

Ep_65_How_Religious_Leaders_Can_Serve_Betrayed_Couples_We

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

religious leaders, trauma informed, institutional betrayal, spiritual trauma, betrayal trauma, first responder, practical support, deception, gaslighting, community support, sexual addiction, forgiveness, spiritual crisis, trauma response, faith communities

SPEAKERS

Bonny



00:03

Music. Hi. I'm Pam Blizzard from recovered peace, and



00:06

I'm Lachelle Burkett with hope redefine, and



B Bonny 00:08

I'm Bonnie burns of strong wives. We're so glad you're joining us. Welcome to another episode of hope for wives. Lachelle and Pam had other obligations today, so I Bonnie will be speaking with a very special guest. Dr Barb Steffens,



00:31

I'm glad to be here. Would



B Bonny 00:32

you like to tell our listeners a little about yourself?



00:37

Sure, I am mostly retired now, I tell people that, but I am still working a little bit, but I've been specializing in working with partners after betrayal for 26 years. 25 years, somewhere right around there, was kind of a pioneer in terms of understanding the experiences traumatic I was trying to help other partners after I had my own life changing experience, and I was already a trained mental health counselor, so I kept hearing traumatic stories, and as I looked at the information about partners, there was nothing about trauma. In fact, they were told they were co addicted or CO dependent. So anyway, that all led to me learning a lot from other women and then doing research and then finding that, yes, indeed, discovery of significant betrayal is traumatic. So that kind of was the beginning, and then I kind of been the, I don't know, kind of a pioneer and a person speaking on behalf of partners ever since and now I think of myself as the grandma of all the other people that have become trauma informed and are doing the wonderful work like you guys since then. So so yeah, I can be a grandma. I like being a grandma. I like the role of being a grandma.



B Bonny 02:05

Well, I'm glad you like that role. I mean, because I wouldn't personally call you grandma. I see you and but you are, yeah, you are a very vivacious Grandma. Yes, still on fire, still on fire, but on on behalf of the army of women who have benefited from your study, I just want to say thank you for us, for helpers to know that we are not we do not have mental illness. We are traumatized. Traumatized.



02:36

We know it now we do Yeah,



Bonny 02:40

no better. We can do better. That's right, and that's actually where we're going at this conversation. The other thing I wanted to mention on your behalf, Barb is that you are retired, yes, but also the retired founder of apps, apps, yes, and that apps, that's was a response to your study around the traumatization of partners who discovered sexual addiction in the marriage. So yeah, really was that too came



03:12

out of partners once they started understanding that they were traumatized. Once the book was released, we had a book called your sexually addicted spouse, that's based on that that that information, it really was the partners demanding better. And so some of us got together and said, What can we do to make it better? And that's how abscess was formed.



Bonny 03:38

Fantastic. Yeah. Well, I know it's been pivotal in my healing so but as we move on, we are now in this conversation. We're going to focus on how to better equip religious leaders to care for marriages. Barb is on a is on a committee, and I am honored to be on the same committee within apps that's called betrayal trauma religious leader training, yeah,



04:10

BTR L, betrayal trauma, religious leader training is something that we've started To offer, put together information curriculum, wanting to help our faith communities, our religious communities do better,



Bonny 04:30

so that our conversation is going to be around today, how religious leaders can serve betrayed couples? Well, yeah, so Barb, let's begin this conversation, and I would love for you to define and talk about institutional trauma and spiritual trauma. What are those things?



