

Women who discover naked photos and sexually explicit emails to other women on their spouse's laptop, feel shocked, confused, bewildered and afraid. It may seem impossible to restore trust and rekindle passion. Hope Whispers shows this is possible to achieve.

Hope Whispers

**A Guide for Couples, After Sexual Betrayal,
Devoted to Restoring Relationship, and Re-igniting
Passion, Intimacy and Sex**

by Lorele Vanzant, Ed.D.

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Hope Whispers



A GUIDE FOR COUPLES,
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DEVOTED TO RESTORING RELATIONSHIP
AND RE-IGNITING PASSION,
INTIMACY AND SEX

LORELE VANZANT, EdD

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Paperback ISBN: 978-1-64718-150-5

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-64718-151-2

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

Booklocker.com, Inc.

2020

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Hope Whispers, A Guide for Couples, After Sexual
Infidelity, Devoted to Restoring Relationship and Re-igniting
Passion, Intimacy and Sex, by Lorele Vanzant, EdD.
Library of Congress Control Number: 2020900293

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Lorele Vanzant, Ed.D.

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Chapter One: At the Crossroads: Should I leave or Stay?

Sexual Betrayal

Melissa was two months pregnant when she walked into my office and sat down, and said, “What is happening to me? I feel like I’m going crazy.”

After she told me about her husband’s series of affairs, these were the first words out of her mouth. Stunned, appalled, and in a state of shock, her eyes appeared haunted as she said, “Ever since I found out about his last affair, I walk around in a daze feeling like nothing else matters. I haven’t been able to eat, sleep, or focus on my work. What is wrong with me? Am I going crazy?”

Melissa isn’t alone. At last count, there is an estimated 13.5 million partners of betrayal trauma in the USA. Although the field of sex addiction is relatively new (for the past 30 years), much has been written about sex addiction, types of sex addiction, feelings of shame or self-hatred about unwanted sexual behaviors, treatment and recovery. The internet has played a huge role in contributing to awareness, acceptance of, and growing preoccupation in our culture with pornography use, sexual fantasies, lust and overt sexual activities. Ask any retailer: Using sex in advertising sells any number of items ranging from books, music, automobiles, healthy diet food, even Mr. Clean.

Chances are, if you, or someone you know, has been sexually traumatized, this is a very stressful season of your life. Disclosing information about sexual betrayal, sex addiction, and infidelity is an incredibly emotional and difficult task. It is my hope that your journey to recovery is made easier through structured interventions, exercises and self-reflection. That is what this book offers you.

The recovery process for partners of sexual addicts is a field that is relatively new but growing. In reviewing the literature on infidelity and recovery there seems to be less information available to couples devoted to reigniting passion, intimacy, and sex.

Regardless of where you and your spouse are in your recovery, the carefully selected exercises, interventions, and self-reflections in this

book offer hope, help, and healing. It is my intention to come alongside, as you renew your sense of self, restore trust, and rebuild your relationship. While the task of healing and learning to sustain sex with intimacy may seem insurmountable, it is not impossible. Recovery is a process—a series of specific tasks, spread over time. You must realize this if your marriage is to survive the traumatic impact of betrayal, heartbreak and loss.

Historically, there are many fine leaders within the field of addictions and in the sex addiction field specifically. Patrick Carnes and Jennifer Schneider, both early pioneers in the field of sex addiction, provided timely research and a foundational framework for others interested in the field of sex addiction and co-addiction.

In the past decade, others have also contributed to the field. For example, one important study of women sexually traumatized by the discovery of a spouse's porn addiction, cybersex, sexting, and visits to prostitutes reveals that such women experienced acute stress symptoms similar to characteristics of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

One woman in group pulled me aside and said, "This group has saved my life, literally, and I can't thank you enough. With your help, I've become more self-aware, and regained my dignity and self-worth. Since Jake and I reconciled, our sex life has been a disaster. We've read dozens of relationship manuals "how to" guides on ways to restore trust, and to develop intimacy, but I still feel awkward, insecure, and emotionally disconnected."

Over the years, I have heard similar complaints from other women in varying stages of recovery who want to become sexually intimate. Yet they feel emotionally inhibited, dissatisfied with their love life, and hopeless. They will ask, *Can you help?* Or, *Where do I turn?*

Many women in my practice who suffer from sexual trauma share similar stories. After the traumatic experience of sexual betrayal, couples need help reclaiming healthy sex. Sex after partner betrayal, is an area that needs exploration. Only recent research on the after-effects of sexual betrayal is considered a legitimate area of study. Today, family counselors, psychotherapists, and psychologists are

slowly gaining insight into the traumatic, long-term effects of partner betrayal.

Some of the most comprehensive recovery sources include: *Mending a Shattered Heart, Shattered Vows and Intimate Treason*. More recent publications provide insight on ways to move forward—*Moving Beyond Betrayal, Full Disclosure, How to Share the Truth about Sexual Betrayal, and Partner’s Betrayal Trauma, provide a full scope for recovery*.

