left it six years to tell you?

You have every right to be upset. The truth is you don't know and I don't know if there is more that Chris is still keeping secret. That's on Chris's side. Only he knows that.

I said you have a choice so here's your other option. You can manage your anger and disappointment and get curious about why it took Chris six weeks to tell you all of this... Why did he tell you about one abortion and not both? Why did he decide to tell you now? They are things I'd want to know.

There's something else I'd like to give you feedback on... It's about using psychedelic mushrooms to find the answers to your relationship issues. Something about this feels weak to me. It's like saying I cannot trust myself to do this on my own, and I want you to know that is not what I believe. I have been impressed with the way each of you are growing and taking risks, and how your characters are developing and I do not believe you need any psychedelic drug to continue doing that.

Individual session with Chris

My aim in this session was to see if Chris was being truthful and I wanted to understand his thought process at having two abortions within a six month period. So I decided to give him a lot of space to talk.

"Helen wanted me to reach out to you to discuss the reasons why I did what I did and to identify areas so they won't happen in the future. I don't want to jeopardise this. I can see that having the marriage I wanted is now a possibility, one which is fulfilling and I can be happy for the rest of my life. She's concerned that that's not enough.

I am committed to telling the truth, addressing old lies and making them right. I had a lot of fear about sharing and she's waiting for the next shoe to drop. For me, there's no big or dark secret I'm holding. I have a lightness since getting it out but I see the impact on her and she doesn't know what to believe. I understand that's going to take time to build up. By her not trusting me she relates to me as a non-trustworthy

person. I want to be seen for who I am now. It's hard for her to truly believe that now."

I asked Chris to talk about his decision to tell Helen about one abortion instead of two. "I was holding onto the idea that I could take these secrets to the grave. It was damage control. I was holding onto the idea if I don't spill it all I can keep this until I die. It has a lot of consequences on me and on her. You told me once that the truth will set you free. That's totally true."

Chris described using psychedelic mushrooms: "I was alone and thinking about the love I have for Helen. I was feeling shame and crying. She was at her friend's house when I was having all these emotions. I became convinced she had died and I lost it. I felt what it was like for her to die. Later that night when she came home my thoughts started going, I have this secret I'm holding on to. It wasn't a small risk she could have found out. Can I keep this or not? Ultimately it was the right thing to do. I told her about the entire experience and said I'm so sorry. I told her I wanted to make this straight.

I feel very irresponsible. I pride myself in making good decisions but I can see how poor my decision making process was. I was being the complete opposite to how I want to be. Shame and embarrassment prevented me from coming forward. This is the root of all of this. I don't want to hurt her anymore. That's kind of fake. It's going to hurt. It's more my own feelings of embarrassment. How stupid can you be? Admitting is telling her I was being a dumbass.

The root of it is birth control. I was trusting Joy. Basically I knew what we were doing was not the best. She said I've done this all my life. It was a poor birth control method. Although I wanted to have the responsibility I let her take care of it. It was a very poor decision on my part.

It was eating me alive not having sex for so long (with Helen). Joy and I were having sex and I wanted to please her to ensure it would continue. She was strong willed. I let her have her way to pacify her. I didn't want to jeopardise the sex. I thought I can keep my wife from finding out about this but I was trapping myself. There was a chance she could find out. I never considered telling Helen but the right thing to do was to end it and confess. I realised it was getting to the point where I couldn't handle it anymore. I was enjoying the sex but all the relationship stuff was too much. It was having a big impact on my life. She was wanting even more. She wanted a second marriage and it was getting more like that. I was leading a double life and I hated lying. I was always trying to see Joy at a time I wouldn't have to lie to Helen. That's not some I like to do. It was a necessary evil. To keep up sex I had to lie. I tried to find times when Helen was out in the house so I didn't have to lie.

I was distracted all the time. I could never be present with Helen talking to me and Joy texting me at the same time. My mind was scattered. I hated that. It impacted on my agricultural business. I was struggling with that. Constantly juggling. A big part was not having focus... working, texting, constant juggling. It got to the point where I said I can't handle this it's too much. Any free time for myself was devoted to someone else. I thought this is having a huge impact on my life but I don't want to not have sex.

Joy told me she was pregnant. She had embarrassment about taking care of planning. She also wants to have child. Her husband is not fertile. It was stressful not being sure if she was going to have child. She felt unsupported. I was stuck in middle doing what we weren't supposed to do. If we were boyfriend and girlfriend it would be different but how am I supposed to be when I am married? I didn't want to say deal with this yourself. I've never gone through this before. I couldn't talk to anyone else or ask what do you think I should do. I could only talk to her.