04:51

Well, institutional trauma, or another way of putting in is institutional betrayal, is just another form of betrayal trauma. Trauma, the trauma that occurs when you expect safety in a relationship and then you are harmed in that relationship. So we understand that with our spouse, you know, we expect safety and they betray us, and it's traumatizing. So institutional trauma, or institutional betrayal is when you then, after that initial betrayal and traumas experience, go to some place where you expect help, and you are received with additional betrayal. And studies have shown that that increases the level, or can increase the level of trauma in the individual. Because here I'm expecting, I'm going to go to this wonderful person, maybe it's a pastor, clergy member, Rabbi, whoever it is, and that they're going to have compassion and care for me, and they don't, or they they're just not educated, and they say things that just don't make sense, or that are heart hurtful or harmful, and then that's another betrayal, and research shows that that increases the intensity of the trauma symptoms. So one way to understand it is kind of like if you were abused as a child and you went to a teacher to tell the teacher about it, and the teacher says, Well, that can't be true. I know your grandfather, your father, they wouldn't do that. And so it's that additional not being cared for and not being believed that adds to it. So it happens in our faith communities when faith communities don't understand, don't recognize, trauma. Are uncomfortable with the topic. Mostly it's that they don't know, that they don't know, and they say things or do things that leave the person feeling even more wounded. So I'll give you an example. An example would be a woman just finds out her husband's been cheating on her or looking at pornography for decades, whatever the discovery was, and goes to a person at the their faith community, and that person says, Well, have you started forgiving them yet so totally jumping over, oh my goodness, I can't even imagine the pain. How can I help you with that? Tell me more? Going to some kind of focus rather, you know, focus on the victim, rather on the perpetration or something bad that happened, and then taking a spiritual truth. You know, forgiveness is something that we're taught to do, but it's a process. But they jump right over the pain to What are you doing? And are you forgetting? That's a really common one that partners experience that that jump to forgiveness without sitting with and hearing and processing the emotions, asking, What do you need? So that was probably a long answer, but that's a very, very perfect of what happens, and the forgiveness one is the biggest one. I've just seen some studies recently where they were looking at how were women experience, you know, what was their experience

when they went and a really common thread came up, pushing forgiveness too soon, because they don't understand, they don't know, or perhaps the person who's hearing this story is just so uncomfortable with it that they don't know what to do, and so they jump to some some spiritual kind of concept that then feels abusive to the person on the receiving end.

B Bonny 08:52

That makes sense, and I Yeah, totally. I think what's really important, if there are religious leaders listening, is to understand that, you know we aren't criticizing at this point. We are not condemning your work at all, but what Barb mentioned about the institutional slash spiritual trauma does further harm, and I have to believe that our helpers in the religious communities don't want that. No,

 09:25

that's not their desire to do not because they don't know what they don't know, or they're uncomfortable, they may jump to things that end up being

B Bonny 09:36

hurtful. I think a lot of our listeners can probably relate to what you have just described. So what can religious leaders do to minimize the spiritual trauma when a couple may come to them and the wife has just newly discovered problematic sexual behavior?

 09:53

Well, one thing, especially as we're doing this betrayal trauma, religious leader training one of. The predominant things we want to help faith providers know, faith leaders know is they can be in a role of a first responder. They don't have to fix it. They can't fix it, you know, I can't fix it, but they can be that, that first responder who asks good questions, and who listens, and so it's, you know what just happened? How are you doing? How do you feel? What do you need? Oh, I'm so sorry that this has happened here. I've got some referrals. I have some people that I know who are well trained in how to help with this, and I would love to encourage you to meet with one of them. So it's listening, it's showing empathy, it's it's having compassion and making sure that that shows be curious around you know what just happened? Leave space for what this person needs to tell you, and then find out who around you is doing this work that I have some confidence in, that I can refer to. And if you're a faith leader and you say, Man, I just don't know who would do this, then I really want to encourage you and challenge you figure that out. Ask contact abscess, contact other organizations to find out who in my area might be helpful for this. Or how could I find someone in my area? But I know that this is happening in your communities, and I know that you have compassion for these people. So just take that next step of finding out who can assist this. You know, this couple as they're going through this, and then part of your role as the faith leader is then to check in with them every once in a while. How is it going? Are you going to counseling? What changes are you seeing? What do you still need? How can we help you practically? Because a lot of times you know this is a major life crisis, like, you know, if someone's hospitalized or it's a sudden death, so ask, what kind of practical supports can our faith community provide for you while you're going through this crisis time, so maybe it's sitting with the kids or bringing food or, you know, doing some laundry, but offer practical help as well,

