BETRAYAL TRAUMA
Riding the Emotional Roller Coaster

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To the women of the PartnerHope focus group. For your courageous hope in the face of daunting circumstances and your desire to light a pathway for those who come behind you.

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Introduction

Betrayal shatters your world. In a moment, everything you thought you knew and could count on changes. The person closest to you switches in an instant from your deepest source of safety and connection to a source of pain, fear and emotional danger.

This is the experience of betrayal trauma. For betrayed partners in the middle of this chaotic, fragmenting, and devastating experience, the whole world is turned upside down and everything feels uncertain.

One of the first ways to help yourself with betrayal trauma is to recognize and put into words the felt experience you are going through. This helps you begin the process of understanding and integrating what has happened into the narrative of your life.

*The goal of this book is to help you identify and articulate the experience you are having—to give you words, language, and concepts to describe this storm of betrayal. My hope is that you will then be able to share about your experience with your support system in ways they can understand and feel.*

This is incredibly important, because sharing your experience with empathetic others will help you to feel less alone on your journey. Other people have been where you are and understand the frightening experience of betrayal trauma. When you share your story with them, you are in wise and caring company.
Years ago, I went through my own story of betrayal trauma. I was married to a man who was sexually addicted and journeyed through all the feelings, behaviors, and experiences that I talk about in this book. I went from the initial discovery of betrayal through the winding road of recovery and eventually to a place of great healing and restoration. This book is not theory. It is lived experience and is written from my heart to yours wherever you are on your journey.

So, let’s get started. This book is divided into six chapters of varying lengths that each look at a certain aspect of betrayal trauma’s impact. These different elements are not linear. You will find yourself experiencing many at once, and bouncing from one to another again and again.

At the end of each chapter there is a FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION section that offers Journal Prompts and Exercises that can help you process the experience of betrayal trauma. Feel free to do them or not do them. Pick out the ones that appeal to you and do them first. Follow your sense of which ones will help you the most and focus on those. This is your journey, so listen closely to and trust your inner wisdom about what you need.

Please be aware that as you put words to the experience of betrayal trauma you may feel great relief; finally, someone is helping you name what is happening. You may also have strong and overwhelming feelings of anger, fear, shame, etc. The process of articulating the impact of betrayal trauma brings these feelings into sharper focus. This is not always pleasant, but it’s necessary if you want to heal. In time, you will process your feelings in ways that allow them to move through you. When this occurs, you heal.

The information provided in this book is intended to help educate and offer support to individuals dealing with the trauma of betrayal. Every person’s story of betrayal is different and unique. This book does not address all the many specific and varied details that can be present in the aftermath of betrayal. In addition, this book is not intended as a substitute for treatment by a trained and licensed mental health professional. Please seek professional advice, help and support if you are dealing with betrayal.

Given all that may come up as you read, you will want to go slow and take your time. Breathe, take breaks, take naps, walk your dog, be kind to yourself, and breathe some more. You are at the beginning of the healing process, and kindness and care for yourself are essential right now.

Michelle May
The protective fog of shock

Amy and Jacob have been married for 15 years. Amy found out about Jacob’s sexual behaviors when he was arrested for having sex in a public restroom at an amusement park. They entered therapy and began to learn about sexual addiction and recovery. Early in the therapy process, we had a couple’s session and Jacob told Amy about more of his secret sexual behaviors. In addition to the incident in the amusement park, he revealed several more affairs and one-time sexual encounters over a span of years.

As Amy listened, I could see her shut down and enter the protective fog of shock. The information was too painful to absorb. As she became overwhelmed, her body came to the rescue and put a buffer between her and what she was hearing. She asked some questions, but mostly sat in silence with tears streaming down her face.

Shock is the brain’s way of protecting us from information and events that are too overwhelming to deal with in the moment.

For instance, a person who suddenly loses a loved one will often go into shock. A protective cloud will envelop that person, numbing their feelings and holding the implications of their loved one’s death at bay until they can absorb what has happened. This type of protective fog lets them get out of bed, shower and get dressed, answer questions about funeral arrangements, attend the
funeral, and interact with family and friends. It helps them function when otherwise they might collapse.

