IN COVENANT: A GROUNDED THEORY EXPLORATION OF WHAT HELPS EVANGELICAL MARRIAGES RECOVER AFTER SEXUAL INFIDELITY BY THE HUSBAND

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Abstract

Infidelity is a commonly identified reason for the dissolution of marriages, including Christian evangelical marriages. Although there is empirical research investigating factors that contribute to infidelity, there is little research on how couples recover from such a breach to the marriage commitment. This study sought to answer the question: What helps evangelical marriages recover after sexual infidelity by the husband? The qualitative research was built on a semi-structured interview framework that collected the personal narratives of three couples that were a minimum of two years post disclosure of an infidelity in the marriage relationship. Infidelity, for the purposes of this research, consisted of extradyadic behaviors, such as oral, anal, or penis/vagina intercourse. The study used the inductive method of grounded theory to allow key words and conceptualizations to emerge from the data collection. The six major findings based on the analysis of the data included developing healthy communication, obtaining support and accountability, maintaining physical distance from the other woman, practicing security-priming behaviors, establishing God as a secure base, and finding a source of hope. The study’s generation of a theory about recovery from infidelity for evangelical couples will serve to inform clinicians who treat the complex issue of infidelity within the married evangelical population.

Keywords: sexual infidelity, divorce, evangelical, marriage, covenant, qualitative study
Dedication Page

This dissertation manuscript is dedicated to Brian L. Allen, my husband and best friend of 27+ years, and to Jesus Christ, my Savior and God. Thank you, Brian, for your love and friendship and for being a safe place for me to be me. Thank you, Jesus, for being a secure base for Brian and me to explore and grow our marriage. Being tethered to Jesus Christ has been our peace in times of trouble and our rest in times of joy. The covenant I share with you both is strong and sure.
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Thank you to the three couples who bravely shared their stories. I join them in the hope that the information in this study will help other marriages recover from the injury of infidelity.

Thank you to my family. You have been my support and have tirelessly cheered me on throughout this journey. To my parents, George and Phyllis Cooper, you have always loved me, believed in me, and taught me about the love of Christ. To my sister, Angela Henderson, you are my friend, my mentor, and one of my greatest blessings. To my children, Luke and Alyssa Allen, Dane and Katie Allen, and Cody and Cheyenne Allen, you encourage me with your words, your prayers, and your fabulous hugs. To my husband, Brian, this is our success. Thank you for encouraging me, for praying for me, and for choosing to go on this journey with me. Our marriage has taught me about the relentless love of God. Thank you for helping me understand the grace of Christ and that God is and will always be a secure attachment.

Lastly, thank you, Jesus, for Who You are, and for who I am in You (John 1:12; 1 John 3:1).
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List of Abbreviations

American Counseling Association (ACA)
Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC)
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
Council on Contemporary Families (CCF)
Couple 1 (C1)
Couple 2 (C2)
Couple 3 (C3)
Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy (EFT)
English Standard Version (ESV)
Exclusive Partner 1 (EP1)
Exclusive Partner 2 (EP2)
Exclusive Partner 3 (EP3)
General Social Survey (GSS)
Hope-focused approach (HFA)
Institutional Review Board (IRB)
King James Version (KJV)
Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (MAT)
Marital Satisfaction Inventory (MSI)
Moral Foundations Theory (MFT)
National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS)
Nonexclusive Partner 1 (NP1)
Nonexclusive Partner 2 (NP2)
Nonexclusive Partner 3 (NP3)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“The Lord was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant.” (Malachi 2:14, English Standard Version [ESV])

Many Christian couples believe marriage is a sacred calling (Lambert & Dollahite, 2008) and view it with an idea of permanence (Polinska, 2010). According to the 2014 provisional data report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the marriage rate in the United States is 6.9 per 1,000 of the total population (CDC, 2017). The Barna Group (2008) reported that the percentage of born-again Christians who marry (84%) is higher than the national average (78%). Although some research suggests that personal well-being and marriage are positively correlated (Helliwell & Grover, 2014), the divorce rate in the United States is still high at 3.2 per 1,000 of the total population (CDC, 2017). Despite the fact that many Christian couples include the pledge “‘til death do us part” in their marital vows (Lambert & Dollahite, 2008; Polinska, 2010), divorce statistics do include the professing religious (Barna Group, 2008). Among religious groups, however, evangelicals are reportedly some of the least likely to be divorced (see Appendix A for population segment breakdown; Barna Group, 2008).

Infidelity is one of the most commonly identified reasons for the dissolution of marriages (Abrahamson, Hussain, Khan, & Schofield, 2012; Sauerheber & Ponton, 2017). Surprisingly, there is a dearth of qualitative research on this phenomenon (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Blow & Hartnett, 2005; Esselmont & Bierman, 2014; Sauerheber & Ponton, 2017). Some empirical research has suggested reasons for the extradyadic behaviors of the nonreligious (Allen et al., 2008; Doran & Price, 2014; Herring, 2011; McDaniel, Drouin, & Cravens, 2017) as well as of the religious (Patterson & Price, 2012). These reasons include but are not limited to
pornography (Doran & Price, 2014; Patterson & Price, 2012), sexual addiction (Herring, 2011), social media (McDaniel et al., 2017), and problematic communication or lack of satisfaction in the marriage relationship (Allen et al., 2008). Within this small amount of research, there are even fewer studies addressing the process of recovering from infidelity (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Blow & Hartnett, 2005; Sauerheber & Ponton, 2017).

This study took a qualitative approach to investigate a subpopulation among couples that have recovered from infidelity. Specifically, it used participant interviews to collect data on the personal accounts of three evangelical couples that experienced a breach of fidelity by the husbands, and it applied a grounded theory method to explore the recovery process for rebuilding their relationships after disclosure.

**Background of the Problem**

Many evangelical Christians interpret marriage as a divine and eternal union that cannot be dissolved by man (Esselmont & Bierman, 2014; Jenkins, 2014; Sauerheber & Ponton, 2017). As a result, these individuals are often willing to persevere through difficult times in order to maintain the relationship (Esselmont & Bierman, 2014; Lambert & Dollahite, 2008). Infidelity, however, has threatened many such unions and is identified as one of the most challenging and problematic relationship issues for clinicians to treat (Duba, Kindsvatter, & Lara, 2008; Snyder & Doss, 2005; Snyder, Gordon, & Baucom, 2004). The individuals personally affected by infidelity do not easily understand it, nor do the clinicians tasked with helping an affected couple (Duba et al., 2008).

In recognizing the challenges that result from infidelity in marriage, it is worth investigating how some marriages survive such a trauma. Blow and Hartnett (2005) conducted a comprehensive methodological review of the research on infidelity dating back to 1980. They
concluded that although there is no lack of information on the topic, there is a significant lack of useful information for clinical practice due to the diverse focus on the topic and limited research designs (Blow & Hartnett, 2005). They suggested that future studies should offer a more narrow, specific definition of infidelity; should distinguish whether infidelities are heterosexual or homosexual relations; should seek to understand how infidelities begin and end; should seek to understand why individuals react differently to infidelity; and should seek to help clinicians understand the process of recovery from infidelity (Blow & Hartnett, 2005). Additionally, they call for more qualitative research in order to more fully understand the processes of infidelity, its correlates, and its consequences (Blow & Hartnett, 2005).

Abrahamson and colleagues (2012) also addressed the lack of useful information on infidelity. They stated, “This paucity of qualitative research involving couples who have experienced infidelity is concerning, since such research offers the potential to inform this difficult area of clinical practice and allows for in-depth exploration and analysis of the recovery process” (p. 1496). In response to the need for more enriching data, Abrahamson et al. (2012) conducted a qualitative study with seven individuals to discover what helps couples rebuild their relationship after sexual infidelity. The strength of their study is based on the narrative interviews of individuals who were still with their spouses two years after discovery. Some of the interviewees were the nonexclusive partners in their relationships; some were the exclusive partners in their relationships. The research identified key themes, such as motivation and forgiveness, for rebuilding the marriage relationship (Abrahamson et al., 2012). Gaps this researcher identified in the Abrahamson et al. (2012) study were (1) collecting data from both partners in each marriage affected and (2) identifying whether a religious belief system, such as evangelical Christianity, would impact a couple’s decision to work toward recovery.
Purpose of the Study

This research study was designed to replicate the work of Abrahamson et al. (2012) and to contribute to the knowledge on infidelity recovery in marriages among the evangelical population. More specifically, its purpose was to investigate marriage relationships in which the wife has been betrayed by the husband’s extradyadic behaviors in order to understand more about how this population recovers from sexual infidelity. Focusing on the evangelical population is important due to the dearth of population-specific recovery research (Blow & Hartnett, 2005).

In the absence of population-specific information, applying a therapeutic treatment or technique could prove to be ineffective and might even cause harm (Glaser, 2014). Consequently, the American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics (2014) requires that professional counselors use great caution when utilizing any assessment techniques normed on populations other than the present client (E.8). Thus, this study will more accurately inform clinicians in the area of clinical practice working with evangelical couples attempting to recover from sexual infidelity by setting goals that are consistent with the client’s religious or spiritual perspectives (Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling [ASERVIC], 2017, p. 12) and applying techniques that are both supported by the client’s religious or spiritual perspectives (ASERVIC, 2017, p. 13) and theoretically based in current research (ASERVIC, 2017, p. 14).

Research Question

The researcher used a semi-structured interview format to maintain this study’s focused purpose. One primary open-ended question drove the research: What helps evangelical marriages recover after sexual infidelity by the husband? This research question was explored
through a series of dialogues with both partners whereby each spouse told his or her experiences in the marriage before the infidelity, during the infidelity, and after the infidelity.

Assumptions, Limitations, Scope, and Delimitations

This study was meant to be a brick in the wall of the existing empirical research on infidelity in marriage. Like in the research by Abrahamson et al. (2012), the participants were a minimum of two years post-disclosure of the infidelity. This study was also designed to have a very targeted focus and specific inclusion criteria based on the recommendation of Blow and Hartnett (2005). These researchers stated that infidelity is a complex issue, which contains many variables, including types of infidelity, attitudes toward infidelity, gender, race, culture, religion, education, and income, and that much of the existing empirical literature is too general and too inclusive when discussing the topic (Blow & Hartnett, 2005). Thus, for this targeted study, only marriages with extradyadic behavior by the husband were explored. This criterion was based on survey data by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) that women are generally more likely than men to petition for divorce (NCHS, 1991). It is important to note that husbands who had a history of multiple episodes of infidelity due to a sexual addiction were excluded from this study. This exclusion was due to the complex nature of sexual addiction, including its potential comorbidity with various mental disorders (Bird, 2006; Levine, 2010).

Other specific inclusion criteria required the participants to be confined to a specific religious bent, which is defined in the “Key Terms” section of this chapter. The participants were heterosexuals. The participants were all from similar geographical locations, the southeastern states of South Carolina and North Carolina. The participants were referrals from evangelical pastors or licensed professional counselors and were not former or current clients of this researcher. This criterion was an effort to reduce any personal biases or preconceived

Additionally, the number of participants was limited to three couples. Keeping the interviewees to a total of six allowed the researcher to facilitate close associations with the participants and become immersed in their narratives while still achieving data saturation (M. Crouch & McKenzie, 2006).

Notwithstanding the limitations of the study due to specific inclusion and exclusion criteria, the researcher assumed that documenting firsthand accounts of surviving marital infidelity among evangelical couples would contribute valuable information on how this population recovers from infidelity. In doing so, this study would more fully inform clinical practice for working with evangelical couples in distress caused by adulterous behaviors. Additionally, it was assumed that this work would contribute to the existing qualitative research on the subject and shrink the information gap on the recovery process.

**Key Terms**

Several key terms required defining in this study.

**Covenant**

Covenant is a formal agreement “between two or more persons to do or not to do something specified” (dictionary.com, 2017). This study adopted the biblical perspective of covenant, held by evangelicals, that such an agreement is made not only between people, but also between Jehovah God and man (Baker, Sanchez, Nock, & Wright, 2009; Lambert & Dollahite, 2008). Consequently, marriage, from an evangelical worldview, is based on the religious schema that a covenant is a lasting union between God, a husband, and a wife (A. F. Johnson, 2007; Lambert & Dollahite, 2008; Sauerheber & Ponton, 2017).
Hence, the biblical covenantal oath carries severe consequences along with its solemn responsibilities. The Old Testament Hebrew word for covenant is derived from a root word, beriyth, which means “to cut” (preceptaustin.org, 2017). Jeremiah 34:18–19 depicts the cutting of a covenant by the participating parties walking between halved animal carcasses. This symbolic gesture implies that the same fate should befall the individual who breaks fidelity in the binding agreement (preceptaustin.org, 2017).