The similarities between Helen and Joy are weird. Helen says she wants to be helped but doesn't want to tell me how to help. She says figure this out and you better get it right and help me.

We went through the abortion. We're both nurses. There was a lot of bleeding. I said it sounds like a horrible experience. If we were together I'd want to be by her side. Instead it was by text. It was an impossible task. I felt a huge weight on me to be there for her in the situation we were in. She had negative feelings towards me. We were constantly arguing, texting, talking. She was disappointed in me and angry. It was hell.

Finally got to the point where we saw each other. I broke down and cried feeling the weight of it. It was what she wanted to see. When I cried she said wow he has feelings. It took time to get it back to a good place.

Then I made a second stupid decision. I'm so annoyed about it. We were having sex when I knew she was fertile. I said I'm not going to come I'll just satisfy you. She wanted me to come in her and said I'll take morning after pill. I was hesitant. I asked are you sure? It's not a good idea. She said this is what I want. Me being a pleaser I didn't stand up for myself. I did it against my better judgement and instantly regretted it. I have so much regret. I should not have done it. She could see I felt really nervous. It was really stupid.

She left it longer than the recommended time to take the morning after pill. I don't know if she was in denial. She waited 3 days. This was so stupid. It didn't work. I was just back from vacation and had a guilty conscience. I wanted to be done with it. I went to the clinic with her the whole time trying to do this in secret. It took almost a full day. I had to tell lies. Knowing it's important to be with her through this. I had too many balls in the air but I couldn't make the same mistake and not be there.

During this time I had a major car accident and my back carried a lot of pain and stiffness. The other manifestation was franticness. I couldn't sit still. I was always lacking time. I felt like pinball bouncing and could never just sit. When I'd be doing stuff I was frenzied, rushing, always something else need to be done.

So I wanted to use an IUD and condoms. I said we have to be extra, extra careful. She was lax about it. After the second time I said we have to do more. She said I'm not using an IUD and condoms. I'm standing my ground. I compromised and agreed to just an IUD. Not long after that Helen found out.

I struggle to admit to myself. I don't want to take the abortions lightly. Regardless we are taking a life. That would have been a child. It was a life. Our irresponsibility conceived that child. I never had fatherly feelings. I really wanted it gone. Each time I

was relieved but had remorse that a child was taken. We dodged a bullet. She had a romantic story about having that child but it would not have been the best life. I would stay married but I'm not going to disown my child. It was going to be ugly. It was a relief for me each time. It was mistake to conceive a child. I don't want children right now. She wanted me to want it. If I conceived with Helen I'd be a damn good father. I'm not ready to be a father right now. I don't lament not being a father.

I am ready to admit how stupid I was being. I did this stupid thing together with Joy. To admit this to Helen is hard. It's her opinion that matters to me. It's hard to face how stupid I was. It's a double whammy. My ex is hurt and it demonstrates how stupid I was because it's the opposite of who I wanted to be. I thought I could keep it a secret forever.

When Helen told me about having a second affair, I had only known about the first, and later that day we started exchanging secrets. She demonstrated the courage to come forward and it was easy to reciprocate but admitting to having the second abortion meant coming up with courage. I would have been admitting how stupid I was so I was lying by omission. Telling about one and how it happened was trying to limit a stupid accident rather than a decision.

I wanted to clear up everything. I couldn't put more lies in place. While I was telling her we were going over the timeline back to the beginning. It was hard getting clear about what led up to it. I got to the end and said that is the truth. I can't ever lie about it. I got it hard to get the truth straight. I said I don't even know truth. Once I got it straight and clean I'm going to stick with this.

I was living in chaos and I have stepped out of it now. It is liberating being who you are. I don't know if I could have got here without going through this. It sucks to think I'm benefitting from being so shitty. There are really great things coming out of it. Benefits through personal growth and in my marriage. I'm thinking differently as a result of the affair and rebuilding my marriage.

Helen is struggling a lot. I know she wants to let go but can't. I don't want to rush her. The thing is I'm not struggling with her affairs but she is with mine and I don't know why she's struggling. We could both acknowledge they happened and move on. I am able to trust her. I know and feel she loves me. I trust she not going to find someone else or betray me but if she does I won't regret trusting her. It would hurt but it would be on her.

Helen is protecting herself by being careful. She hasn't really come clean about her affairs or shared the details. I'm ok about this. I don't need to hear. There's a piece of her that can't forgive hers. I know she has shame carrying this for over six years. She can't begin to forgive me if she can't forgive herself. I want her to forgive herself so we can move on but I don't want to push. It's not my place yet."