This same type of protective shock often envelops betrayed partners after discovering infidelity.

During therapy over the next few weeks, Amy asked questions about Jacob’s sexual behaviors. I gently reminded her that he had already given her the answers. She looked at me with startled disbelief. As I reminded her of what she had heard, she slumped into herself saying, “Oh yeah,” as she recognized and remembered the information. This happened repeatedly over many sessions because she truly couldn’t remember. Her brain had blocked out the information because it was too painful. Slowly, over time, she was able to let the blocked information come in and begin to process it.

Shock can also create a sense of being gone from your body. One of my clients talked about not knowing how she got her daughter to the bus stop or how she got to the grocery store. She was going through the motions of life but was not present or aware.

In whatever way it manifests, shock can last from a couple of weeks to a few months depending on the person and the circumstances. The feeling of being lost in a fog can come and go at the beginning, with some days feeling emotionally cloudier and other days feeling clearer.

When shock begins to lift

When shock begins to wear off, there is a thawing of emotions and feelings start to be felt and processed. You may notice that instead of your grief, anger, and pain feeling slightly separate from you or a bit fuzzy, they are suddenly engulfing you and being felt in vivid color. Tears that felt stuck or unable to fully flow may now arrive in unpredictable torrents. The feeling of walking around half asleep or on autopilot may be replaced by feeling highly charged, disorganized, and hyper-vigilant. These are all signs that the protective fog of shock is receding.

You may recognize your version of shock and wonder: What do I do about this? The answer is nothing. Shock is your body’s way of protecting you, and this protective fog will eventually diminish, allowing you to more fully connect to and process your new reality. This will happen naturally, over time, as your system adjusts.

If, after several weeks or months, you continue to feel like you are stuck in shock, talk with your therapist. A therapist well-trained in working with betrayal trauma can introduce tools and interventions to help you slowly and gently build your internal capacity for handling your new reality. In time, you will emerge from your numbed state of shock and feel more present and connected.
For your consideration

JOURNAL PROMPT

Shock is the brain’s effort to protect you from information and events that are too overwhelming to deal with in the moment. In what ways have you experienced shock? Do you feel like you are still in shock, have come out of shock, or are moving in and out of shock?
Circuit overload

In addition to shock, you may experience significant changes in your daily functioning. When you are trying to absorb overwhelming, life-changing information that has plunged you into pain, grief, and confusion, your “circuits” get overloaded, and sometimes they will temporarily short out.

According to a study of partners of sex addicts conducted by Barbara Steffens in 2006, 71% of betrayed partners demonstrate a severe level of functional impairment in major areas of life after the discovery of infidelity. ¹

I went through my own story of betrayal trauma many years ago. When I was in the initial crisis after discovery, life felt surreal and I did odd, silly, and downright dangerous things. I accidentally sprayed my hair with hairspray instead of mousse and dried it upside down into a strange and shocking Mohawk. I ran out of gas on the side of the road and had to be rescued by a friend because I couldn’t figure out what to do next. I couldn’t decide what to name my new kittens so I named them Black Cat and Grey Cat. I had too many “almost” car accidents to count. I lay awake until 7 a.m. having panic attacks. I shaved just one leg (many times). I rode my bike into oncoming traffic. I went through multiple cell phones (dropped in glasses of soda, puddles, orange juice). I lost my two indoor cats outdoors (I eventually found them). In general, I was short-tempered, tired, teary, and couldn’t concentrate.

Here are some things betrayed partners frequently experience during the first few months after discovery:

- Forgetting things
- Clumsiness, accidents
- Sleeplessness or a desire to sleep all the time
- Difficulty concentrating
- Mixing up words when talking
- Inability to complete small tasks
- Wanting to isolate
- Anxiety, panic attacks, overwhelming fear
- Unstoppable crying or the inability to cry
- Anger, rage, or frustration
- Depression
- Racing thoughts or an inability to “turn your mind off”
- Intrusive thoughts of real or imagined scenes of our partner’s sexual behavior
- Twitching eyes, legs, arms
- Loss of appetite or increase in appetite
- Headaches/migraines
- Body aches
- Feeling numb, robotic, or disconnected
- Sour or churning stomach
- Guilt or shame
- Thoughts of suicide or self-harm
- Frequent illness