Due to the serious nature of a covenant, severing the bond is not taken lightly from a biblical worldview (preceptaustin.org, 2017). This is particularly true for the marriage covenant (Brummer, 2003; Polinska, 2010). While some evangelicals believe the Bible has some allowances for cutting the marriage ties, including adultery, abandonment, or sexual abuse (Baker et al., 2009), other evangelicals adhere to the belief that God opposes divorce based on the following passage (Attanasi, 2013):

"'Take heed then to your spirit, and let no one deal treacherously against the wife of your youth. For I hate divorce,’ says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘and him who covers his garment with wrong,’ says the LORD of hosts. ‘So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously.’” (Malachi 2:15–16, New American Standard Bible)

Infidelity

Several definitions for infidelity are identified in empirical literature. Moller and Vossler (2015) interviewed seven couple counselors in order to define infidelity based on the counselors’ work with heterosexual couples dealing with the issue. Upon conducting a thematic analysis of the interviews, Moller and Vossler (2015) found that extradyadic sexual activities, such as masturbating in the presence of another, performing oral sex, engaging in sexual play, kissing, and watching pornography in secret, may be construed as infidelity. Hertlein and Webster
(2008) synthesized existing research that used online surveys taken by both male and female participants on how technology impacts relationships negatively. They found that technology-based behaviors, such as cybersex, exchanging sexual self-images, and using online pornography, might also be interpreted as sexual infidelity (Hertlein & Webster, 2008). For the purposes of this study, however, infidelity was limited to heterosexual, extradyadic sexual activities that cross the flesh barrier, such as oral, anal, and penis/vagina intercourse.

**Evangelical**

An “evangelical” was defined using the criteria established by the National Association of Evangelicals LifeWay Research (2015), which required participants to strongly agree to the following statements:

- The Bible is the highest authority for what I believe.
- It is very important for me personally to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior.
- Jesus Christ’s death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin.
- Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God’s free gift of eternal salvation. (p. 2)

**Recovery**

For the purposes of this study, the definition of recovery was adopted from Heintzelman, Murdock, Krycak, and Seay’s (2014) quantitative study on recovery from infidelity. Thus, recovery was defined as forgiveness and posttraumatic growth within the dyad (Heintzelman et al., 2014). Heintzelman et al. (2014) derived their definition of forgiveness from Gordon and Baucom (1998), who stated, “Forgiveness is conceptualized as attaining: (a) a realistic,
nondistorted, balanced view of the relationship; (b) a release from being controlled by negative affect toward the participating partner; and (c) a lessened desire to punish the participating partner” (p. 425). Additionally, Heintzelman et al. (2014) used Tedeschi and Calhoun’s (2004) definition of posttraumatic growth, which is “the experience of positive change that occurs as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life crises” (p. 1). This positive growth can be a reevaluation of one’s beliefs or assumptions, a new appreciation for life, a new sense of personal strength, or changes in relationships and spirituality (Canevello, Michels, & Hilaire, 2016; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

**Nonexclusive Partner**

The label nonexclusive partner (NP) was used to refer to the spouse who participated in the extradyadic sexual activities that crossed the flesh barrier. This label was used in order to further replicate the Abrahamson et al. (2012) study.

**Exclusive Partner**

The label exclusive partner (EP) was used to refer to the spouse who did not participate in extradyadic sexual activities that crossed the flesh barrier. This label also replicated the Abrahamson et al. (2012) study.

**Significance of the Study**

This study provided valuable information, in the form of coded data and a conceptualized theory, for clinicians who are working with distressed evangelical couples seeking to rebuild their relationship after infidelity by the husband. As recommended by Blow and Hartnett (2005), it provided a narrow definition of infidelity, examined a particular population, collected data on the life cycle of the infidelity, and sought to understand key themes in the recovery process. Despite the narrow focus of this study, it is possible that its core concepts or its sub-core
concepts may be contextualized for use as interventions in other applications. However, care should be taken in applying the theory conceptualized from this study to a different population because any modifications may not have sufficient relevant fit (Glaser, 2014).

**Conceptual Framework**

In this research study, the conceptual framework for understanding the phenomenon of recovery in a marriage relationship after the disclosure of infidelity by the husband was based on grounded theory. This approach differs from other interpretive qualitative approaches that make inquiries of meaning from social practices and processes in that its goals are not only to describe meaning or glean understanding, but also to “develop an explanatory theory of basic social processes” (Starks & Trinidad, 2007, p. 1373). Glaser and Strauss (1967/2006) postulated that “a systematic discovery of the theory from the data of social research” is the best way to arrive at a theory most suited for its supposed uses (p. 3). Thus, the grounded theory exploration begins with no preconceived ideas to guide the research process (Harris, 2015; McLeod, 2011; Moustakas, 1994). Instead, it begins by asking the open-ended question: “What is happening here?” (Harris, 2015). By starting from this vantage point, grounded theory helped the researcher see things as they were and not as the researcher preconceived them to be (Glaser, 2014).

Grounded theory is largely an inductive methodology that requires data to be simultaneously and systematically collected and analyzed (Creswell, 2009; Harris, 2015; Moustakas, 1994). The researcher continually sought to fill gaps in the data collected, including any inconsistencies, omissions, or incomplete understandings (Moustakas, 1994), in order to more fully know what the participants did or did not do that led them to the place of recovery from their once-impaired marriages. Therefore, the researcher thoroughly interviewed
participants, transcribed interviews line by line, codified each sentence or phrase, categorized the
codes, made comparisons among the categories, and developed a theory from the emergent data
about the recovery process from infidelity (McLeod, 2011; Moustakas, 1994).

The study, however, was not atheoretical or approached as a *tabula rasa* (Glaser &
Strauss, 1967/2006). Instead, an important part of the conceptual framework included examining
existing theories on marital infidelity in the literature, bracketing that information during the
collection of new data, and then comparing it with new, emergent data from this study (Elliott &
Higgins, 2012). Based on a review of the literature, two specific theories that provided a lens for
comparison in this study were attachment theory and social constructivist theory (Allen et al.,
2008; Atwood & Seifer, 2007; Moller & Vossler, 2015; V. M. Russell, Baker, & McNulty,
2013). Attachment theory provided clarity to intrapersonal factors (Allen et al., 2008; V. M.
Russell et al., 2013); social constructivist theory gave context to cultural socialization (Allen et
al., 2008; Atwood & Seifer, 2007; Moller & Vossler, 2015).

**Organization of the Remaining Chapters**

Chapter 1 has provided an overview of this proposed research study. Chapter 2 discusses
the available findings on how couples recover from infidelity through a review of the existing
empirical literature. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology proposed for the study, including the
selection and role of participants, the role of the researcher, and the methods for collecting and
analyzing data. Chapter 4 tells the stories of the participants, using their own words; codifies the
data; identifies key themes and metanarratives; and conceptualizes a theory of how evangelical
couples recover from infidelity by the husband. Chapter 5 discusses the relevance of the study
and offers recommendations for future research.
Chapter Summary

Infidelity has been the cause of dissolution of some marriages (Sauerheber & Ponton, 2017), including evangelical marriages (Patterson & Price, 2012). However, some couples have found a way to recover from such an injurious breach to their covenant relationship (Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2006; Hall & Fincham, 2006; Heintzelman et al., 2014). Empirical research has explored the topic of infidelity; however, the available firsthand accounts of how couples rebuild after marital infidelity is paltry at best (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Blow & Hartnett, 2005). Therefore, this qualitative study was designed to collect, organize, synthesize, and interpret data from evangelical spouses who not only have experienced infidelity but also have reclaimed their marriages. This research study took a grounded theory approach to document the stories of three evangelical couples whose marriages have been compromised by the husband’s infidelity and used the data to identify emerging patterns in the narratives of these intact marriages a minimum of two years after discovery of the infidelity event. The study sought to more fully inform clinicians who work with distressed couples in this population by offering a theory for practice constructed from the shared phenomenon of recovery among participants.
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The topic of marital infidelity is not new to empirical research, although this phenomenon in marriages is not adequately understood (Atkins, Baucom, & Jacobson, 2001). Contemporary studies have provided data on risk factors of infidelity (Allen et al., 2008; Doran & Price, 2014; Herring, 2011; McDaniel et al., 2017; Patterson & Price, 2012), predictors of infidelity (Allen et al., 2008), and effects of marital infidelity (Pereira, Taysi, Orcan, & Fincham, 2014; Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2011). Some of these studies are synthesized in this review of the current literature. Fewer studies, however, have been designed to understand how partners recover from marital infidelity (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Duba et al., 2008); especially clearly defined couple populations with specific eligibility criteria (Blow & Harnett, 2005). This chapter provides an overview of the existing research acquired through online scholastic databases for empirical research journals, such as Wiley Online Library, APA PsycNET, Sage Publications, PsychINFO, Science Direct, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences, and Christian Periodical Indexes. While this information is by no means comprehensive, it is reflective of the existing research on what helps heterosexual, evangelical marriages recover after sexual infidelity by the husband.

Risk Factors of Infidelity

Some risk factors of marital infidelity include pornography (Doran & Price, 2014), sexual addiction (Herring, 2011), social networking sites (McDaniel et al., 2017), and lack of sexual satisfaction in the marriage relationship (Allen et al., 2008).

Pornography

Pornography is one contributor to infidelity in marriage (Doran & Price, 2014; Shaw, 1999; Zitzman & Butler, 2009). Research has indicated that pornography might be incongruent with the characteristics of healthy, stable marriages (Doran & Price, 2014; Manning, 2006;
Yamoah & Dei, 2015). Specifically, pornography consumption can be linked to separation and divorce, negative self-assessment of sexual experience, emotional distance, and an increased likelihood of extramarital affairs (White & Kimball, 2009).

A study by Doran and Price (2014) used data from over 20,000 ever-married respondents of the General Social Survey (GSS), a national survey of adults in the United States conducted annually since 1972 that includes questions about pornography, to investigate the impact of pornography use on marriage. They discovered that adults who had watched an X-rated movie in the past year were 25% more likely to be divorced, were 12% more likely to be unsatisfied in their marriages, and had 101% higher odds of having an extramarital affair (Doran & Price, 2014). Additionally, the study found that pornography use was positively correlated to infidelity, and its use reduced the positive relationship between frequency of sex and happiness for men (Doran & Price, 2014).

Not all pornography research, however, reported detrimental impacts on the marital relationship. For instance, although some research suggested that women felt like their partners had committed infidelity when they discovered secret pornography use (Bergner & Bridges, 2002; Doran & Price, 2014; Perry, 2016), other research reported that wives experienced less distress when husbands were honest about pornography use (Resch & Alderson, 2013). Still other studies discussed positive benefits for couples that jointly used pornography, such as heightening sexual eroticism and fantasy exploration in the relationship (Daneback, Bente, & Månsson, 2009; Perry, 2016). Despite these seemingly positive aspects of pornography use, women in such dyads often experienced lower self-esteem and less trust in the fidelity of their partners (Newstrom & Harris, 2016; Perry, 2016).
Patterson and Price (2012) conducted a study to investigate the relational impact of pornography usage among the religiously active. Using GSS data, the study showed that those who belonged to a religious organization or club and who consumed pornography experienced less overall happiness as a result of this behavior (Patterson & Price, 2012). Essentially, the GSS revealed a smaller percentage of pornography use among actively religious individuals, yet those who did participate felt more guilt about viewing pornography than secular viewers (Patterson & Price, 2012). This lower percentage of religious users, however, may be the result of underreporting by the religiously active due to shame or guilt, or it may be due to the intentional appropriation of a higher standard of moral behavior among this population because of their strong religious beliefs (Patterson & Price, 2012).

Sexual Addiction

Sexual addiction is another potential contributing factor in marital infidelity. It is defined as compulsive sexual behavior (Herring, 2011). The sexual behaviors of addicts are problematic and disturbing to those closest to them, yet their sexual behaviors continue despite negative consequences (Steffens & Rennie, 2006). Consequently, when an exclusive partner becomes aware of his or her mate’s compulsive extradyadic behaviors, the exclusive partner experiences overwhelming feelings of fear, anger, mistrust, suspicion, and hypervigilance that can lead to further erosion of the fragile relationship (Milrad, 1999; Schneider, Corely, & Irons, 1998; Steffens & Rennie, 2006).

A qualitative study by White and Kimball (2009) identified sexual addiction as a growing epidemic among evangelical Christians and found that this topic was seemingly viewed as taboo in the church pews. The researchers collected data from the case files of three Christian couples in marital therapy due to the sexual addiction of the husband (White & Kimball, 2009). The
study revealed key themes among the husbands that contributed to the addiction, including inadequate sexuality development and isolation, and it also identified fear of consequences as a main factor that kept husbands from seeking help for their addiction (White & Kimball, 2009). Research suggested that evangelical Christians are particularly vulnerable to remaining stuck in sexual addiction because their church communities lack support for teaching healthy sexuality and supporting the sexually wayward with love and acceptance (Laaser, 2003; White & Kimball, 2009).

Social Media

Empirical research has identified social networking sites as places where people go to look for sex partners and as contributors to infidelity in marriage (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017; Cravens & Whiting, 2014; McDaniel et al., 2017; C. B. Russell, 2014; Wysocki & Childers, 2011). With the World Wide Web bringing an array of virtual meeting venues to the privacy of a computer screen, relationships are taking on a whole new dynamic. Messaging, friending, poking, tweeting, snaps, and sexting are a part of the relationship-building vernacular for the online community. In this seemingly safe and private world, people connect in extradyadic ways (McDaniel et al., 2017; C. B. Russell, 2014; Wysocki & Childers, 2011).