B Bonny 12:33

absolutely, and what you said about checking back in with them so important. I've heard story after story of heartbreak from women who go to their pastor, and maybe they go as a couple, or maybe she just goes by herself, and then it's radio silence. Yeah, there's never anyone who checks back in and that that goes along with what you're saying. It's another betrayal that you don't care enough about me to pursue me to to ask how I'm doing when I am in one of the worst situations of my life. You know, similar to a death as you were just you were just talking about. So what do you think is the obstacle for for our religious leaders not following up?

 13:26

Um, I think it could be a variety of things, certainly feeling uncomfortable, not knowing what to say. You know, our faith leaders can be amazing at times of crises, and they know what to do if there's a sudden death, and they're trained in that, and they have experience in that, but this is a little different, and because the the topic and involves sexuality or a sexual betrayal, I just think it's just more uncomfortable for the faith leader to know how to step in. I think sometimes too they don't really understand, and they think they may think, Well, what was the spouse doing that their loved one cheated on them, and so they're looking for a fault in the partner, the betrayed person that might have caused this. And again, they don't know what. They don't know that compulsive sexual behavior is not about sex. It's about numbing out. It's about a way of managing life. It

takes it becomes a beast and takes on a life of its own, and it can go on unknown and uncovered for years, if not decades. So it's not a sign of something going bad in the marriage. It's something that has happened within the relationship. Mm. And right now, the primary hurting person is the person who has been betrayed. But again, faith leaders don't really understand that they're not trained that in seminary or whatever their education is, and so we really want to be able to step in there to provide the information so that they can have that level of compassion, to be able to initially respond and then check in on how are things going? But it is uncomfortable, right? It's an uncomfortable thing to hear about someone else's sexual sin, and that's what a partner is going to come and tell you, my husband, my loved one has done something that has absolutely devastated me, something I didn't anticipate or expect.

B Bonny 15:50

So recently, I was listening to a webinar for for religious leaders. It was it was another organization, and they made a great point that you, as a religious leader, if you have some sexual baggage, if you have some sexual brokenness that you haven't addressed, you can only take people as far as you've gone. So it's really important to address your own issues in that area, and that way you'll be able to help even better.

 16:26

I agree with that. We talk about that in our training through abscess as well, that you know, the person of the leader definitely impacts how this faith community is going to respond, gosh, way, way, way back 25 years ago or something. I had a job with a nonprofit, and part of my role was trying to get into churches to talk about the pornography issue and closed door after closed door after closed door. And there were two reasons for that. One was, we don't want to talk about it because we'll be flooded and we won't be able to handle it. That was one fear. But the second was, Well, how am I going to start to talk about and address this issue when I know that many of my colleagues are dealing with this. They wouldn't necessarily say and I'm dealing with this, but we know from stats that, of course, our faith leaders are going to be struggling with this as well. It's rampant in our society now, so of course, that's an issue. So we bring that up in our training around you know, if this is the case, of course, it makes sense that you're not at a place to address this, because you need to address it yourself. So we do a gentle appeal to to look at that yourself again. This is all gentle. No one is shaking fingers. We are saying this is a place of extreme pain, and it's in our faith community, so we want to encourage people to do whatever they need to do, including getting good and healthy themselves, to make our community safer places.