During this initial stage, whatever you are feeling and experiencing, you are normal and others have experienced the same. You are on a wild emotional ride and betrayed partners have reported an incredible variety of feelings and experiences during this time. Be patient and gentle with yourself and do not expect more from yourself than is possible during this early period. Your body is handling more than normal and is overwhelmed. You may be searching for the right thing to do or an action to take, but what you really need is kindness, patience, realistic expectations, and lots of self-compassion.
Compassionate expectations exercise

1. Go back to the list of symptoms above. Put a check next to each one that applies to you. Write in any other symptoms you are experiencing that are not on the list.

2. Now take a few minutes to consider that for a while your ability to do what you normally would is going to be limited. Are you still expecting the same things from yourself? Are you putting pressure on yourself, or using your inner voice to criticize and scold yourself for not being able to “do life” the way you did before the betrayal?

3. Write a short letter to yourself about the expectations you have for yourself right now. How will you be more patient and kind to yourself? What will it mean to have expectations that are realistic and compassionate during this time? Where do you need to say no to others to take care of yourself?

Dear
Big fast emotions

After discovery of betrayal, you will find yourself suddenly riding an emotional rollercoaster of extreme and rapidly changing thoughts and feelings. One minute you’ll feel hopeful and think you are doing well. The next minute you’ll feel that your world is ending and you are falling apart. You may hate your partner one moment, and the next moment feel that you love him or her deeply. You may go to bed feeling like you want to stay in the relationship and to work things through, but wake up looking for the quickest route out the door. These rapid shifts from hope to despair, calm to rage, certainty to confusion, and fear to stability can make you feel like you are losing your sanity. On top of this, each strong emotion and reaction feels incredibly real and true while it is moving through you.

This is all normal. Betrayed partners have lots of big feelings about the betrayal, lots of confusion about the way forward.

*The human brain can only process one emotion at a time. That is why it can seem like your feelings change in a split second. This is your brain processing emotions in turn so that each one can be felt and moved through your body.*
Hold your feelings loosely

During this phase, one of the things that my clients and I talk about is how to hold their feelings loosely. This means allowing yourself to feel the feeling, noticing it, naming it, and allowing it to move through you without attaching to it. You may find yourself thinking, *You know, I was feeling calm, but then I thought about when I found those hotel receipts in my husband’s wallet and now I am really angry.* This thought process may sound too simple, but it works, because, by noticing and naming what is happening, you give yourself permission to feel your feelings and you validate your reality.

Conversely, holding tightly to your feelings means attaching to and acting on a feeling before you have waited to see if that feeling is true and lasting or something that is just passing through. When you hold too tightly, you are likely to act on the feeling rather than thinking through what is best for you and your family.

I was talking with one of my clients about how to hold her feelings more loosely and she said something incredibly honest and enlightening: “It feels powerful to make a decision. Any decision. I don’t even care what it is. It gets me out of feeling helpless. I want to *do something even if it is the wrong thing or something I’ll regret later.*”

This urge to act is strong for betrayed partners because they want to escape the pain and uncertainty as fast as possible. They are looking for ways to relieve their discomfort. Unfortunately, betrayed partners coping with the aftermath of betrayal can make poor decisions that do more harm than good to themselves and their families. The simple reality is that during this beginning stage of healing, most betrayed partners don’t know where they will land emotionally after gathering information and processing what has happened.

Avoiding needless chaos

The more tightly you hold on to your feelings during this stage, the bigger and wilder the emotional rollercoaster ride will be, and the more chaos you will invite into your life. For example, if you wake up one morning feeling hopeless and wanting out of your relationship, holding tightly to your feelings may involve telling your spouse you are done, calling the divorce lawyer, and cancelling your couple’s therapy session. However, that afternoon you may notice that you no longer feel so desperate to leave the relationship. Instead, you may feel some hope that perhaps you and your spouse can work it out. At that point, you will regret the steps you took in the morning and wish that you hadn’t rushed into action.