While some have suggested that virtual connections, such as sexting, can contribute to building sexual satisfaction within the context of marital relationships (Parker, Blackburn, Perry, & Hawks, 2013), the hedonistic nature of these connections can also provide motivation for extradyadic behaviors (Davis et al., 2006; Parker et al., 2013). C. B. Russell (2014) suggested that greater use of virtual connections, such as social networking sites, led to greater amounts of pair-bond partner conflict, infidelity, breakup, and divorce, and this result was not contingent on the length of time in the romantic relationship.
Social media, particularly Facebook, is identified more and more in divorce cases filed on the grounds of infidelity (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017; McDaniel et al., 2017). According to research by Abbasi and Alghamdi (2017), “Facebook is positively correlated with marital problems and rising divorce rates” (p. 3). The most common reason for citing Facebook in a divorce filing was due to “the spouse’s inappropriate communications with other users” (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, p. 4). While this study demonstrated only correlation and not causation, it did suggest that the allure of anonymity and the availability of a variety of potential partners offered individuals an escape from their primary relationships and provided a venue for emotional and sexual infidelity (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017).

**Sexual Dissatisfaction**

The literature has identified many other factors that may increase the likelihood of marital infidelity, such as gender differences (Treas & Giesen, 2004), an individual’s age at the time of marriage (Atkins et al., 2001), education and income levels in the dyad (Atkins et al., 2001), more permissive sexual values and sexual opportunities (Atkins et al., 2001; Treas & Giesen, 2004), and religious influences and biases (Atkins et al., 2001; Burdette, Ellison, Sherkat, & Gore, 2007; Regnerus & Smith, 2005), just to highlight a few. This review, however, will focus on one last potential risk factor: lack of sexual satisfaction in the marriage (Allen et al., 2008; Duba et al., 2008; Yucel & Gassanov, 2010).

Yucel and Gassanov (2010) conducted a cross-sectional study to understand sexual satisfaction in the marriage relationship. They analyzed data from 433 married couples “within the frameworks of the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Cook & Kenny, 2005) and the Interpersonal Exchange Model of Sexual Satisfaction (IEMSS; Lawrance & Byers, 1992), which called attention to the dyadic nature of the marital relationship” (Yucel & Gassanov, 2010,
The researchers explored various associations of what they refer to as “costs and rewards,” which contributed to the frequency of a couple’s sexual engagement, and, according to the study, one’s overall sexual satisfaction in marriage (Yucel & Gassanov, 2010).

Costs were defined as negative associations that decreased a couple’s desire to be sexually intimate with one another. Some of the costs for both men and women identified in the study were a single partner’s use of pornography, premarital sexual histories, and feelings of distrust or rejection due to unfaithfulness in the dyad (Yucel & Gassanov, 2010). Rewards, on the other hand, were defined as positive associations that increased a couple’s desire to be sexually intimate with one another. Some of the rewards for both men and women identified in the study were an exclusive and mutually faithful relationship, emotional satisfaction, and physical satisfaction (Yucel & Gassanov, 2010). The researchers suggested that secret or single-user pornography use, premarital cohabitation either with a spouse or a person other than the spouse, and unfaithfulness were all high-cost variables in marital sexual satisfaction and could have ultimately contributed to relationship breakdown (Yucel & Gassanov, 2010).

**Predictors of Infidelity**

Risk factors of infidelity are after-the-fact considerations. There are, however, predictors of infidelity that may identify individuals as more susceptible to being unfaithful in a pair-bonding relationship. Some of these predictors include problematic communication styles (Allen et al., 2008), personality styles (Davis et al., 2006), and attachment styles (Fish, Pavkov, Wetchler, & Bercik, 2012).

**Problematic Communication Styles**

Allen et al. (2008) conducted a longitudinal study on precursors to infidelity with 72 couples. They utilized a diathesis-stress model to compare partners who experienced infidelity
during the first year of marriage with partners who did not experience infidelity the first year of marriage (Allen et al., 2008). They used measures, such as the Marital Satisfaction Inventory (MSI; Snyder, 1979), the sensual/sexual satisfaction subscale of the MSI (Snyder, 1979), and the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (MAT; Locke & Wallace, 1959), to assess infidelity precursors such as temptation, relationship adjustment, sexual satisfaction, and communication patterns in marriages (Allen et al., 2008). The study indicated that the most consistent predictors of marital infidelity were lower levels of positive interaction and higher levels of invalidating interactions (Allen et al., 2008). They suggested that couples that have lower levels of positive communication patterns were more vulnerable to extramarital relationships (Allen et al., 2008).

Krivickas, Sanchez, Kenney, and Wright (2010) identified hostile and withdrawing as two maladaptive communication styles in their longitudinal study on maladaptive marital communication among individuals with traumatic childhood abuse. They suggested that individuals with a history of childhood abuse are often less confident and less able to establish meaningful communication in relationships, and thus are more likely to have higher levels of marital distress and suffer subsequent degenerative consequences (Krivickas et al., 2010).

In general, the study reported that hostile communication styles, such as sarcasm, anger, and screaming, are often developed from physical and verbal abuse in childhood (Krivickas et al., 2010). Notably, this communication pattern is heightened for both men and women in marriages where there has been prior cohabitation or a prior marriage by either spouse (Krivickas et al., 2010). The study identified withdrawing communication styles, such as remaining silent or attempting to leave, among adults who were victims of physical and sexual abuse (Krivickas et al., 2010). Interestingly, the study noted that parental conflict and childhood abuse had little effect on the husband’s use of withdrawing communication, but these strongly impacted a wife’s
withdrawing (Krivickas et al., 2010). Furthermore, the study suggested that premarital counseling is not necessarily an efficacious context for dealing with these types of maladaptive communication patterns wrought by the effects of childhood abuse, but it might be useful in identifying potential red flags in the marriage relationship as well as filtering for abuse histories (Krivickas et al., 2010).

**Personality Styles**

Personality styles are believed to impact marital satisfaction and are often a viable predictor for the likelihood of sexual infidelity in the dyadic relationship (Baumeister, Gailliot, DeWall, & Oaten, 2006; K. A. V. Gibson, Thompson, & O'Sullivan, 2016; Mark, Janssen, & Milhausen, 2011; Shackelford, Besser, & Goetz, 2008). The literature has placed much attention on what are called the Big Five personality traits (Baumeister et al., 2006; K. A. V. Gibson et al., 2016; Mark et al., 2011; Shackelford et al., 2008). Research has found that these five traits, extraversion, low agreeableness, low conscientiousness, high neuroticism, and high psychoticism, are prognostic characteristics of individuals given to risky sexual behaviors, including infidelity (Mark et al., 2011). In addition, narcissistic traits have been found to predict infidelity. Several of these personality styles are examined more closely in the following subsections.

**Extroversion.** Extroversion is often indicative of high energy, high self-esteem, and an overall positive affect (Barta & Kiene, 2005). It has also been found, however, to be an attractive trait for those seeking sexual partners (Schmitt, 2004). Consequently, the extroverted personality tends to have a more relaxed view of relationship exclusivity and may be prone to extramarital flirting or engaging in other extradyadic behaviors (K. A. V. Gibson et al., 2016).
**Agreeableness and conscientiousness.** A meta-analysis of 45 studies on the relationship between personality and sexual risk by Shackelford et al. (2008) showed that individuals who scored high on agreeableness and those who scored high on conscientiousness were less likely to engage in high-risk sexual behaviors. Conversely, studies demonstrated that low agreeableness and low conscientiousness personality traits were linked to infidelity (K. A. V. Gibson et al., 2016; Schmitt, 2004; Shackelford et al., 2008). Individuals low in agreeableness tended to be deceitful and nonempathetic, and those low in conscientiousness were often disorganized and unreliable (Shackelford et al., 2008). People with these traits were also prone to low self-regulation and ego depletion, which potentially made them more vulnerable to satisfying impulsive urges (Baumeister et al., 2006).

**Narcissism.** Narcissism is another personality trait that is often predictive of sexual infidelity (McNulty & Widman, 2014; Shackelford et al., 2008). This personality style is characterized by its tendencies to exploit others for personal pleasure or gain, a lack of care or empathy for others, permissive attitudes toward sociosexuality, and an inflated sense of personal sexual skills and abilities (McNulty & Widman, 2014; Shackelford et al., 2008). Additionally, data from 123 newlywed couples participating in a study to examine domain-specific measures of narcissism that lead to infidelity revealed that sexual exploitation, sexual entitlement, low sexual empathy, and confidence in sexual skill were all facets consistently associated with extradyadic behaviors in narcissistic spouses (McNulty & Widman, 2014).

Interestingly, Hunyady, Josephs, and Jost (2008) experimented with mind-set priming techniques to see if individuals with narcissistic personality traits could change their attitudes toward sexual infidelity. The results demonstrated that when primed to identify and empathize
with the betrayed partner, narcissistic men experienced a changed mind-set and disapproved of extradyadic sexual behaviors (Hunyady et al., 2008).

**Neuroticism.** The trait of neuroticism has been found to be a predictor of sexual dissatisfaction (Gottman, 1994; Schmitt, 2004) and marital infidelity (Schmitt, 2004). The features of this trait include emotional distress, such as anxiety, depression, and anger (Schmitt, 2004). A predictive study on marital infidelity by Whisman, Gordon, and Chatav (2007) found that individuals high in neuroticism were more likely to engage in sexual behaviors outside of the marital relationship. Although the reason for the risky sexual behavior remained unclear to researchers (Schmitt, 2004; Whisman et al., 2007), it was postulated that the sexual behavior was used as a coping mechanism for emotional distress or that the individuals high in neuroticism were unable to manage impulsive urges (Trobst, Herbst, Masters, & Costa, 2002).

**Attachment Styles**

Attachment styles are primarily categorized as secure or insecure, and these systems often find their roots in the primary caregiver–infant relationship (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2013; Kirkpatrick, 1992; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Secure attachment, or autonomy, is characterized by confident exploration and seeking proximity to a safe base in the presence of a threat (Bowlby, 1969). Insecure attachment, on the other hand, include anxious and avoidant styles (Bowlby, 1969). Anxious attachment refers to the degree to which individuals crave closeness and protection but fear that others will not be available to them or will find them unworthy (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Avoidant attachment refers to the degree to which individuals prefer self-reliance and emotional distance from others (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Empirical research has proffered that adult attachment patterns are related to moral decision-making (Njus & Okerstrom, 2016). Moral decision-making, based on Graham, Haidt,
and Nosek’s Moral Foundations Theory (MFT; 2009), is preceded by moral intuition or judgment and by moral reasoning or the explanation of a moral judgment. According to the theory, all people are born with the same basic moral preparedness, but socialization and cultural immersion influence selective retention or loss of these moral foundations (Graham et al., 2009; Njus & Okerstrom, 2016). Thus, according to MFT, moral foundations are both innate and shaped by culture, and these influences ultimately impact individual moral thinking and behavior and attachment style in interpersonal relationships (Graham et al., 2009; Njus & Okerstrom, 2016).

As a result, research has suggested that individuals with secure attachment are more sophisticated in moral reasoning because they are better able to consider the needs of others, exhibit empathy, and resist group pressures toward conformity (Njus & Okerstrom, 2016). Individuals with insecure attachment styles, however, might alter their moral decision-making for their own comfort levels (Njus & Oserstrom, 2016). A study by Gillath, Sesko, Shaver, and Chun (2010) explored moral decision-making and attachment styles. They reported that securely attached individuals seemed to be honest both with self and with others, anxiously attached individuals exhibited dishonesty toward romantic partners and others, and avoidantly attached individuals were inauthentic with self and others (Gillath et al., 2010). Furthermore, research has indicated that insecure attachment styles are negatively related to positive qualities, such as care, fairness, and loyalty, in adult romantic attachments (Njus & Okerstrom, 2016), suggesting that secure and insecure attachment styles have different moral psychological profiles that drive behaviors in interpersonal relationships such as marriage (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2012).

Fish et al. (2012) conducted an analysis of 93 males and 260 females, ranging in ages from 18 to 75. The participants were of various cultures, sexual orientations, and marital statuses.
(Fish et al., 2012). The study was designed to explore the concepts of differentiation and insecure attachments within the context of extradyadic behaviors. The study demonstrated that individuals with higher levels of attachment anxiety (fearful and preoccupied) were more likely to engage in emotional or physical infidelity (Fish et al., 2012). Individuals with avoidant attachment styles were shown to have a need to exert independence within intimate relationships; however, there was no significant relationship between high avoidance and infidelity, although physical infidelity scores were higher than emotional infidelity scores for this population (Fish et al., 2012). Additionally, bivariate correlations in the study revealed that individuals with significantly lower levels of differentiation participated in extradyadic behaviors at significantly higher levels, and fusion and emotional reactivity were positively correlated with proneness to participate in infidelity among this population (Fish et al., 2012).