B Bonny 18:20

Yes, I love that you've said yet, we're a gentle approach. We're a soft approach. Yeah, there's no shame, there's no humiliation. No, we get we're all broken,

 18:32

and it's so hard. It is just so hard. I have this vision of our faith communities, just like we can do really good job of stepping in when there's a crisis in our community. You know, you and I both live in areas where there's tornadoes. You know, in our faith communities, if something like that happens, we know how to rally and come together and offer some level of support. I just have this vision of our faith communities being able to do that in these kinds of hard situations as well. I know it's not something that everyone wants to make public, but there still can be processes and procedures in place so that if there is trauma, if there is abuse, if there is infidelity, if there is sex addiction, whatever, that hard thing is that there's a process in place on how we can go and offer at least support. Again, I don't expect the faith community to be the place where all of the counseling and all the healing processes happen. Faith community, though, can be an integral part of that in terms of support and response. So I want to say that think about how can you processes and become trauma in. Formed enough to know how to respond when there's this kind of trauma. We know how to do it with this disasters, but the individual trauma, whether it's this or sexual assault or sexual abuse, sometimes we have rules around those things, things we're supposed to do. But how do we show up and support? How do we bear witness? How do we sit with people who are in pain? Jesus did that so well. He did that. So he did and I just want us to do what he does, what he was,

B Bonny 20:43

yeah, yeah, yeah. And I, as you were speaking, supporting a marriage where there's been sexual betrayal and then a traumatized wife isn't that big of a leap from supporting a widow. And so I think knowing that it's not insurmountable to learn these tools that you already have some of the foundation, it's just seeing this through a slightly different lens, yeah, it's not, it's not

 21:21

21:21

Yeah, yeah. It's not brand new. And I think sometimes we think that this is a problem in the marriage, that this wouldn't have happened if it was a healthy marriage. Marriage takes two people and two healthy people, and if one person is doing things especially deceptively, that is breaking the marriage promise. This is not a marriage issue. It's not a sign that the spouse is not doing something. It's it's something that this person probably brought with them into the marriage without being honest about it, and now it's been uncovered. So think of it as a crisis, just like the tornado, but it was kind of there festering. So it's not a marriage issue. You may talk to the two people together to hear what's going on and what do they need, but understand that there is a severely injured party here, and that's the person who was betrayed, whether it's the husband or the wife. Whoever is betrayed, that's a severely injured party because they did not know. They could not because they did not know, they couldn't say, Oh, that's okay. They had an assumption that this was not happening because they weren't told. So they couldn't say yes, they couldn't say no. Their voice was taken away. Their agency was taken away. So we, we want to help you understand the magnitude of that, so that, yeah, you step into listening to the magnitude of that.

B Bonny 23:02

And would you say it's important for religious leaders to understand that not only is there this deceptive sexuality, but a lot of times there are behaviors that try to keep the secret. Yeah. And so when she describes a completely different man than you've ever seen. She's not wrong. She's not wrong. Yeah, you think

23:27

about someone hiding secrets for years and years. Of course, they're developed ways to maintain a secret, and so there's deception, there's direct lies, there's indirect lies, there's the just, I'm just not telling you, and they Well, I didn't lie, I just didn't tell you. And there can be this kind of manipulation of reality. We hear the word gaslighting a lot right now in our in our world, and it's used pretty broadly, but gaslighting is really around trying to alter your sense of what's true and what is the reality of the situation. So they will spin yarns that are amazing, or they will say You are overreacting, you are misunderstanding, you are thinking the worst of me, you are so they're changing the focus from, you know, yeah, maybe, maybe I should have told you where I was going. I'm really sorry about that. Rather than that, they're saying, you are always suspicious. You're just like your mom. Always like that. And so it changes the focus back to the person who is saying, What is going on? This feels crazy. What just happened. So that may be going on as well, and so that not only is something that you know this person is doing to protect their secrets, it's also eroding this sense of reality of the person on the receiving end, they start to mistrust themselves. Else in their own sense of what's real and what's not real. So there's layers of injury here, potentially that you may not notice, you may not see, but understand that it really can be there. So yeah, it's it's deception around sexual behaviors, but it's also deception in the relationship that that can erode the sense of reality for the person who's being deceived, and that is scary for the person who's on the receiving end, to not trust their own intuition, their own sense of what is true. Very scary, and that can take even longer to heal from than the deception, because they start to feel like they deceive themselves. So very complicated, yeah,