Holding tightly to your feelings invites chaos into your life and causes you to expend a lot of emotional, physical, and mental energy on thoughts and feelings that are rapidly changing. These thoughts and feelings, while big and
strong, are often temporary. They will shift and change over time.

The many feelings moving through your body are your brain’s way of trying to process what has happened and sort through it to determine the way forward. Instead of grabbing a particular feeling and going with it, try telling yourself, “Right now I feel like I want out of the relationship, but I don’t know if this is the decision that is best for me. So, for now I’m going to notice how I feel and I’m going to wait and see what happens with that. It’s OK for me to not know what decision to make today.”

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For your consideration

**JOURNAL PROMPT**

Riding the emotional rollercoaster of sexual betrayal can be confusing and chaotic because your feelings change so rapidly. Think of a time when you attached to your emotions as they were happening and made decisions or took action based on that.

- What were you feeling?
- What behaviors did you engage in based on those feelings?
- What were the results?
- Were there negative consequences such as increased chaos, increased conflict, or increased pain?

Now think of a time when you were able to hold your feelings loosely, a time when you knew you were having a strong response to something but also knew that it was temporary and your feelings about it might change.

- Were you able to feel your feelings but not act on them in an impulsive way?
- What were you feeling?
- What happened?
- Were there positive consequences of being aware of your feelings but standing outside of them and waiting for them to pass or change?
Shame on who?

When you discover betrayal in your relationship, you may feel overwhelmed by shame. Usually, this shame is rooted in a secret fear that some lack in you has caused your spouse to go outside the relationship sexually. You might fear that if others find out about the cheating, you will be judged as an inadequate spouse or partner. You might fear that your relationships with family and close friends will suffer. You might also worry that if your spouse is diagnosed as a sex addict, he or she will be labeled a pervert.

Most betrayed partners feel terribly isolated with their shame, as though they have a secret they can’t share.

One of my clients put it this way: “You aren’t connecting with people anymore because you are no longer like them. You have huge issues with isolation, confusion, and rage.”

Shame motivates many betrayed partners to keep the infidelity, the sexual addiction, and accompanying behaviors secret. They don’t feel they can tell those around them about what has been discovered and what they are going through. As a result, they inadvertently participate in keeping secrets. Recognizing this, early recovery emphasizes the need to reach out to supportive others. If a betrayed partner feels that she or he cannot tell anyone and instead suffers in silence, this perpetuates the unfaithful partner’s veil of lies and secrecy, and continues the pain of betrayal.
At the other extreme, some betrayed partners essentially grab a bullhorn and broadcast their dirty laundry to as many people as possible. Often, this public shaming is a subtle (or not so subtle) form of revenge, driven by the anger they feel about being betrayed. It is also often an unconscious effort to repudiate the shame they feel. It is a very human response to manage feelings of shame by shaming others.

Unfortunately, this behavior does not alleviate shame. Even worse, it can create relational damage that may take years to fix. For example, one of my clients told her family about her spouse’s behavior before stopping to consider how her family would respond. Five years into a solid recovery, her family still wants nothing to do with her spouse. This puts an incredible strain on her as she balances her relationship with her spouse and her relationship with her family.

The need to overcome shame and isolation in a healthy and productive way is why it is so important for you to seek outside help and get plugged into a community of support. You need people who understand the betrayal trauma you have experienced, and can guide you into a process of dealing with and healing from what has happened. You need to sit in a room with other individuals who have experienced what you are experiencing, where you can tell the shameful secrets and find out that in telling them your shame begins to lift and dissipate.

**Shame picture exercise**

1. Draw a picture of the shame you feel about the betrayal. If your shame has a color, what color is it? If your shame has a shape, what shape is it? If your shame has a texture, what texture is it? Is it solid, liquid, gas, heavy, soft, prickly, etc.?

2. Now that you have a picture of your shame, sit back and consider it. Does this shame belong to you? Is it something you want to keep and carry, or would you like to release it?

3. Sometimes, keeping the shame can have secondary benefits that we are not consciously aware of, such as keeping us from taking risks with others. Are there any hidden benefits to carrying your shame? What would you gain from releasing the shame?