Relationally, it has been demonstrated that there are similarities between the infant-caregiver dyad and the adult pair-bonding dyad (Bales et al., 2017), including touch, cooing, and prolonged eye contact (Kirkpatrick, 1992, 2005). Research has suggested that in the absence of a secure adult attachment relationship, God might be an adequate substitute attachment figure (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2013; Kaufman, 1981; Miner, Dowson, & Malone, 2014). Even Freud (1927/1961) postulated that God was created out of a need for omnipotent protection and secure attachment. Kirkpatrick (1992) identified God-attachment behaviors, such as prayer, upraised arms, and glossolalia, as attachment behaviors reminiscent of a secure infant-caregiver relationship. Research has found that anxious individuals were more likely than either secure or avoidant individuals to seek God attachment (Counted, 2016; Kirkpatrick, 1992, 1997). Studies have also suggested that participants who had reported insecure maternal attachments in childhood, but who had undergone radical attachment change due to a relationship with God,
experienced less emotional reactivity, more emotional stability, and became more loving and less distant in their adult attachment relationships (Beck & McDonald, 2004; Kirkpatrick, 1992, 1997; Miner et al., 2014).

**Effects of Infidelity**

**Shame**

Regardless of the stimulus for the betrayal behavior, infidelity often results in intense feelings of shame and emotional dysregulation for both the nonexclusive partner and the exclusive partner (Campbell & Elison, 2005; Dickerson, Gruenaewald, & Kemeny, 2004; Janin, 2015; Steffens & Rennie, 2006; Tangney et al., 2011). Tangney and colleagues (2011) described shame as an emotion arising from public exposure to moral or ethical violations. Shame is considered to be an intrapsychic, extremely painful emotion because it deals with one’s core self and not just with one’s behavior (Dickerson et al., 2004; Tangney et al., 2011). Men, in particular, “are highly prone to hearing shame, inadequacy, and failure in the context of marital disappointment and conflict” (Giblin, 2011, p. 131). Thus, the emotion is accompanied by a sense of shrinking, a sense of worthlessness, and a sense of powerlessness (Dickerson et al., 2004; Tangney et al., 2011). Additionally, shame is an emotion comorbid with most addictions and has been identified as an instigator of pornography use (Chisholm & Gall, 2015). Consequently, shame often produces a need to hide, thus increasing one’s sense of vulnerability or loneliness and perpetuating a negative behavioral cycle (Tangney et al., 2011).

**Impaired Couple Attachment**

Infidelity often leads to impaired attachment (Pereira et al., 2014). It is important to note that sexual intimacy in the marriage relationship involves more than physical connection; it also involves emotional vulnerability (Pereira et al., 2014). The fracture of trust due to infidelity can
lead to negative or fear-based feelings of being unsafe, unwanted, and unloved in the exclusive partner (Pereira et al., 2014). Threatening events, such as infidelity, cause a person’s attachment system to activate, whereby the individual seeks protection through proximity to his or her attachment figures (Gillath et al., 2006). When the pair-bonding relationship has been damaged because of adultery, however, partners can have a heightened sense of loneliness, depression, and insecurity (Pereira et al., 2014).

**Divorce**

Such extradyadic behavior can have devastating effects on the exclusive partner (Duba et al., 2008), and it also leads to a high probability of divorce (E. Crouch & Dickes, 2016; Duba et al., 2008). Infidelity is often viewed not only as a marital betrayal, but also as a form of deviant behavior (Previti & Amato, 2004). In fact, many states considered infidelity to be one of the few legal grounds for divorce before the establishment of no-fault divorce laws (Previti & Amato, 2004). A cross-sectional study (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994) reported that extradyadic behaviors were more likely to be reported in marriages that had ended in divorce than in intact marriages. Likewise, Allen and Atkins (2012) reviewed a number of studies that indicated divorce was strongly associated with infidelity and that infidelity is often cited as the reason for divorce. In a study of their own, they found that a history of extramarital sex increased the odds of being divorced and not remarried 4.1 times compared to being married and never divorced (Allen & Atkins, 2012).

Even though divorce is frequently concomitant with adulterous behaviors, this is not always the case. A 2014 report by the Council on Contemporary Families (CCF) used data from the GSS to document trends among Americans with religious affiliations between 1972 and 2012 (Park, Tom, & Andercheck, 2014). Their report noted that White Catholics and mainline
Protestants were less likely to be divorced than the national average (12.5% versus 14.2%). Interestingly, the report identified evangelical Protestants, with a 17% divorce rate, as more likely to be divorced than the average American who claims no religious affiliation (Park et al., 2014).

The 2014 CCF study attributed church attendance and strong biblical beliefs to lower divorce rates among Protestant Christians and Catholics (Park et al., 2014). It attributed higher divorce rates among the evangelical Christians to lower education levels and early-age marriages, which they stated are common among this population (Park et al., 2014). Other research also identified people who were active in their faith, regardless of the faith system, as having a lower propensity to abandon the marriage relationship even in the face of treacherous events, such as infidelity (Esselmont & Bierman, 2014; D. Gibson, 2008).

**Impaired Family System**

Infidelity not only affects the couple, it also impairs the nuclear family system (Hertlein & Stevenson, 2010; Negash & Morgan, 2016; Vossler, 2016). There are many devastating results to the family. Some impacts of infidelity include dissolution of the nuclear family (Hertlein & Stevenson, 2010; Negash & Morgan, 2016); social and economic repercussions for family members (E. Crouch & Dickes, 2016); psychiatric distress, such as depression (Cano & O’Leary, 2000), anxiety (Cano & O’Leary, 2000; Marin, Christensen, & Atkins, 2014), and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among family members (Marin et al., 2014); adjustment disorders in children (Amato & Afifi, 2006; Harold, Shelton, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2004); and negative impacts on adult children’s romantic attachment styles and proclivity toward infidelity (Platt, Nalbone, Casanova, & Wetchler, 2008).
Recovery from Infidelity

The literature does not offer a wealth of information on the phenomenon of couple recovery from extradyadic behaviors (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Blow & Hartnett, 2005; Schneider, 1989). However, one narrative inquiry study with seven individuals who had experienced sexual infidelity in their marriages identified key themes in the recovery process: participants acknowledged that the recovery process was arduous and required forgiveness, managing thoughts, new learning, changing couple dynamics, and seeking counseling (Abrahamson et al., 2012).

While counseling has also been identified in some studies as a help in the recovery process (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2004; Greenberg, Warwar, & Malcom, 2010; Worthington & Scherer, 2004), one mixed-methods study by Walters and Burger (2013) on disclosure of infidelity to primary partners revealed that none of the informants who participated in the study were so distressed by the infidelity or the act of disclosure that they felt they needed counseling. This may be due to the small sample size of 22 in the study, or it may speak to an underinvestigated attitude toward self-discovery in the act of infidelity (Walters & Burger, 2013).

Sauerheber and Ponton (2017) stated, “There is little guidance for the counselor working with a Christian couple that addresses issues of infidelity” (p. 54). The help that does exist, however, consists of three basic components in the treatment model: disclosure (Marin et al., 2014; Pittman, 1989; Walters & Burger, 2013; Winek & Craven, 2003), interventions (Aalgaard, Bolen, & Nugent, 2016; Bagarozzi, 2008; Beckerman & Sarracco, 2002; Enright, Gassin, & Wu, 1992; Gordon et al., 2004; Greenberg et al., 2010; S. M. Johnson, Makinen, & Millikin, 2001; Sauerheber & Ponton, 2017; Worthington & Scherer, 2004), and the role of the therapist
Role of Religion in Marriage

A few studies have indicated that having a religious belief system might have some positive influence on marital fidelity (Ellison, Henderson, Glenn, & Harkrider, 2011; Greenwood, 1990; Lambert & Dollahite, 2008). Ziv, Lubin, and Asher (2017) conducted such a study. They reported that religiosity was a stronger reason for individuals to remain faithful to their spouse even above concern for the effects infidelity would have on the partner or children (Ziv et al., 2017). Their findings were based on a questionnaire of 29 perceived reasons to resist temptation taken by 423 participants (Ziv et al., 2017).

Lambert and Dollahite (2008) suggested that couples that attend church on a regular basis have a lower divorce rate than couples that do not regularly attend church together (44% versus 60%). A key theme that emerged from this study was the belief that marriage should not be dissolved (Lambert & Dollahite, 2008). Therefore, since leaving the marriage was not an option, couples felt determined and motivated to work through problems (Lambert & Dollahite, 2008). This effect of religiosity may be attributed not only to the biblical perspective, but also to the Jungian perspective, that marital commitment among the religious is not only a conscious commitment to another but also a reverential fear and commitment to a higher power at an unconscious level (Greenwood, 1990; Lambert & Dollahite, 2008). Marriage is seen as being made up of three: husband, wife, and God (Lambert & Dollahite, 2008), as having divine character and being sacred (Ellison et al., 2011).

Religious tenets, such as forgiveness, church attendance, and prayer, appear to play a role in the interpersonal framework of many Christian marriages (Aalgaard et al., 2016; D. Gibson,
2008). However, the degree to which religion influences marital satisfaction and marital fidelity may reside in the individual’s commitment to a sanctified life, or one that embodies the divine (Ellison et al., 2011). Research has suggested that religious beliefs, such as viewing the marriage as sacred, might bolster dyadic fidelity (Esselmont & Bierman, 2014). Thus, the belief of sanctification in a marriage may be the differentiating factor in affair-proofing relationships (Esselmont & Bierman, 2014). Marin et al. (2014) suggested that future research should include qualitative data on the role of spiritual and religious beliefs in leveraging strength in marriages before and after the disclosure of infidelity.

Chapter Summary

This chapter described the existing literature on the topic of infidelity, which largely provided statistical-type data for occurrences and topical generalizations. It appeared that the primary focus of the infidelity literature was on causes, predictors, and effects. The call for more qualitative data featuring firsthand accounts of the recovery process as a whole and among criteria-specific populations was cited in many studies as a need for future research (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Blow & Hartnett, 2005; Sauerheber & Ponton, 2017; Schneider, 1989). The purpose of this study was to fill a small gap in this wide-open space with relevant qualitative data that will help inform clinical theory pertaining to recovery from infidelity in Christian couples specifically. Chapter 3 will discuss the methods for this grounded theory study.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

The purpose of this research study was to explore the process of recovery among evangelical couples that have experienced sexual infidelity by the husband, and to inform the area of clinical practice working with this population about the theory that emerges from and is substantiated by the research process (Harris, 2015). The qualitative nature of this study allowed for rich data mining and interpretation based on real-life experiences (Harris, 2015). Participants told their stories of recovery, and the researcher took a hermeneutical approach to developing a theory of recovery by analyzing the details of their shared phenomenon (McLeod, 2011; Moustakas, 1994). Chapter 3 includes information pertaining to the qualitative research design, the researcher, the research question, the participants, the interview setting, data collection and analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations. It concludes with a chapter summary.

Research Design

Grounded theory was the approach to inquiry for this qualitative study. The aim of this methodology is to go beyond describing participants’ stories to generating a theory about the basic social processes of their shared phenomenon of recovery (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Creswell, 2007). The study’s design allowed the researcher to examine the causes, contexts, contingencies, consequences, covariances, and conditions that make up the social processes of recovery for the participants (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Although this grounded interpretative research was aimed at constructing an integrated theory from the data collected, its process was open and was influenced and guided by discoveries and interpretations of data along the way (Holliday, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, there are no sequential steps that confined the research (Moustakas, 1994). Grounded theory provided a robust approach for producing a
pragmatic framework for understanding how evangelical marriages recover from infidelity by the husband (McLeod, 2011).

It is important to note that there are two different schools of research thought concerning grounded theory: objectivist grounded theory and social constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2008; Taghipour, 2014). Objectivist grounded theory is the process of generating “a theory from data systematically obtained from social research” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2006, p. 1). The objectivist seeks answers to the “why” questions, desiring explanation and prediction at a general level from a specific research site and process (Charmaz, 2008). This theory is rooted in post-positivist epistemology and is based on an etic position by the researcher, who is the observer (Taghipour, 2014). This type of grounded theory seeks to uncover existing truths (Taghipour, 2014) or latent patterns of behavior (Breckenridge, Derek, Elliot, & Nicol, 2012).

Social constructivist (also referred to as “social constructionist” by Charmaz, 2008) grounded theory, on the other hand, is rooted in interpretive tradition and relativism (Taghipour, 2014). It seeks to answer the “what” and “how” questions (Charmaz, 2008). It is based on an emic position by the researcher, who partners with the participants and co-constructs a theory of a social process that includes the researcher’s perspectives, values, positions, and understandings of social realities (Charmaz, 2008; Taghipour, 2014). The constructivist, unlike the objectivist, searches for meaning in the relative realities of the participants (Taghipour, 2014) and attempts to construe how participants formulate their truths in a synthesized theory (Breckenridge et al., 2012). For the purpose of this study, the researcher took a constructivist approach to grounded theory.

Furthermore, Moustakas (1994) discussed the overarching tenets that guide grounded theory research. The following tenets were adhered to for this study:
• Continually question any gaps in the data;
• Avoid fixed methods or procedures and allow the data to guide the process;
• Recognize the importance of context and social structure;
• Generate theory and data from interviewing individuals rather than simply observing individuals’ practices;
• Concurrently collect, code, and analyze the data; and
• Allow the theory to grow out of and be grounded in the data.

Locating the Researcher

I am a doctoral student at Liberty University, in Lynchburg, Virginia, and currently hold a master’s degree in professional counseling from Liberty University. As a licensed professional counselor in the state of South Carolina, I work with married couples in both secular and faith-based settings.