B Bonny 25:55

yes, and the lack of trust in themselves can overflow into lack of trust in God, which becomes a spiritual crisis, yeah,

26:06

yeah. I just read an article, um, I think it was a group of partners who were researched, I believe, in Australia. And the predominant theme that came up was they came to believe that God was the co conspirator. They use those words because God knows, God is all knowing. Why didn't he tell me? Why didn't he prevent this? Why didn't he intervene? So it's like God is now part of the deception. He co conspired. He withheld this from me, so there can be this break in a relationship with God, or confusion around how does a good God allow this to happen? And faith leaders, you know how to handle handle some of those questions and other kinds of situations. How did God let this tornado come through and wreck my house? Well, they're going to have that question, but in a much deeper level, when it comes to interpersonal betrayal, so understand that your your person who is coming to you is not just feeling betrayed by their spouse or betrayed by someone they went to for help, but they are very likely feeling betrayed by God. He didn't prevent it. He knew those this was going to happen. You know, however they've they view that in their relationship with God, they're going to likely experience a sense of betrayal. It's not always. I have a lot of women who say, I know God let me know because he gave me dreams, or I found the information and God was involved in that process, but there can also be that profound. Why did I have to stumble upon it? Why couldn't you let me know? Why couldn't you keep me from marrying someone that would do this? So it can take a lot of different forms, but it is part of the trauma response. It's not because this person in front of you doesn't have strong faith, or isn't a believer. It's because their world has been shattered, and God is a big part of that world.


B Bonny 28:32

So moving on in our conversation, what are some resources that religious leaders could tap into to learn more to do better

So moving on in our conversation, what are some resources that religious leaders could tap into to learn more, to do better.

 28:44


Well, of course, the first one I'm going to suggest is check into the betrayal, trauma religious leader training. We're going to be doing one in July this year, and it's it's appropriate for faith leaders to come to something like that. It's four days. We'll give you information on trauma, what it looks like when there's betrayal, ways of helping, systems you can put in place. We're going to give you all that information. Give you ideas on how to be first responders. So that would be my first and foremost suggestion, is to look at that training, and there's different ways of doing that, and we could tell you more about it if you're interested. The other thing would be to find someone in your community who is trauma, informed and understands this, so perhaps an app that's trained or certified individual who could come and kind of just help consult with you. If you don't have someone like that, contact app sets and they will find someone for you who can come and help you just talk through what are your options? I know that you do that in other settings with other um. Um situations. So I want to encourage you to do that for this, because I can guarantee you, even if they've not walked into your door or said anything to you, it's there, it's and speaking into it and saying, I'm willing to have the conversation and to be a first response or responder for you that can be life changing for people in your congregation, in your community. So do that? Do some reading? I'm going to suggest, again, read your sexually addicted spouse by Stephens and means, because we go over how it's traumatic, and it'll give you stories and examples of what that can look like, but, but it will take getting some education. So doing that in a consultive way, in a training way, those are really, really good first steps.

 30:54

Yeah, I've even spoken to religious leaders on the phone for 45 minutes to an hour just answering their questions. And I've been very impressed with how open and just wanting to learn bringing scenarios to me that I can explain from a trauma informed perspective, instead of the marriage perspective that what has she done? She hasn't done anything. Yeah, I

 31:22


just want to underline that right now that this is coming from a trauma informed perspective that we need to understand trauma and then how it can result in compulsive sexual behavior, and that trauma in terms of how it can be received when someone's secret sins are exposed. So we need to be trauma informed all around this issue, for the partner, but also for the struggler. So yeah, be trauma informed. There's some really good books on being trauma informed. So, you know, contact one of us and we can give you a list or some ideas of what to check out, but there's nothing like consulting with someone to help you figure this out. Yeah, sure, and

 32:17

we'll have all of these references and resources in the show notes, the betrayal, trauma religious leader will have a link directly to that that you can read more about it and register, and we'll have your sexually addicted spouse a link in the show notes directly to Amazon, where you can buy it. What other books off the top of your head?