4. When you are ready, take the picture of shame that you drew and symbolically release it in some way. I have had clients burn the picture, send it off on a piece of bark in a stream, bury it, or tear it up and throw it away. Do whatever feels right for you.
In the aftermath of learning about infidelity, one coping behavior that many betrayed partners employ is to block out what they have learned, sweeping it under the proverbial rug. This is different from putting aside your thoughts and feelings about what happened to pick the kids up from school, grocery shop, or meet a project deadline at work. That is a necessary, good, and helpful skill that enables you to continue to function.

What I’m talking about here is forgetting that your partner cheated or that your partner is a sex addict—forgetting the betrayals that were disclosed because it feels too daunting to live in that reality. As an example, my client Kim came in for her appointment and began to talk about how she used to feel when her spouse was acting out. She was talking about it as though it were long in the past, but her spouse had been sober for only two weeks. Another client, Mary, came in and reported that she and her spouse had unprotected sex the day before. When I reminded her that she was waiting for him to be tested for HIV and other STDs because he’d had unprotected sex with prostitutes, she looked at me in shock. She had forgotten all about that.

Tucking away such difficult, painful information is easy to do, and the temptation is oh so understandable. If you can be aware of the tendency to do this and work to stay grounded in reality, you will be better able to take care of and protect yourself.
When you block out information, you no longer know what you need, what boundaries are appropriate, how to protect yourself, or what the best course of action is, because you are operating without the full facts. It’s like having one of your senses go missing. You can hear but not see, see but not smell, etc. It limits you.

To help yourself stay aware of what you know, I suggest using your journal to write things down, asking supportive friends to remind you if they see you forgetting things, and talking about what you have found out to help process and digest it. These and similar tools can help you stay grounded in your reality.

For your consideration

**JOURNAL PROMPT**

What have you blocked out because it feels too overwhelming to face?

What is it like to bring this information into your awareness? What feelings come up?

Usually we block things out because they are troubling to us and feel like they are beyond our coping capacities. What support might you need to help you deal with and process the things that you have been blocking out?
Loss and grief

Discovering sexual betrayal plunges you into loss and grief. Suddenly you are faced with more losses than you can count. Loss of trust in your partner, loss of trust in yourself, loss of the relationship you thought you had, and loss of your dreams for the future.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, a pioneer in the study of grief and loss associated with death and dying, identified five stages of grief. Over time, these five stages have become recognized as the stages that people dealing with all types of trauma, including the trauma of sexual betrayal, go through. The stages are: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. These stages are not linear.

For example, you may begin your day telling yourself that at least your partner didn't have sex with a live person (bargaining and denial stages). A little later you might remember walking in on your partner looking at Internet pornography and you might feel tremendous rage, disgust, and shame (anger stage). That afternoon you might feel lifeless, unmotivated, and exhausted (depression stage), while also feeling like you are beginning to understand more about sex addiction and why your partner has done the things that he or she has done (acceptance stage).
The stages of grief are a winding journey, skipping around in no particular order, doubling back on themselves and sometimes washing over you all at once.

Grief is on its own schedule, rising inside of you at the most inconvenient times and places. If you can honor grief when it shows up and allow yourself to feel it despite how inconvenient and exhausting it can be, this will allow your emotions to be processed, helping you move through your grief and loss more quickly.

Understanding acceptance

Let me clarify a bit about the stage of acceptance, as that word can feel triggering for some betrayed partners. Acceptance does not mean being OK with or excusing your partner’s behavior. Instead, acceptance is about beginning to understand how your reality has shifted, and coming to grips with how to live well in your new reality.

After my divorce, I remember asking myself, “How do I build a life that I don’t want?” I didn’t want to be single again, bearing the wounds and scars of a traumatic marriage and divorce. That is not the reality I wanted, and for a long time I couldn’t figure out how to build a life for myself based on a reality I didn’t want. Over time, however, I put bits and pieces of a new life into place—a career I love and thrive in, a lovely home that is a place of rest and play, friends and family that nurture, support, and love me. This is what acceptance looks like. It comes bit by bit, and we move in and out of it as we discover what it means to have a full and generous life in the midst of new and often challenging circumstances.

Over the coming weeks, you are going to grieve the many losses resulting from your partner’s betrayal. It is possible that the biggest losses will center around losing your sense of self, and losing the partner and relationship you thought you had.