I have been married to my husband for 27 years. During this time, we have had three sons, three daughters-in-law, two grandchildren, and plenty of life challenges. My family has a long evangelical heritage that goes back five generations. It was a personal belief in my younger life that Christian marriages are different from those that are not built on the “Rock” of Christian beliefs and values. However, in my adult life, through both personal and professional experiences, I have learned that no marriage is immune to stressors, challenges, or traumatizing events. Thus, I have a passion to better understand how to help couples recover from difficult times, including infidelity.

I agree with Duba et al. (2008) that infidelity is one of the most challenging relationship issues. In my professional work with couples challenged by adultery, it is not uncommon for only one spouse to come for counseling. This might be because the broken covenant has resulted
in the partners living separately, or it might be because emotions between the partners are so sensitized that one spouse is simply unwilling to attend marriage counseling for fear of being judged or for fear of another confrontation. I have experienced some couples in which both the nonexclusive partner and the exclusive partner believed that recovery from something like “this” was impossible, and consequently, they resolved that divorce was inevitable. After all, how can a person just forget and forgive such a betrayal? Yet I have also witnessed other couples that survive and recover. This brings me hope that if a few can, perhaps more can.

The desire to see marriages thrive, despite the setbacks of hurts or betrayals, is what has fueled my passion for this qualitative study. I want to approach this research with a new mind and to scrutinize any preconceived ideologies (Holliday, 2016) as I hear the stories of those who have rallied. I want to identify common themes in the narratives and to analyze each detailed account from disclosure to recovery in order to formulate a practical theory of recovery for myself and for others working with married couples distressed by sexual infidelity.

**Research Question**

The central research question for this study was: What helps evangelical marriages recover after sexual infidelity by the husband?

**Selection of Participants**

The study’s focus was on the particular phenomenon of the process of marital recovery from infidelity by the husband. Therefore, participants for the study were selected by means of purposive sampling (Harris, 2015). Purposive sampling is a type of nonprobability selection of participants in order to ensure they can provide relevant data for the study’s focus (Harris, 2015). The study examined the narratives of three evangelical couples. Keeping the interviewees to a total of six allowed the researcher to facilitate close associations with the participants and
become immersed in their narratives while still achieving data saturation (M. Crouch & McKenzie, 2006).

Inclusion criteria required participants to be heterosexual evangelicals. Participants included both partners. Only marriages with extradyadic behavior by the husband were considered. Emotional or cyber affairs without physical contact did not fit the criteria. Extradyadic behaviors for this study crossed the flesh barrier through acts such as oral, anal, or penis/vagina intercourse. Husbands who had repetitive infidelity were excluded from the study. Additionally, couples were a minimum of two years post initial disclosure and still married in order to replicate the Abrahamson et al. (2012) study. Qualifying participants may or may not have received therapeutic treatment for the infidelity.

Potential couples were solicited through referrals from evangelical pastors or licensed professional counselors in the upper region of South Carolina. Cooperating pastors and counselors were given an information document to share with interested parties (see Appendix E). The document included the scope of the study, including the purpose of the study, participation criteria, limits of confidentiality, permission to record interviews, and the process for protecting and disposing data collected. Additionally, the document informed potential participants that participation was voluntary and would not impact their existing relationships with their pastors or therapists. Couples chosen for the research study received a $30 dining gift card as compensation for participation.

**Interview Setting**

An interview setting should be a quiet and suitable place to conduct an interview, but it should also be natural to the participants (Creswell, 2008). Therefore, the researcher met with each couple in an environment of their own choosing. One couple chose to meet in their home
environment. These participants were asked to ensure the in-home interviews could take place in a part of the home where children were not present and confidentiality could be protected. One couple chose to meet in their private office. And one couple chose to meet in the researcher’s counseling office, located in Anderson, South Carolina. Creswell (2008) discouraged settings where there is an imbalance of power between the participants and the researcher or where the researcher appears to be in a superior position. Therefore, the researcher ensured her office provided a confidential and welcoming environment that included comfortable temperature, lighting, and seating and offered bottled waters to the participants. The seating was arranged in a manner so that there was no hierarchical order of the seats and no barriers (such as a desk) between the participants and the researcher. The researcher requested to audio and video the interviews. Each couple, however, declined to be videoed and only allowed the researcher to audio record the interviews. Additionally, two of the couples asked to stay together for their interviews.

**Data Collection**

The data were collected from both the exclusive partner and the nonexclusive partner through information provided in the participant information screening form (see Appendix D) and through face-to-face interviews with the researcher. The participant information form was used to screen potential participants who were referred to the researcher and who agreed to be vetted for the study. Three couples that met the criteria for the study based on the form were scheduled for face-to-face interviews. The information forms of any couple not selected were destroyed immediately.

The interview questions (see Appendix F for the full list of interview questions) were used to investigate the study’s research question: What helps evangelical marriages recover after
sexual infidelity by the husband? There were two interviews per person. Two of the couples, however, chose to remain together during the interviews, although questions were still addressed to each individually. Additionally, all three of the couples requested to conduct both interviews within the same day. The researcher accommodated this request.

The researcher asked permission to arrive at the interviewee setting a minimum of 10 minutes before the scheduled interview time. This gave the participants a chance to read and sign the informed consent form, which explained the purpose of the interview, permission to record the interview, limits of confidentiality of the interview, and disposal of data collection after completion of the research project (see Appendix E for Informed Consent Form for participants).

The interviews started with courteous pleasantries in order to help the interviewees become comfortable (Creswell, 2008). The audio recording began when the interviewee indicated that he or she was ready.

The first interview lasted for approximately 60–70 minutes and was divided into two parts. The researcher began the conversation with questions that allowed the individual to provide a brief biography or oral life history in order to understand the person in his or her context (Creswell, 2008). The heart of the interview, which addressed the life cycle of the infidelity, was semi-structured to ensure that specific data were collected pertaining to the recovery phenomenon. However, the interview questions were open-ended to allow the participants to share full thoughts and not restrict their responses (Creswell, 2008). The researcher also used probes to follow up on areas of interest or to glean more complete information (Creswell, 2008) while being careful to approach sensitive issues without reductive judgments (Holliday, 2016).
Part 1 of the first interview focused on eliciting factual information from both the nonexclusive partner and the exclusive partner about the infidelity, as well as subjective information based on each partner’s personal experience with the infidelity.

**Initial Questions for Each Participant**

- Tell me about your marriage relationship prior to the disclosure of infidelity.
- How would you describe your home environment?
- What were the stressors that impacted your relationship (children, work, finances, health, etc.)?
- How was the infidelity initially found out?
- What did the process of full disclosure look like?
- How did the nonexclusive partner (offender) respond to being “found out”?
- How did the exclusive partner (nonoffender) respond to finding out?
- What aspects of your family of origin might have influenced your reactions to finding out about the infidelity?
- Describe any apology that may have been offered for the infidelity.
- What factors influenced each spouse to stay with the marriage and pursue healing?
- Describe how the relationship was managed in the days, weeks, months following the disclosure.
- What strategies, including the daily choices and activities of both spouses, were used during the recovery process?

**Reflective Questions for Each Participant**

After a brief intermission, part 2 of the first interview had each individual reflect on his or her personal accounts of the infidelity. The prompting questions were:
- As you reflect on your marriage, what factors do you think might have contributed to the infidelity?
- What was the impact of the disclosure of the infidelity on you? What do you think the impact of the disclosure had on your spouse?
- What hurt most deeply about the disclosure of the infidelity?
- What were things like for you in the aftermath of the disclosure?
- What do you think enabled you to stay in the relationship after the disclosure of the infidelity?
- Discuss the resources you used to gain personal strength from during the time of disclosure to recovery.
- Describe your current level of functioning and security in the relationship, including levels of trust, hurt, shame, or anger.
- How has the infidelity impacted your relationship with your spouse?
- How has the infidelity impacted your sexual relationship with your spouse?
- How has the infidelity impacted your relationship with other family members, such as your children, parents, or in-laws?

**Role of Faith Questions for Each Participant**

The researcher conducted a second interview with each participant that lasted for 30–45 minutes. Its purpose was to fill in any gaps of information from the first interview. Additionally, the researcher asked each individual questions specific to the role of personal faith in the decision-making process for him or her to stay in the marriage relationship. The open-ended questions for this interview were:
In your first interview, you shared some things that enabled you to stay with the marriage following the disclosure of the infidelity, including (this space was filled with the personal details of each participant). Tell me about any other factors that also played a role in staying in the marriage.

Discuss the role of spirituality in your individual life prior to the disclosure of the infidelity.

Discuss the role of spirituality in your marriage prior to the disclosure of the infidelity.

How did the infidelity impact your personal spirituality? How do you think the infidelity impacted your spouse’s spirituality?

How did the infidelity impact your marriage’s spirituality?

Discuss any changes that the infidelity has prompted in your personal spiritual relationship.

Discuss any changes that the infidelity has prompted in your spiritual relationship as a couple.

Follow-Up Interviews for Each Participant

The researcher obtained permission from participants to follow up with subsequent interviews, if needed, to clarify the participant’s meaning when using specific terms or to fill in gaps of information within the story’s context (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). The researcher stopped collecting data at the theoretical point of saturation, or the point at which there were no new ideas, concepts, or explanations emerging (Harris, 2015; Holliday, 2016).

Data Analysis

The data collection and data analysis occurred simultaneously (Creswell, 2008; Glaser, 2014; Holliday, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). The researcher collected data through live interviews,
which were audio recorded. The researcher transcribed the audio recordings of all interviews. This process helped the researcher become thoroughly familiar with the participants and their stories (Creswell, 2008; Harris, 2015; Holliday, 2016). The researcher’s goal was to understand the meaning each participant was trying to communicate through his or her story (Creswell, 2008; Holliday, 2016). To ensure clarity, the researcher asked participants to review the interview transcriptions to see if anyone wanted to add to or change any of the documented information (Creswell, 2008; Holliday, 2016). The participants received copies of their transcripts either by email or by registered mail. In order to guard the privacy of each participant and to allow each participant to maintain control of the access to his or her transcripts, the method of delivery was based on each participant’s preference as indicated on his or her informed consent form (see Appendix E). After confirming the accuracy of the transcripts, the researcher coded the data.

Grounded theory requires a constant comparative method for coding and analyzing data collected (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Holliday, 2016; Starks & Trinidad, 2007). The interpretive process is “an iterative, inductive process of decontextualization and recontextualization” (Starks & Trinidad, 2007, p. 1375). Each individual’s data were broken down and coded into units of meaning in the text, and then the data were reintegrated and organized around central themes from all participants’ narratives (Starks & Trinidad, 2007).

The coding occurred in three specific stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Open coding involved examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Axial coding disaggregated core themes and helped identify causal conditions, strategies, contextual and intervening conditions, and consequences pertaining to the phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe,
The research question helped shape the axial coding (Creswell, 2007). Finally, selective coding by the researcher described the interrelationships among the categories and helped structure a theory about the phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012).

**Trustworthiness**

The researcher is the instrument for analysis in grounded theory (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Therefore, the work is essentially subjective (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). This requires trustworthiness throughout the research design and process. In qualitative studies, trustworthiness can be ascribed to the work through credibility, dependability, transferability, conformability, and authenticity (Elo et al., 2014). The trustworthiness of the data collection was verifiable since the researcher provided the exact details of the sampling method and provided participants’ descriptions verbatim (Elo et al., 2014). Member checking was used to ensure the accuracy of specific descriptions or themes (Creswell, 2008; Holliday, 2016). This included going back to participants to see if they believed that interpretations about their descriptions were accurate (Creswell, 2008; Holliday, 2016). Peer debriefing was used in the form of a dissertation committee chairperson, who reviewed and asked questions about the study to ensure the interpretation resonated beyond the researcher (Creswell, 2008). Additionally, the researcher was honest and authentic about personal beliefs and preexisting thoughts and hypotheses (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). The researcher practiced the self-reflective process of bracketing, whereby a priori knowledge and assumptions are held without prejudice in order for the data to be interpreted with an open mind (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). The researcher took notes throughout the analysis in order to examine her personal thoughts and reactions to participants’ narratives (Creswell, 2007; Starks & Trinidad, 2007).
Ethical Considerations

The researcher approached this grounded theory study with the ethical perspective of “do no harm” (ACA, 2014). Therefore, the researcher obtained approval from her dissertation committee as well as approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before conducting the study with participants to ensure potential risks associated with this research study were mitigated.

Every effort was made to help the participants feel accepted and not judged. If participants experienced an emergence of guilt, shame, or grief during the interview process, the researcher was empathetic toward them. The researcher also normalized the experience and reminded the participants that the interview was strictly on a voluntary basis and withdrawal from the study was permissible with no repercussions to the individual. If there had been an instance whereby a participant experienced emotional regression as a result of the interview process and desired counseling services, the researcher would have provided the individual with referrals for professional counseling services in his or her area as needed.

