



What Should I Tell My Spouse about My Sexual Sin?

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Introduction:

The goal of this workshop is to equip you to share your sexual sins with your spouse, to respond well to your spouse confessing, and to rebuild trust together as a team.

This handout includes all the material that will be covered in the presentation, as well as some lists and suggestions that will be mentioned but not covered in the talk itself.

Further resources are in APPENDIX C.

An arrow (→) indicates a practical application.

- **How do I confess sexual sin?**

- There is a tension between speaking truth in a way that brings freedom to the guilty and speaking truth in a way that blesses the spouse who has been sinned against.
- You must simultaneously:
 - Bring your sin “into the light” (1 John 1:4-9).
 - Speak truth that “builds up and gives grace to those who hear” (Eph 4:15, 29).
 - Walk in the light, which means obedience by truth telling. This must be done in love.
 - Confession is not fundamentally about “getting something off your chest.”
 - Godly confession leaves out harmful, gratuitous detail (e.g., David and Bathsheba in 2 Sam 11–12).
- Walking in the light leads to fellowship.
 - No one regrets honest confession in the long run.
 - It’s easy to admit to being a generic “sinner.” It’s hard to admit to real, ugly sins.
 - Any “secret” you keep from your spouse should be a red flag that shame/guilt are at work.

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- Confession could lead to the end of the relationship. But the relationship is already dead if it's founded on a lie. There will always be distance and falseness.
- Dating and engaged couples should talk about the following before they move forward:
 - Past sexual history
 - Current sexual struggles
- Practical suggestions for bringing sin into the light in a way that builds up your spouse:
 - Don't wait to confess until the sin is "under control."
 - Get it *all* out now.
 - Don't worry about seeming genuinely sorry; worry about *being* genuinely sorry.
 - Cover all your categories: who, what, when, where, why.

SEE APPENDIX A.

- Share *details* in order to prevent relapse. The higher the danger of relapse, the more detail is needed.
 - The more *recent, frequent and/or accessible* the sin, the higher the danger of relapse.
 - Get help. Don't go it alone. You need support, encouragement and accountability.
- How much do you *share* and how much do you *spare* your spouse after confessing?
 - This requires wisdom and a careful, thoughtful understanding of your spouse and his/her needs. Different marriages will do this differently. Non-negotiables: You have to be fully in the light with somebody. You won't share everything with your spouse—just as you don't share every feeling of anger with co-workers or your kids.
 - I recommend that you tell your spouse about any overt incidents of active sin outside the confines of your own head (e.g., pornography, masturbation, etc.). Share temptations and specifics of the ongoing internal struggles with a friend/accountability partner.

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- **How do I respond to a confession of sexual sin?**

- Trust God, not yourself or your spouse.
 - Gen 50:20. Look for the good God is doing in the midst of this.
- Respond with grace.
 - Don't pretend it doesn't hurt.
 - Don't mope. Grieving is an emotion. Moping is a performance.
 - Offer hope.
 - "I want to work through this with you." "I am trying to see you as Jesus does: clean and forgiven. I want to see you that way." "I love you. This doesn't change that." "I know this is hard on you, too. I'm concerned for you."
- Look at yourself.
 - This is NOT your fault.
 - But have you made this easier and/or more tempting to your spouse by what *you* have done?
 - Preventing relapse sometimes mean you actually step *back* from scrutinizing your spouse.
 - Give yourself time. Your world has come unraveled.
 - You need support and accountability, too!

- **How do we rebuild trust?**

- Trust = (time elapsed) x (trustworthiness).

Trust is built one trustworthy act/intention at a time.

Trust itself is not the goal. Righteousness and love are the goal. Trust is a bi-product of a repentant spouse living faithfully and a forgiving spouse living lovingly.
- Put up wise fences and guardrails for the spouse who sinned.

SEE APPENDIX B
- 3 ways to be trustworthy and faithful:
 - Beware of selfish sorrow. Two kinds: "I wish my spouse would get over it already" & "I hate myself"

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→ Welcome the chance to be tested. Your instinct is to be insulted. Instead, you need to embrace testing as an opportunity for your own growth and to build trust.

→ Don't minimize or hide relapses.

- 4 ways to grow in loving someone who has sinned against you:

→ It's not necessarily wrong to withhold your trust.

- Recommended Resource: *Does Love Really Believe All Things?* (Welch)

→ If you stop wanting to build trust, that's a problem.

→ Remember, you are not trustworthy either.

→ Find the good in your spouse. Become an expert in what is right about your life partner.

Conclusion

God's redemptive grace at work in our marriages means walking through these pains and trials can result in a stronger marriage than you had before the sin was uncovered.



Appendix A: Covering the “Categories” of a Confession

What:

The “what?” question basically asks, “What happened and how far did it go?”

- Actual: masturbation/voyeurism/kiss/making-out/emotional affair/sex/rape
- Virtual: porn/900#s/dating sites/texting sexually charged pictures /video chats/strip clubs.

Speak to everything that applies. Recognize that you and your spouse may see the biggest problem differently. She may be more devastated by you being on a dating site than by you going to strip clubs. He may be more hurt by your ongoing emotional connection than the one night stand.

- Come clean about times you’ve lied. Lying is a sin that must be brought into the light. Indeed, it is the signature sin of darkness.