Be gentle with yourself. Give yourself plenty of space to feel sad, to cry buckets of tears, and to talk with safe friends about what you have lost. Grief is an exhausting emotion, so you are going to be tired. Very tired. Patience with yourself and realistic expectations about what you can manage are needed. And because I don’t think betrayed partners can hear this enough, I will say it here: This will not last forever. You are going to experience joy again. You are going to come out of this and you will once again feel happiness, contentment, gratitude, and openness. This is a dark tunnel you are passing through, but there is daylight at the end of it.
For your consideration

JOURNAL PROMPT

Make a list of the things you have lost as a result of your partner’s betrayal. Many of these losses may be temporary, but if you are experiencing them right now, put them on the list. These losses can be physical things (loss of money, loss of a much-anticipated trip, loss of a friend, loss of the sexual relationship) or emotional things (loss of safety, loss of joy, loss of trust).

Allow yourself the space to feel sadness and grief around these losses. Give yourself permission to cry, to call a friend, to request comfort from those close to you. In the same way someone needs support after the death of a loved one, you need support. You have experienced the death of the relationship you thought you had, and you are grieving in the same way as a person whose loved one died.

Grief kit exercise

One of the most important things you need while grieving is comfort. Make a list of items or actions that help you to feel comfort when you are sad and grief stricken. Some items might include: A hug from your best friend, your favorite sweatshirt and yoga pants, a warm bath, a long talk with your sister, petting your dog/cat, snuggling up under your favorite throw, being held, etc. There are no right or wrong answers here. Each person is different, and what brings you comfort will be unique to you. Let yourself explore and name what you need to help you through this stage.
Summing up

As we come to the end of this book, I hope that you now have a better understanding of what is happening inside of you as a result of experiencing betrayal. I hope you have words and language to help you articulate to yourself and others the wild, chaotic, scary, and painful process you are in. I hope you feel validated. You are not crazy; nothing is wrong with you. You are in the middle of an incredibly challenging circumstance and you are reacting in normal ways to the abnormal stressor of betrayal. Most of all, I hope you know that you are not alone. Many others have experienced betrayal trauma, and there is support, care, guidance, and wisdom available to help you navigate your way. And one more time, let me say it to you, it is going to get better. This too will pass.
Acknowledgements

You would be amazed at what it takes to put a book like this out into the world. I certainly did not do this alone, and I am filled with gratitude for all the help and support I’ve had along the way. Here are some of the folks for whom I am particularly thankful.

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About the author

**Michelle D. Mays** LPC, CSAT-S is the founder of PartnerHope, a comprehensive resource and online community offering authentic hope and practical help to those recovering from betrayal trauma.

She is also the founder and Clinical Director of the Center for Relational Recovery, serving individuals and couples struggling with sexual addiction, betrayal trauma, childhood trauma, and relationship issues. She is also in the process of writing a full-length book for partners of sex addicts.

Michelle is a Certified Sex Addiction Therapist and Supervisor trained under Dr. Patrick Carnes. She is also trained in Post Induction Therapy (for the treatment of relational trauma) by Pia Mellody. She is currently completing her certification in Emotionally Focused Therapy for couples. She is a Registered Supervisor with the state of Virginia and is licensed as a Professional Counselor in both Virginia and Washington DC.

On a personal note, here are a few things to know about Michelle. Snow makes her happy. Reading is her favorite. She hates asparagus. The beach is the happiest place on earth. Her siblings and sibling-in-laws make her laugh out loud. She regularly refers to her dog as “her labness.” She would rather not be bored. Ever. A night out with friends can’t be beat. Music makes life worth living. Interior design is her secret fixation and she wants to come back as Joanna Gaines in her next life. A morning spent writing on her sun porch is the best morning ever. A tent and a campfire almost always end in tears (usually from laughter but sometimes not). And she really wishes she could teleport.

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**More hope and help**

For more hope and help in recovering from betrayal trauma visit PartnerHope.com. There you can sign up to receive a weekly blog post from Michelle, and to be part of the “testing hope” membership group when the resource site goes live in January 2018.