Furthermore, the data collected have been safeguarded. The audio recordings have been stored on a password-protected laptop that will be kept in a locked office. The professional editor received the research study manuscript via upload to a secure website. The editor was privy only to pseudonyms of the participants. The editor returned the finalized research study manuscript to the researcher via download from a secure website. Additionally, all participant data will be destroyed after the three-year retention period required by federal regulations; this includes deleting video and audio recordings on the laptop and thumb drive, deleting all interview transcripts, and shredding any handwritten notes.
Chapter Summary

This chapter provided the details of the research methodology. This included the explanation of how grounded theory is conducted in a qualitative study and, more specifically, in this research study. It presented the selection of participants and the setting for the interviews, offered information on the researcher, and explained the processes for data collection and analysis. The chapter also explained the strategies for ensuring unbiased, truthful representation and interpretation of the data collected and identified ethical protections for this project.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This qualitative research study took a grounded theory approach to understand the phenomenon of marital recovery after sexual infidelity by the husband among evangelical couples. The researcher believed this study would provide additional rich data in the form of firsthand accounts to the existing empirical literature on the process of recovery from marital infidelity and would better inform clinicians working with the evangelical population. The study was conducted by examining the lived experiences of three evangelical couples that each had a breach in the marital covenant due to extradyadic behavior by the husband. This chapter reports the key findings of the study in the form of major themes based on the units of analysis.

The couples’ lived experiences were collected in the form of semi-structured interviews with each partner. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. To ensure trustworthiness in the collection and interpretation of the data, the researcher used data triangulation by collecting data from multiple participants, member checking by sending interview transcripts to all participants for their review and approval, and peer debriefing with the researcher’s dissertation committee chairperson, who reviewed the findings and asked questions about the study. The analytical process of coding was used to categorize the data and to link key themes across each couple’s experience with the phenomenon of recovery. Axial coding revealed six major themes across the participants’ stories:

1. Develop healthy communication habits that build security
2. Tell someone else for support and accountability
3. Maintain physical separation from the other woman
4. Practice security-priming behaviors
5. Establish God as secure base
6. Find a source of hope

The remainder of this chapter describes the process of data collection and recording, chronicles of the participants’ stories, and discusses the key findings in a hermeneutical manner. The expository description by the researcher and the direct dialogue by the participants depict the systematic analysis of the study’s data. Subsequently, a conceptual framework for recovery is constructed.

**How the Data Were Collected and Recorded**

The researcher contacted professional counselors and pastors via phone calls, emails, and face-to-face communications to inform them of the study and its criteria. The counselors and pastors were asked to serve as intermediaries and inform potential participants of the study. These individuals then contacted the researcher to indicate their interest and willingness to participate in the study. The researcher used a screening form (see Appendix D) to verify the individuals met full criteria for the study. After confirmation, the researcher met face-to-face with each of the three couples for their interviews. At the beginning of each couple’s meeting, the researcher thoroughly explained informed consent, answered any questions from the participants, and obtained the signature of each participant indicating his or her understanding and voluntary participation in the study.

The researcher met with each of the couples in the environment of their choice: one couple chose their home, one couple chose their office, and one couple chose the researcher’s office. Each environment provided a comfortable and confidential space for the couples to share their stories. Additionally, two couples requested to stay together during their interviews. The idea of “being totally transparent” and “being fully known” was the consistent reason for this request. The interview questions, however, were still directed to and answered by each spouse.
individually. Each individual participated in two semi-structured interviews. All three couples asked to complete both of their interviews in the same day. The researcher was able to comply with their requests. The total amount of time spent with each couple was approximately three and a half to four hours; the variation in lengths of interviews depended on how long individuals elaborated on their answers.

The interviews were audio recorded with the full consent of the participants and later transcribed by the researcher. The transcripts were then sent back to the couples for member checking. This step added to the trustworthiness of the data. Two of the couples asked that the transcripts be emailed to them. One couple asked that the transcripts be sent via certified mail.

**Participant Demographics**

Participant demographics are displayed in Table 4.1. Couple 1 consisted of a 52-year-old male and a 49-year-old female. They had been married for 17 years before the infidelity. Couple 2 consisted of a 37-year-old male and a 36-year-old female. They had been married for 15½ years before the infidelity. Couple 3 consisted of a 49-year-old male and a 48-year-old female. They had been married for 16½ years before the infidelity. All of the couples were Caucasian, had the socioeconomic status of upper middle class, and lived in the southeastern United States. Additionally, each couple had children who lived in the home at the time of the infidelity.
Table 4.1 Participant Demographics

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**Participants’ Stories**

The husband and wife interviews provided insight into “real people in real settings through the ‘painting’ of their stories…[and illuminated] the meanings of personal stories and events” (Wang & Geale, 2015, p. 195). According to McLeod (2011), people make sense of their experiences and share those experiences with others through storytelling. Thus, the intention of using vignettes from the interviews in this research report was to offer a richer and deeper understanding for the reader of the particulars of recovery from infidelity in the participants’ own words.
This section is a synopsis of the participants’ personal interviews and recounts each one’s view of his or her marriage before the infidelity, the disclosure of the infidelity, the process of recovery from the infidelity, and a snapshot of the current status of the relationship. In order to protect the anonymity of the participants, the dyads are referred to as Couple 1 (C1), Couple 2 (C2), and Couple 3 (C3). Within each dyad, the nonexclusive partner (husband) and the exclusive partner (wife) have corresponding labels. When referring to the spouses in C1, the nonexclusive partner is NP1, and the exclusive partner is EP1. When referring to the spouses in C2, the nonexclusive partner is NP2, and the exclusive partner is EP2. When referring to the spouses in C3, the nonexclusive partner is NP3, and the exclusive partner is EP3. Here are their stories.

Couple 1

C1 were college sweethearts. They had been married for 36 years and had three sons. Before the infidelity, the family lived in a metropolitan area. NP1 was a “Wall Street boy,” and EP1 was a stay-at-home mom. The family was very involved in community, school, church, and charitable activities. The busyness of overscheduled days caused NP1 and EP1 to feel stressed and distant from one another.

NP1’s view of the marriage before the infidelity. NP1 was on a fast-track career path. He was working 60-plus hours a week with no plans of slowing down. NP1 and EP1 had mutually decided that she should stay home with the children, so it was important to NP1 to provide for his family and to meet their financial needs. NP1 frequently traveled with his job, so EP1 managed the home, the children, and the extracurricular activities. He explained that he always “lived under high stress.” The stress, however, was never financially induced; instead, it was “schedule stress” from the “busyness” and “chaos” of their lives. “I probably should have
had an assistant at home to manage all of the schedules,” he stated with a laugh and a slight shake of his head. Most of the time, NP1 and EP1 were always coming and going in opposite directions, and it felt like they were “living separate lives.” Reflecting back on those days, he stated that he often experienced times of loneliness, although at the time he was not emotionally aware enough to identify what he was feeling. In fact, because he felt like he was “on a stage” most of the time with his high-profile career and his community and church presence, he considered solitude as a chance to isolate from commotion. NP1 reported that he was never one to be overly affectionate. Therefore, he was almost incognizant when he stopped pursuing his wife altogether.

NP1 was raised in a Christian home, and he was dedicated to religious pursuits throughout his life. In fact, it was imperative to him to find a spouse who shared his Christian faith and his evangelical belief system. NP1 and EP1 were active in their local church body and took on many leadership roles and responsibilities. As NP1’s career became more demanding, however, his personal walk with Christ became complacent and took second place to maintaining more performance-driven, task-based activities. These activities were good and included church work and community fundraising; nevertheless, his intimacy with Christ diminished due to busyness and chasing the goals of perfection and success. “And I did it [to] my own family,” he mulled. “I wanted them to be perfect. I wanted them to overachieve…[and] for what?”

NP1 believed EP1 was compatible with him in every way. She was a Christian, she was a good mom, and she represented him and the family well in public. He summarized their marriage before the infidelity like this:
[Overall]…I think we both were very, very busy. And I think, if anything, it was that between career and kids, uhm, our relationship was not that we didn’t love each other; it wasn’t that we didn’t care, it was that we had nothing left.

**EP1’s view of the marriage before the infidelity.** When NP1’s career began to skyrocket, EP1 was willing to leave her job and become a stay-at-home mom to be the primary caretaker of the home and family. The children quickly became the focus of her world. However, EP1 was an articulate, intelligent, high-energy extrovert, so she poured herself into her children, friends, and extracurricular activities. “We had every sport, every after school activity…we did it all!” said EP1. She was also very involved with her church and even participated in a group that would meet to go out and evangelize the community. Reminiscing about those days, she said with a mirthful tone:

> We were a little radical. We all had little kids. We would get our strollers and our kids out and go evangelizing door-to-door…. That’s what we did for fun! How weird is that?”

So, you know, again, [it was] my own individual thing though. He wasn’t really involved in that. He worked. And I got the freedom to kind of do stuff like that.

Additionally, EP1 was front and center in community involvement such as working with inner city schools, aiding the local women’s shelter, and fundraising for the zoo. She supported her husband’s work by helping plan his company’s work-related events. EP1 was a champion for promoting her family and giving them a good name in the public eye. “Now, looking back on it…. You [NP1] wanted more [personal] support from me,” she said as she looked at NP1 and grabbed his hand.

EP1 described her home as “a loving environment for the children…the home wasn’t destructive in any way…[and] they were showered in love by both of us.” Although the children
received an abundance of attention, they never witnessed NP1 and EP1 showing open affection to one another. EP1 referred to the spousal interactions as being “passive to one another” and explained:

I figured out…that I wasn’t really going to have an emotional connection [with him].

When we first got married, I thought it was weird. And I fought for [more affection].
And we fought a lot, and then I think I just went, “He’s not capable of this, so I have these outside relationships [to fulfill my needs].”

Eventually, they had each become so active following their own paths in life that “there was very little time for marriage.”

Like NP1, EP1 was raised in a Christian home and believed that her family of origin was a close-knit family. She wanted to marry a Christian man who was full of integrity and family-oriented, and that was nonnegotiable for her. EP1 was convinced that she had found that person in NP1. “Our first date was to [a conference to hear] Josh McDowell [a Christian apologist evangelist and writer],” EP1 recalled as she looked to her side and gave a flirtatious wink to NP1.

[NP1 was] always a man of integrity. I’m telling you…the day of our wedding, we couldn’t find him! That’s not good, right? [EP1 laughed]…He was in a separate part of the church on his knees praying for our marriage. But that’s who I married.

EP1 was also committed to her personal relationship with Christ. She credited the intimacy of that relationship with preparing her for the impending trauma of her husband’s betrayal.

**NP1’s view of the disclosure of the infidelity.** NP1 became involved in a two-year affair with a female within the couple’s cohort of extracurricular activities. The relationship evolved into extradyadic behaviors and included other intimate connections such as frequent
phone calls and taking trips together. NP1 eventually moved out of the family home under the guise of needing solitude due to work stress. At first, EP1 seemed to understand his need to have this alone time, and she was even concerned for his overall mental health. EP1 persuaded NP1 to go to a counselor to help deal with his stress. NP1 felt that therapy was not helpful at the time because he was not honest about what was really behind his “bizarre behaviors” of moving out, being short-tempered, and losing interest in family life. EP1 became increasingly suspicious and eventually confronted NP1 about having an affair.

NP1 was humiliated when his wife presented him with her evidence of his infidelity. He felt anger and shame at being exposed. He considered the affair a personal failure. NP1 agreed to go to couple’s counseling. He described their first attempt at counseling as:

…angry counseling sessions. She [EP1] went through me hollering, displaying anger, trying to reconcile and then withdrawing. [I] hadn’t cut off the relationship with the other person…. I wanted someone to blame, so I blamed her [EP1] a lot…. It was hard to watch [my] wife go through the fear, and the episodes, and the flashbacks…but at that point all [talking in counseling] would do was flare up more shame.

Moving from being exposed to pursuing healing “wasn’t an event; it was more of a process,” according to NP1. He spent a lot of time contemplating the question, “Wow, how did I get here?” He described himself as being in a “pit” where he discovered “the depth of [his] brokenness.” NP1 admitted to himself that his anger was misplaced. He was really angry not at EP1, but at himself. NP1 ruminated on what he valued most in life, and he realized he could not stand the thought of not having his wife and his family, but he knew things could not go back to the way they were before the infidelity. Something had to change; he had to change. NP1 went
to EP1 with a genuine “I’m sorry” and “Please forgive me.” This was the beginning of the
process of recovery for NP1.

**EP1’s view of the disclosure of the infidelity.** “I knew that something was wrong,” said
EP1. “You know, they always say that women know, and I just knew that he had been very
different, very angry for a long time. Very distant, so…I went through phone records,” she said,
“and there was way too many phone calls to this one number. And I didn’t even really know
who it was, but I knew it wasn’t OK.” At the time that EP1 discovered the questionable phone
calls, NP1 was gone on what she thought was a business trip. One of the children, however,
discovered a receipt for two plane tickets and told EP1. “And then it was like ‘boom!’ OK.
Well, here it is. Now we know who those phone numbers belong to,” she recalled.

Upon further investigation, EP1 found that her husband had been moving money into a
separate bank account. EP1 felt overwhelmed with the revelation of NP1’s secret life and even
more vulnerable by the fact that NP1 always managed their finances and she did not understand
the financial complexities of her present situation.