A book I personally found to be helpful, for couples in process of reintegration is *The Couple’s Guide to Intimacy, How Sexual Reintegration Therapy Can Help Your Relationship Heal*.

Until the last few years, many therapists, professionals, and counselors have used co-addiction, or co-dependency as a primary model for treating partners of sex addicts. It is the belief of many therapists who work in the field of sexual addiction that an integration of the twelve-step model and the trauma model, may be a more effective approach. Today, more therapists working in the field of addiction are leaning toward the trauma model.

You will find, in reading this book, certain names used interchangeably such as *co-addict, partner of the sexual addict, and betrayal trauma*. A co-dependent, or enabler, is a term most often used to describe the spouse of a sexual addict who will tolerate his unwanted behaviors and allow him to remain in his addiction. Treatment for both the twelve-step and trauma model, follow certain guidelines.

Chapter Two: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

For you, and for most partners of sex addicts, it isn't the unexpected discovery of betrayal trauma that causes the deepest pain, the one thing that seems to hurt the most is that *your trust and belief in the person closest to you has been shattered. As the unsuspecting spouse of the sex addict, and you happened to discover evidence of betrayal on his laptop, or cell phone, of lust, cybersex, sexting, and hard-core pornography use, you have undoubtedly experienced acute symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)*

In 1997, Peter Levine's first book, *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma, The Innate Capacity to Transform Overwhelming Experiences*, presents a new and hopeful vision of trauma. Levine wrote: Trauma is perhaps the most avoided, ignored, belittled, denied, misunderstood and untreated cause of human suffering... We enter this altered state – let us call it “survival mode” – when we perceive that our lives are being threatened.

Robert Weiss, a sex and intimacy specialist in the digital age, also writes that post-traumatic stress disorder is common, normal, and often adaptive response to experiencing a traumatic or stressful event. Under stressful conditions, most anyone will experience symptoms of PTSD. Our brains are hard-wired to tell our muscles to tense, and under intense stress, we breathe faster and pump more blood. This *flight-or-flight* response is a normal physiological reflex during a traumatic event.

Symptoms of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

- Tears, anger, mood shifts (from rage to sadness to hope and back again)
- Constant hypervigilance (checking phone bills, hotel receipts, cell phones, phone apps, computer files, browser histories, etc.)
- Being easily triggered by events (the spouse comes home late, turns off the computer quickly when you walk into his room, or stares too long at a pretty woman)
- Sleeplessness, panic attacks, or nightmares

- Obsessing about the trauma (being distracted, irritable or depressed)
- Avoiding discussion of the trauma
- Intrusive images (thoughts of a spouse having sex with prostitutes, etc.)
- Isolation (spending time alone in bed watching TV)
- Eating mood-altering foods
- Aggressive driving
- Drinking or smoking more than usual

Unfortunately, for you, and for many spouses of sex addicts who suffer from symptoms of PTSD, it can be debilitating, affect their health, and cause serious damage to their relationships. The main treatment for symptoms of post-traumatic disorder or PTSD is psychotherapy, medication, or a combination of the two. Too often, these hurting people suffer in silence.

Awakened by the sound of keys jangling in the front door lock, Lindsay flew out of bed. Racing down the hallway, heart pounding and afraid that something dreadful had happened, she glanced at a clock on the wall that read 5:00 a.m. When she opened the front door, her husband stood there, bleary-eyed and disheveled.

“Where the hell have you been?” she asked. Disbelief, fear, relief and rage, emboldened her reaction. Arms crossed, she demanded, “Well?”

Jake mumbled incoherently. The air around him reeked of cheap perfume, and as the dawn light brightened, giving way to morning, Lindsay noticed red lipstick smears on his collar that sparked outrage. With both fists, she began pounding at his chest and clawing his face. “You bastard!” Whimpering, she crumpled to the floor and sobbed, “I knew this would happen.”

Sadly, this was a scene that was all too familiar. For the third time in the past five years, Jake had relapsed. “I don’t know why I stay!” she said. Curled into a ball, hands covered her face. “I did nothing wrong!”

In most cases, the symptoms of post-traumatic stress will subside within a month. When Lindsay’s symptoms of extreme stress lingered,

her psychiatrist prescribed anti-anxiety medication and referred her to a psychotherapist who specialized in sexual addiction.

At the recommendation of her therapist, for over a year, Lindsay had faithfully attended a support group of a half dozen or more female partners of sexual addicts. These courageous souls, each in varying stages of recovery, supported and encouraged one another's efforts to heal. At first, they listened patiently to Lindsay's angry diatribes against men, insisted that she had every right to be angry, and offered assurance by saying things like, "Your feelings are normal, expected and uncomfortable."