 32:37

Diane langberg has written a couple books around being trauma informed within the church, so I would check her out. She also has a lot of podcasts, and you can find her on YouTube. But Diane langberg is a strong voice in the Christian community, in particular about how do we respond when there's trauma in the church. So highly encourage you to check her out.

 33:08

Yeah, yeah. And I think Ron black, from covenant eyes, wrote a book about the church that we can put in. Do you remember the name of that? I don't have it right in front of me. Sam Black has done a really, really good job on Sam black, yeah, yeah, yeah. So we'll have a link to Sam Black's book, which is focusing on the pornography issue within the church. Yeah. It's a very good read as well. Oh, well, Barb. We usually conclude with some words of hope for our listeners. So feel free to either address the betrayed wives and the recovering husbands or the religious leaders directly. Okay, in whatever hope you want to extend. Oh,

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goodness, um, the hope is that there are many, many, many of us, and we are stronger together. And heard someone say that

before, but I don't mean it that way. I mean we're stronger because we have this experience. So so find people that understand and be honest with them, and you're going to find the more risk you take to be honest with someone else, the more healing is going to start to flood in when we keep it all to ourselves, that just magnifies shame or feeling alone. So so find a community. If you are listening to this podcast. You are hungry for this. You want connection, so make sure you find connections. So whether you're the betrayed partner, you know, stay in that group, even if it feels like I've been doing this forever, stay in a group as long as you need to, because you need the community. I. Um, if you're a person struggling, there's nothing like sharing your struggles with someone else who says, young me too, and these are the things that help me. So stay in community. If you are a faith leader and you want to get in this work, you know, connect with us, because we want to help you do it, and we want to talk with you about our struggles as well, so so we can help each other in this process. So I think that's the main thing is, is find your people, find your tribe, find the folks that are doing the things you are doing or the things you want to do, and then those people are the ones that can cheer you on. We need cheerleaders. We need help that way. And

B Bonny 35:43

you mentioned Jesus earlier, and that's where I want to point us all for our hope. Jesus was kind and compassionate, and he didn't point fingers. He wrote in the sand, and he asked those without sin, cast the stone, and we know that we're all in the same boat, and we can become more and more like Christ, not only through education, but through just an open heart and asking God, help me do better. Help me find a way. And for those who are betrayed and in a marriage with a man in recovery, Lord, show us the next step. I know, Barb, you were just saying, if you've been in this group forever, and you feel like you've done this forever, maybe, you know, maybe ask God what's, what's the next group? Or what additionally Can I add? So Jesus, even if you don't trust him, he's there waiting for you,

 36:53

and he was betrayed, so he knows the experience. No, I'm just so grateful that you do this and you ask questions and you provide information. When I started doing this work, there was very little, and what there was was not very helpful. And so I just am so glad, so pleased, so grateful to God that wherever you are in the struggle, there is no need to have to walk through it by yourself. So yeah, listen. Go to podcast, go to YouTube, find the information, but connect with people. That's how we were created, to be as connected with each other and and the better we can do, the more information we have we can respond and in good, appropriate, healthy, helpful ways. So don't do it alone.

B Bonny 37:59

Well. Thank you for joining us today for this important conversation. Listeners, all the resources and workshops that Barb has mentioned will be in our show notes. As I mentioned previously, I've also said this in a previous podcast, but I'll be traveling to Australia and New Zealand during the upcoming month of September to offer free discussions and workshops around this very topic. So if you are in Australia or New Zealand and have a church organization, a ladies day, whatever that you would like to invite me to come to please email me at bonnie@strongwives.com, to get on my schedule. Please share us with women in your support groups and friends who may need our particular set of conversations. Word of mouth is the best advertising, and also, if you're willing, leave a five star rating or review on Apple. So we will talk with you again soon.