It’s not funny, but they [sons] still laugh about it now…but we’d gone out to dinner, and I
said, “Guys, this is it. We’re going to have to figure out how we are going to survive as a
family unit…the dynamics are changing, and I’m not going to get into it now, but Dad’s
clearly, you know, in a place where he’s not wanting to be a part of this.” And they
[sons] made jokes…about how we’d survive…like, “Well, we could sell the dog….”

Since her husband was out of the country with the other woman, EP1 did not feel like she could
talk to him, so she decided to call an attorney for legal advice. Based on that advice, she filed for
a separation to protect her and the children financially.
When NP1 returned, EP1 confronted him with the affair. NP1 was not forthcoming with
telling EP1 what was happening in his life. “He was never big on full disclosure,” she recalled,
“as with most of the telling it was coming one piece at a time.” EP1, however, felt like God
wanted her to stay and fight for the marriage. Thus, she chose to pursue healing and
reconciliation.

**NP1’s view of the process of recovery from the infidelity.** NP1 and EP1 tried marriage
counseling again with a different counselor. The second counselor was quick to identify
problems in the couple’s communication style. NP1, who towers over EP1 in stature, used a
great deal of sarcasm, and EP1 would often retreat and even physically flinch. The counselor
accused NP1 of “punching” his wife with his words because “I always communicated [to EP1]
through sarcasm.” This strong metaphor pricked NP1 to the core because it challenged his
perception of his character and integrity.

Pride caused NP1 to leave counselor number two, and the couple began working with a
third counselor. This counselor told NP1 that his heart and his head were not connected. He had
no emotional awareness. Slowly, NP1 began to realize how much his drifting from Christ had
caused his heart to harden. The therapist spent time teaching NP1 how to work on identifying
his own emotions and learning how to articulate his thoughts and feelings with his wife. NP1
and EP1 committed to being transparent with each other and learned to embrace healthy
confrontation instead of allowing emotional dysregulation to send them into hiding. Before,
conversations about the infidelity would cause NP1 to shut down:

I just wanted to move on from it, you know, but [EP1 wanted] those pieces [of
information]. I would underscore the thought that in my head…there was no place of
secret. It was really important if I could convey anything there could be no place [for
secrets]…if you have secrets, it’s because you have more power and more control over whatever, and that’s not being humble.

Additionally, the therapist helped NP1 deal with his personal shame and anger over his “incredibly public” failure. NP1 lost his job as a result of the affair because he used business trips to take the other woman on vacations. Consequently, his family, his church, and everyone in his circle of influence knew about his infidelity. As he worked through his shame, though, he described experiencing a “freedom” that he had never known before living under the self-induced pressures of performing perfectly. “I actually think that’s what God intended, that we’re supposed to be in a place where our security isn’t based on something else,” he said. Before, NP1 would not have told another person about his fears or struggles or shortcomings. He learned, however, that he needs people and he needs people to know that he needs them.

The process of recovery for NP1 also included a personal reunion with Christ. His faith system “made me totally realize that no matter what I think, no matter how I judge myself, it’s [Christ’s] judgment that matters, and…if I stray off of a daily encounter with Him, I’m probably on shaky ground.” Therefore, NP1 believed that establishing daily habits of spending time with God, through prayer and Bible reading and worship music, was a major part of healing his mind and attitude and of softening his heart for his wife again. Additionally, he instituted times of devotion and prayer for him and his wife together. “The steps away seem small, and the steps back seem large,” he said with great conviction. NP1 also embraced a greater clarity about the spiritual context of marriage:

There are incredible pictures that are in the Bible that covenant isn’t just agreement. It’s all that you have becomes mine, and all that I have becomes yours. It’s an exchange of people. And that’s actually what Jesus did on the cross. We became joined in covenant.
That’s why we’re referred to as “the Bride.” But it’s deeper, and so covenant is meant to carry significance that I think we’ve, even in Christian circles, while we believe in the vows and the ceremony and what’s going on there, I don’t think we understand in God that He’s actually no longer seeing you as two individuals. You become one. And that that’s His model, so if you follow that through, husband and wife become one; John 17 says, “I go to the Father so that they may become one with us.” But He also says the Body of Christ is to become one. So, He’s created a picture of one. So, I tell people what we don’t understand is the power of agreement in God’s economy is He vested agreement with power. And that’s why the devil wants lawlessness, and divorce, it’s part of lawlessness. Because he breaks down power, he’s after the power that God put in there as our inheritance.

**EP1’s view of the process of recovery from the infidelity.** After accepting the decision to work on her marriage, EP1 turned to a group of Christian men that the couple had been friends with from their church and in their community, and she asked them to help her pray for her husband. She said these men would meet early in the morning, once a week, to intercede in prayer over NP1. After months of this intentional praying, NP1 began to have a change of heart and decided he wanted to fight for his family.

EP1 said the couple tried marriage counseling. According to her, the experience with the first counselor was “chaotic” and simply “not good.” The experience with their second counselor was like watching one alpha dog challenge another alpha dog, as he went toe-to-toe with NP1 over several issues. However, EP1 identified some positive changes in the couple’s communication patterns that resulted from this therapist. The third counselor dealt more with each partner’s emotions, which was the most helpful. EP1’s identity and self-confidence took a
major blow by the betrayal. She felt “fear…shame…rejection…[and] no worth” by her husband, even fearing that people would find out “I’m just so defective that my own husband doesn’t want to stay with me.” To compound her loneliness, she felt rejected by God, describing the infidelity as “a dagger to [her] faith.” So, she worked on “identity recovery.”

While in counseling, EP1 felt like they were still missing some much-needed practical elements in the recovery process. “I’m like, ‘I feel crazy!’…. Should I make some moves? Help me problem-solve some solutions here,” she said as she grabbed her head and shook it from side to side to illustrate her confusion and frustration at the time. EP1 said that no counselor wanted to offer practical help or help her make decisions. Instead, when she would ask, “What should I do?” the response would always come back in some form of “Well, I don’t know. How do you feel about that?”

I think they’re afraid of getting sued…[and] don’t want to be blamed if this heads to a divorce…. But I learned that there’s sometimes when you are so emotionally stuck that processing emotions is out of your realm. You’re in PTSD mode.

Some of the practical things the couple began to do on their own came through what EP1 considered to be divine intervention. NP1 had lost his job due to the affair, which gave the couple the opportunity to spend a lot of much-needed time together. They began to talk more with each other and also with close, trusted friends. EP1 and NP1 embraced the emotional and relational support of others. The couple eventually decided to relocate to pursue a new job opportunity for NP1 and to establish physical distance from the other woman, which helped EP1 not be triggered by seeing her on a regular basis.

EP1 stated that NP1 slowly but deliberately began to return to the Christ-centered man she had married. The two established new habits of reading the Bible together and praying
together and talking about spiritual things. They would turn on worship music instead of the television. EP1 said that intentionality to connect with one another on a spiritual level led to a deeper level of intimacy in every area of their marriage relationship.

**Summary of the current condition of C1’s relationship.** C1 is currently 19 years post disclosure of the infidelity. They believe their marriage is stronger due to overcoming the trauma of infidelity. NP1 said, “I revere my wife today…I now realize that I’m supposed to be serving something greater than myself…my spouse….” He stated that the infidelity will always be unfair to EP1 because she was forced to suffer many things because of his “terrible life choice.” However, her willingness to fight for the marriage increased his faith and personal belief in God. He stated, “I believe that part of the reconciliation that God showed me that my wife will always represent to me what grace looks like—unmerited favor. And I’ll always know what the price is for mercy.” EP1 found purpose in her pain. She went back to school and became a licensed professional counselor. She works with married couples in distress. The couple strongly believe that “spiritual washing” has to be “put on the menu” for recovery. They have also written a book together to encourage couples that there is hope for recovery after infidelity.

**Couple 2**

C2 met and dated in college. They had been married for 19½ years, and they had four children together. Before the infidelity, NP2 was pursuing ministerial studies, and EP2 worked as a teacher but later became a stay-at-home mother. The couple was very active in church work and ministry. However, the busyness of church work eventually usurped first place in NP2’s life, and the marriage became distressed.
NP2’s view of the marriage before the infidelity. The first few years of the marriage were great, according to NP2. He recalled being in graduate school together and adjusting to married life. Around year six, their unity in marriage began to become “divided” when C2 moved to the other side of the country, away from family and friends, to attend seminary and work at a local church. “Life was busy,” he said. NP2 found himself becoming more and more involved in church activities. EP2 felt concerned by NP2’s lack of attention to the marriage, but NP2 dismissed her fears as exaggerations. This behavior, however, eventually set a precedent for how NP2 prioritized his life and relationship with his wife over the next several years.

I think we kind of had “her life” and “my life” and then a little bit of, small bit of “togetherness life.” In hindsight…it was usually her school life and friends, and my life at work. Uhm, we moved after seminary to [another city] to work at a church. And I began to jump into a new place…and all of a sudden, she’s teaching, I’m working at the church, and again, we have two different realities in a lot of ways. Uhm, and then 2006, we had our first child. And, then, there are good moments. Well, to me, there’s nothing miserable about those years, but it was, uhm…they’re just fast paced. I think that the common theme for me was I lacked a lot of intentionality in my life, specifically for my marriage. So, uhm, there’s going to be a lot of responsibility taken for all of this stuff, obviously, on myself. Uhm, and then, 2008, we moved…we stayed [with] the same church but moved to a different city and began to work for the church beginning…a new campus…and life. Every four years we’ve moved until recently.

NP2 was raised in a Christian home. His parents have been married for 40-plus years, and they raised two children. Both NP2 and his sibling pursued careers in ministry and church work. On the surface, NP2 said his family of origin looked ideal. Although his father expressed
plenty of pride, there was very little affection in the home. NP2 said he never witnessed his parents hugging or even saying, “I love you.” He then explained, “I mean, they love each other, but they live together [and] tolerate each other.” The environment of his youth was passive and avoidant. “The way I grew up…you just don’t talk about [potentially confrontational] things,” he said.

NP2 confessed that he allowed the first 15 years of his marriage to mirror his parents’ marriage. Similar to what his father modeled for him, NP2 was more concerned with public appearances than with spending time nurturing his personal relationship with his wife. He avoided hard conversations with his wife, and when cornered he would take a defensive or dismissive approach.

As NP2 established himself in ministry, he described himself as being full of pride. He recalled that one assumption he had before the infidelity was, “I’m above something like that happening. I would never cheat on my wife. I’ve seen other guys in ministry do that, but that’s not what I’m going to do.” NP2 attributed pride and isolation as two major pitfalls that “put me in a really vulnerable and awful position.”

**EP2’s view of the marriage before the infidelity.** Before the infidelity, EP2 described the marriage as being good but having a lot of ups and downs. She said the couple moved every four years as NP2’s ministry career was developing, and that added to stress on the marriage. She believed that “being in ministry…always trumped anything that had to do with me or with us. I always felt [ministry] was first.” She illustrated this point with the example of having a miscarriage and NP2 left her to go to the church to work. She was left to grieve their loss alone. EP2 tried to talk to NP2 about the marriage. “I would bring it up…[but it would] just go back to like [EP2 paused thoughtfully]…just something’s always been more important,” she said.
As C2 began to have children, EP2 chose to become a stay-at-home mother. The isolation was difficult for her because she had always been one to have deep connections with her friends, so journaling became companionship for her. NP2 was satisfied with his busyness, but EP2 noticed a significant “drift” in the marriage relationship. In her journals, she described a feeling of “heaviness” and “darkness” that saturated the home. In response, her attitude became, I’m going to take care of the baby. I’m going to do my thing. You do your thing. And at that point, I’m like “Whatever.” If you walk around the house and you don’t even say, “Bye,” whatever… I’ve been asking [you to work on this] for so many years that at that point, it’s like just do whatever.

EP2 was not raised in a Christian home. Her parents divorced when she was young. She remembered that her father had an affair, but her mother was willing to stay with the marriage. Nevertheless, her father chose to leave. EP2 said that growing up she always believed that her mother must not have been a very good wife since her father still chose to leave instead of to reconcile. Because she was raised with divorced parents, EP2 and NP2 committed to one another that they would never cheat or divorce.

After the birth of their fourth child, EP2 was convinced something was wrong in the marriage, something beyond work stress. EP2 chose to confront her husband with her greatest fear and asked him if he was having an affair or thinking about having an affair. NP2 told her, “No.” However, at that time, he had already begun having inappropriate conversations with another woman, although there was no physical extradyadic behavior yet. EP2 still knew that something was “different” in the marriage, but she believed NP2 because he had never lied to her.
He had said, “No.” We had had the baby, and so I actually started going to see [a
counselor] because I thought something’s not right…and [if] it’s me, I’m going to figure
out what’s going on.

NP2’s view of the disclosure of the infidelity. NP2 started a relationship with another
woman in the summer after the birth of his fourth child. NP2 said that his wife asked him if he
was having an affair or thinking about having an affair around that same time.

And I said, “No,” because I was not having a physical affair at the moment…. But I lied,
because she even said, “Are you thinking about it?” And I think I, in that moment, I did
the gymnastic to say, “Well, no, I’m not thinking about it.” But, you know, in hindsight,
yeah, I really was. And, so, I don’t think in that moment I was trying to say, “I’m going
to lie to you,” but at the same time, I wasn’t in a place where I was right thinking.