When Jake relapsed for the second time, they patiently supported her determination to heal again from the devastating blow to her emotions, her self-worth, dignity, and self-esteem. They understood her pain, offered friendship and understanding, and listened to her anguish. When Jake relapsed for the third time and showed no true empathy or remorse, they encouraged her to leave. *You've tried your best, but it's time to move on.*

"Jake is terribly ashamed," Lindsay insisted, tears streaming down her face. "He begged me to give him a second chance, and I agreed. But now? I'm having second thoughts. What should I do? She looked pathetic. "I can't do this again! I won't! This is the final straw!"

On the other hand, it is common for the humiliated and sexually betrayed spouse to assign blame to a spouse, or even attempt to shame him into behaving. Women who have been sexually betrayed often say things like, "Shame on you! You're disgusting! Loser!"

Chapter Three: Benefits of Joining a Partners of Sexual Addicts Support Group

Unfortunately, *you, as the* betrayed spouse, have good reason to feel angry, mistrustful, hurt, overwhelmed, and confused. In the early stages of recovery, you especially need validation for your feelings and support to move forward. Through no fault of your own, your life has been shattered by the trauma of sexual betrayal. Chances are, you already feel inadequate, disgusted and unworthy, and to rub salt in the proverbial wound of injustice, you feel intense shame, self-hatred, and self-pity.

For years, women similar to yourself, who were in need of emotional support and encouragement, came to group. They shared a sense of community, a commonality of beliefs, shattered lives, laughter, love and tears. I witnessed such raw emotion, incredible strength, hope and courage, and in that process of triumphant transformation, I learned more about myself.

The one thing that hurt these women the most, even worse than the fact that they had been cheated on, was the humiliation of being the last to know. “Though the evidence stared me in the face,” Lindsay grimaced, “I still couldn’t wrap my mind around the fact that my husband had been leading a double life for years and I had no clue. What an idiot! I must be crazy!”

At first, the group followed a structured twelve-step program for recovery; however, over time there was a gradual change to process—sharing their stories, listening to the others’ pain, and admitting their vulnerability. As they came to understand the seriousness of sexual addiction, and the traumatic impact of sexual trauma on their lives, life took on a new meaning.

In the open “cross-talk,” women began to openly pour out their feelings of disbelief, hurt, fear and rage. After a few months in the natural ebb and flow of expressing their emotions, there was a definite shift from structure to process. Though these partners knew the risks involved in staying with the recovering addict, they knowingly and courageously, faced the risk of future relapse and humiliation. Though most of these resilient partners held out hope for reconciliation, others

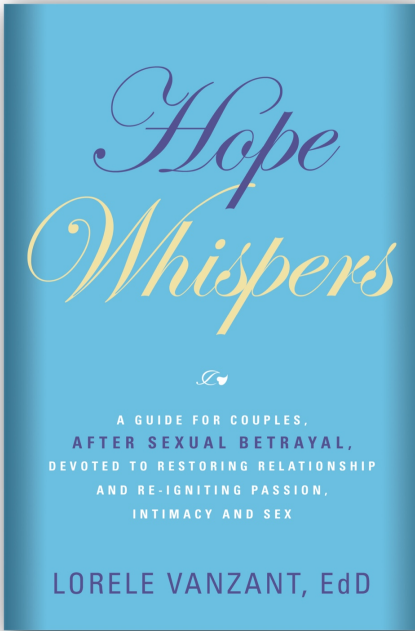
who leaned toward rebuilding their relationship, were still confused, conflicted, and indecisive. As a psychotherapist who had been emotionally and sexually traumatized, I could feel their pain. While my personal journey of recovery led me to leave, I steadfastly supported their decision to stay.

What if the addict reneges on his word? You can't make him behave or force him to change. After all, he is a compulsive sex addict, a known liar and cheat. He can't stop himself. Despite adverse consequences, he will find a way to act out. I feel helpless; what should I do?

There is no clear-cut answer. As a requisite to reconciliation, female partners in group established definite boundaries around the sex addict's inappropriate behaviors, e.g., being flirtatious, staring at other women, and being secretive about finances, cell phones, or work-related trips. Admittedly skeptical, they insisted on their husbands signing an agreement that met certain criteria, e.g., continue in individual and couple counseling, attend a weekly sex addict's recovery group (SA and/or SLAA), and submit to therapeutic disclosure and polygraph to ascertain the truth.

Until now, women in group had focused on their spouse's betrayal, possibility of relapse, and length of recovery. However, going forward, they were urged to focus on their own healing. Through the use of healing metaphors, timely interventions, exercises and self-reflection, they were able to face their fears, while they envisioned a bright future.

My late friend, Zig Ziglar, had this to say, *F- E- A-R has two meanings: Forget Everything and Run' or 'Face Everything and Rise - the choice is yours.* At first, the recovery process in group was slow, but as these women began to focus solely on their own fears, humiliation, shame and inadequacy, the results were truly amazing.



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