Who:

- When a specific other person is involved (i.e., not just pornography in general), it’s important to be clear; e.g., An affair with your wife’s close friend is different than a random hook up with a stranger. A random stranger is different than a prostitute. Was this friend her sister? Was this person the man at the office your husband has been suspicious of for years and you’ve always resented the suspicion? Was it with someone of the same gender? A child? Your child?

When/Where:

- How long ago? Still going on?
- How long a period?
- How often?
- Before we were married? Before we knew each other?
- On business trips? When I’m visiting my mother? At a motel? In our house?

Why:

- Give the back story. How did you get yourself into this?

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Appendix B: “Fences” and “Guardrails” to Remove Opportunities for Relapse

In Matthew 5, Jesus says “if your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out...And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off...It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.” It doesn’t get any more serious than Jesus telling us it is better to be maimed than to live in sin.

Any conversation about limiting your freedom because you have sinned will feel shameful and require great humility. Your goal as the spouse who has fallen into sin is to lead the charge and take the initiative in creating, identifying and executing the changes in your life and marriage that will most help you fight off the sin that ultimately wants to destroy your marriage and your soul.

Here are some possible fences/guardrails you might set up:

Accountability:

- Commit to regular accountability. This is the most important guard you can erect against your sinful desires. This is best done in person with people you already know and trust as friends and who are spiritually mature.
- Get internet accountability software for your computer and/or mobile devices. Covenant Eyes is the best outfit I know of. They have a strong emphasis on helping you bring your sin into the light with accountability partners you choose. X3 Watch is also an option.
- You should check in with accountability partners more often than the sin is happening. If you are falling daily, check in 2x/day. Aim to speak *before* the time you are typically most tempted.
- Email some of your closest friends and ask them to check on you by calling weekly (or daily or monthly) if you move and don't have an accountability network set up yet in the new place.
- Commit to calling a friend or your spouse before you leave work and having them pray for you before you get in the car and drive past whatever source of temptation is on the way home.

Working together as a marital team:

- Skype with your spouse every night you are on a trip. Take the chance to talk; don’t make it sexual.
- Use your smartphone to video tape yourself doing things at times when you might be tempted. E.g., Your wife works and you commit to go home for lunch rather than go out

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with co-workers since you had an affair with a girl at your office. So tape yourself at home having lunch and let your wife watch it each evening. (Or tape yourself if you are working late on the computer, so the camera can film you and the computer screen.)

- Put your computer in a safe that only your wife has access to. Only go on the computer in her presence.
- Keep the Skype window with your husband/wife open all night, even as you sleep, when you are on a business trip. He/she can then see when you are in the room and when you are not and what you are doing. Have him/her black out the video and the audio (unless you're actively talking!) so you won't know if you are being observed at any given moment. This helps you remember God is always watching, too. (This could be done with an accountability partner as well.)
- Give your spouse your credit cards. Limit yourself to an agreed upon amount of cash that can be withdrawn. Keep receipts.
- Pray regularly with your spouse for your life/family/marriage—in all the facets you are concerned about or thankful for. Talk about what is most on your heart. Don't let your marriage shrink to dealing with this one issue.

Be transformed by the renewing of your mind:

- Make yourself a list of reasons why you don't want to fall into this sin. Post it by your computer.
- Memorize Col 2:20–3:5. Notice that mere fences (2:20–23) do no good, but a heart set on Christ (3:1–4) leads to radical warfare against the sins that tempt you (3:5).
 - Make a habit of reading the psalms and praying them aloud. Every time you come to a psalm of imprecation (i.e., calling down curses on your enemies), remember that your Enemy is the Enemy of your soul. His biggest weapon against you is the temptation to be unfaithful to your spouse in mind and body.

Flee temptation:

- Drive home a different route from work that doesn't take you by that store or club.
- Quit your job and get a new one that doesn't demand so much travel.
- Get an internet filter that blocks objectionable material (e.g., Covenant Eyes, Net Nanny). Money spent on this is the best investment in eternity you can make with your earthly wealth!
- Talk to your boss at work about how you have a “personal problem” with the guy in the office you had an emotional affair with. Ask that you not be assigned to the same group if at all possible.
- Cut off all contact with someone you've been inappropriate with. This includes texting!

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- Stop drinking alcohol or set a very low limit, if this has been a struggle, and have someone you are accountable to.
- Throw away mementos given by a past boyfriend/girlfriend/lover, especially if your spouse doesn't know where they came from and it's a secret you are living with.

Get creative:

Where are the biggest temptations and what are practical ways to limit your access or to reduce the power of the draw? The best solutions are always the ones that you really throw your heart into and own for yourself. Every limit you place on yourself *will be inconvenient*. Don't let inconvenience be an excuse for not protecting your soul and your marriage.



Appendix C: Resources for Further Help

All resources are available at ccef.org

Aaron Sironi, *Forgiveness: The Divine Insanity. How forgiveness restores sanity to struggling marriages* (Conference 2010 audio)

David Powlison and Cecelia Bernhardt, *How Specific Should I Be in Confessing Sin?* (podcast)

Winston Smith and Cecelia Bernhardt, *What Does Real Forgiveness Look Like?* (podcast)

Ed Welch

- *Disclose or Be Exposed* (blog)
- *Living Publically* (blog)
- *Does Love Really Believe All Things?* (Blog)
- *Do You Feel Like a Fraud?* (Blog)

Tim Lane

- *Forgiving Others: Joining Wisdom and Love* (mini-book)
- *Pursuing and Granting Forgiveness* (*Journal of Biblical Counseling* article)

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