The relationship evolved into a sexual relationship by the fall. NP2 regretted his decision
to have the affair and to jeopardize his family after a few months into the adulterous relationship.

“I wrecked it!” he moaned and questioned, “How do I make it right? What do I do?”

Subsequently, he ended the relationship in early spring. NP2 then became more intentional to
pursue intimacy with his wife. He experienced a newfound closeness to his family, yet he also
carried the weight of his guilt and shame.

And, so, in my mind, I’m beginning to think like this is what I want. You know, I want
[my wife]. I want my family. I’m pursuing those things. Uhm, but [I’m] totally afraid
and unsure and begging God for freedom from this weight and from all of this whatever
[clasping his hands together to demonstrate his pleading]. And, uhm, so ultimately, the
other lady, the girl, the woman, told her husband, and she called my boss.
One day in late spring, NP2 was called into his boss’s office at the church. The boss said that he had gotten a phone call from the other woman revealing her affair with NP2, and he wanted to know if the accusation was true. In that moment of exposure, “I…remember the feel of freedom…which is a little weird…it was this ‘I’m done, I’m free!’ [from] the suppression of ‘I can’t talk about this because I’m going to be found out.’” NP2 recalled that he had wanted to tell the truth and be free from the burden of his secret many times. However, he knew because he worked at a church, exposure would also mean immediate dismissal, and that would hurt his family’s financial security.

I’m not trying to make excuses, but in a way, it’s almost like if I say anything, my family is homeless…[and that thought] just added to the pressure of “What the hell have I done?”… When that happened, it was kind of like, “Wow, well, this is it…. I don’t have to be fake and keep a secret anymore…. Now the fear of “what are we going to do,” uhm, all of a sudden was there. But in the weirdest way, all of a sudden the peace…the peace that passes all understanding was there in that moment for me…for that. I have no idea what I’m going to do for a living…how my family is going to have food to eat next week or whatever…but those worries in a way just kind of passed.

From the moment of initial disclosure to his boss, things began to unfold very quickly. NP2 could not remember all the specifics of that day except that he called his wife and told her he was coming home to talk. His boss accompanied him to the house to make sure NP2 told his wife the whole story. After NP2’s confession, he remembered his wife was extremely distraught, and she left the house.

**EP2’s view of the disclosure of the infidelity.** EP2 said that things in the home, and in the marriage specifically, had improved drastically by mid-March. At the time, she credited the
changes in the home to the counseling sessions that she had started several months prior. Then one day in May, EP2 remembered NP2 calling her from work. He asked her to get someone to watch the children because he was coming home so they could talk. “And I remember thinking, ‘He’s going to tell me he had an affair.’ Like I just knew it, I just knew it,” she said. NP2 and his boss arrived at the house, and “we had the conversation.” She remembered the situation being very strange, listening to her husband’s confession and looking at his boss invading that very private moment. “[I thought], ‘Why are you even here?’ It was awful. [The church leadership] should not have done that…I mean, it was a really terrible thing,” she said while shaking her head from side to side. She elaborated more on her shock in that moment:

   Uhm, so, I mean…it’s still like I knew it, but like how could this even happen? How can this be real? My parents got divorced because of an affair. So, that was something that we had talked about. How that was not going to, you know, [happen to us]. So, that, I think that was my first initial [reaction], like, “How could you do this to us?” Like we, like this was the biggest thing that was part of my family growing up that was not going to be the same for us.

   EP2 ran to her room. She needed someone to reach out to but did not know whom to call. Then, she remembered another pastor’s wife who she knew had been through a similar situation. She called and spoke to that lady briefly.

   In the meantime, the word of NP2’s dismissal was beginning to spread among the church’s leadership team. A good friend of EP2 heard the news, called her, and simply said, “I’m on my way to pick you up.” EP2 described herself as being “in shock,” “numb,” and “not knowing what to do.” She needed and allowed others to begin making some decisions for her and to help carry her during that time.
NP2’s view of the process of recovery from the infidelity. When EP2 returned home after leaving the night of the disclosure, depression overtook her to the point that she stayed in the bed most of the time. She could not take care of their children or the home. NP2 told his mother and father about the affair because he needed his mother to help with the four children. Additionally, NP2 lost his job at the church, so he was home for three months following the disclosure. This enabled him to be present for his wife and give her emotional support and physical help while she was struggling with the depression. NP2 said, “[EP2] was very emotional, and I was all over the place…very high highs and low lows. Lots of depression during that season.”

NP2 knew his wife had been seeing a counselor previously, so NP2 contacted this counselor and asked for her to help them “because I can’t put this [back] together.” The couple began marriage therapy. The therapist taught NP2 and EP2 how to talk about the hard stuff and how to understand their own emotions and one another’s emotions.

Uhm, I definitely didn’t want to talk about it, but I, uhm, there were probably moments depending on the day…. I don’t remember specifics, but, like, definitely didn’t want to talk about it. But I knew, [and] I’m gonna…one of our phrases, one of the things we’ve talked about is “being fully known.” I [tried] to be sensitive to the timing of [sharing]…because I knew this would send her to the bedroom for the rest of…for the next two days.

NP2 elaborated more on his struggle with learning how to communicate when he illustrated his attempts to apologize to EP2.

We had the same conversations over and over and over and over…it wasn’t conversations, it was one conversation that…never ended. She wanted to know…“What
did I do?” And I would never say, “You did this, this, and this.” Because that just wasn’t, in my mind. I know that she wasn’t perfect, but the infidelity had nothing to do with what she did. It was all me. I thought she was asking those questions…because…my answers and my apologies weren’t…good enough.

Counseling, however, helped NP2 understand that his wife was spinning from self-doubt and wounded self-esteem. He described his emotional self at that time as a “very shallow paper plate,” while EP2 was “a deep, deep well of emotions.” NP2 learned how to talk to, how to listen to, and how to be present for his wife. Case in point,

When…she asked in the summer of 2013, “Are you having an affair? Are you thinking about having an affair?” [I said], “No, I’m going to bed.” …Whereas now, if she asked me that question now, we’re going to stay up and talk about “Why are you feeling that way?”

NP2 took several intentional steps to help his wife feel safe and rebuild trust. Since the other woman lived in the same neighborhood as them, the couple intentionally took an alternative route to enter and exit the neighborhood to avoid passing that woman’s house. The couple downloaded apps to their phones in order to keep each informed of the other’s whereabouts. When NP2 got another job, he intentionally texted his wife each morning upon arriving to work and each evening when leaving work. He also made sure to answer the phone whenever EP2 called. Additionally, NP2 made his phone and email accessible to his wife. He stated, “There [are] zero things that she doesn’t know or have access to.” Finally, he answered her questions about the affair with patience and sensitivity. He committed to “being fully known” and to setting his priorities in the right order of “Jesus, EP2, and the kids.”
NP2 said he had “nailed down” that pride and isolation were two major pitfalls for him. The realization that he was fallible and capable of betraying God and his family crumbled his prideful attitude. He stated with remorse that while he was in seminary, the Bible, which he once loved, “became more of a textbook.” He allowed “growing the church” to become more important than God and His Word and more important than his family.

It became more important than [my wife], and we’ve talked about that. I kind of lived in that world for a long time, so one of the neat things about this is that for the last four years I haven’t worked at the church, and it’s been kind of awesome! And, so…uhm, my relationship with the Lord, I think, is really a lot more…. The worship music thing became very real [to us] in those early days…it was saturating [and] inviting…. [EP2 and I] talk a lot about spiritual warfare…not in a Pentecostal way but as much as a good Baptist kid could, right? And, so, that side of it [the existence of spiritual warfare] became more real to me. Like, we would talk about it at church, [but] it’s a lot more of a real connection than it was in the past. You know, [now] I have a drive to work that I didn’t use to have, so there are some different things, like “pray as you go” kind of things, that became a lot more a part of my life than in the past.

NP2 experienced a resurgence of intimacy in his personal relationship with Christ, and as he did, his marriage experienced a new depth of intimacy, as well. Finally, to guard himself from the pitfall of isolation, he established an accountability relationship with a trusted male friend. In doing these things, NP2 turned away from his defensive and isolating behaviors and attached himself to Christ, to his wife, and to a brother in Christ.

**EP2’s view of the process of recovery from the infidelity.** “I was literally in the bed for 2 months…on depression medication…I couldn’t do anything,” said EP2. She recalled that
her mother-in-law came and stayed at the house to take care of the children and the home. Even in her numbed state, EP2 made this vow to herself:

Even if I was mad at God…I was going to make myself read the Bible. I had to stay connected. Worship music played a huge part. [It] was kind of the sustaining…. When I could not read or pray, I had my phone constantly playing…. So, I would go to sleep to it and wake up to it. But I distinctly remember making the choice that no matter how I felt, I was not going to quit reading my Bible. And…I think [that] was the game changer for my healing…that Truth constantly coming in just kept my heart soft.

In addition to Christ prompting her heart, the fact that NP2 never made excuses but took full ownership of the infidelity helped EP2 find the strength to fight for the marriage. EP2 said, “It was very evident…[he was] just broken and remorseful.” Additionally, she did not want her children to experience the pain of growing up in a home with divorced parents if she had the power to prevent that. EP2 also remembered having a sense of hope because of two women she had met years before who had shared their stories of betrayal and recovery. “I knew it could be done,” she said with certitude.

EP2 said that counseling helped with the communication issues in the marriage. As a result, she stated that conflict and conversations are no longer avoided today. Instead, “there’s depth to them,” she mused. Counseling also helped EP2 overcome the feelings of failure and shame she experienced as a result of her husband’s betrayal. She even recanted the thought that her own mother must have failed as a wife because her father left, and she replaced old judgments with new empathy for her mother.

In addition to talking to a counselor, EP2 shared her pain with friends. At first, she did not want to tell anyone because of her shame, and because her husband’s adulterous partner had
been her friend and neighbor. She feared letting anyone too close but also realized that she needed friendships.

[I wanted] to make sense [of things]…[the other woman] was a friend of mine. She was a very good friend of mine. So, I was trying to piece together her betrayal as well and trying to understand our friendship and how…the breakdown of that.

EP2 and NP2 established boundaries around their marriage and committed to being “fully known” with one another. This meant a great deal of intentionality to stay connected with one another. “He never called me from work before,” she said, but now her husband communicates throughout the day.

**Summary of the current condition of C2’s relationship.** C2 is currently four years post disclosure of the infidelity. They feel like trust has slowly been reestablished, and they have developed a healthy new normal. NP2 feels free from guilt and shame but said, “I still say ‘I’m sorry’ quite frequently, and I’m going to keep saying it!” He is overwhelmed by his wife’s “amazing love and grace.” EP2 went back to work as a teacher. Having a consistent schedule has helped her manage her thought life. To help her feel safe, NP2 suggested moving the family out of the neighborhood. However, the other woman and her family moved away, so for now the couple is still in their “recovery home.” C2 believe they have experienced posttraumatic growth from this painful experience. “Our marriage has improved…[and] the way we parent our children…. There’s purpose in that,” EP2 concluded.

**Couple 3**

C3 began dating when NP3 was in the tenth grade and EP3 was in the ninth grade, and they dated for ten years before getting married. The couple had been married for 25½ years, and they had two children together. Before the infidelity, the couple described themselves as having
a good relationship, and they had even overcome some difficult disappointments related to
shortfalls of career aspirations early on in their marriage. They saw themselves as united in
parenting and in financial decisions and believed they made a good team. The two were active in
their community and in their local church. Both admitted, however, to placing a great deal of
their focus on raising the children and less attention on nurturing the marital relationship. This
unintentional neglect put the marriage in a vulnerable position.

NP3’s view of the marriage before the infidelity. NP3 practically grew up with EP3.
“We’re friends…we’ve just always enjoyed being together. But I think…when you’re with
somebody for such a long time, you just get into ruts…there just becomes complacency,” he
stated contemplatively. C3 had gotten to a place where they were going through the motions of
doing what was expected. They were active in their local church and often held leadership roles
within the church body. They had a good name in the community and participated in social
activities. The couple worked in tandem for the good of their two children, both of whom were
very active in sports and had full schedules. Most of the time, it seemed like NP3 was going
here with one son and EP 3 was going there with another son.

Reflecting back, NP3 saw how his own marriage was similar to his parents’ marriage.
NP3 grew up in a religious Christian home. He explained their home life like this:

I grew up in a very structured, uhm, home that was centered around…I’m going to say it
was centered around the church. And I say the church specific. I’m not saying the
Gospel, I’m saying the church….

On the surface, the family was a high-functioning and godly Christian household, but
things were not always perfect.
[I] saw my mom and dad growing up, and I knew they had arguments and stuff. Uhm, and I can still remember those vaguely. But I just saw my mom being committed to my dad, and my dad being committed to my mom, and that their children were of [utmost] importance to them. And, uhm, I remember times when, and even now I’m just having some memories back when my mom was talking about leaving, but she didn’t. And, again, I just now had that thought. I just remembered some tough times. My dad was…my dad was tough. Uhm, but that’s the…that’s the type of environment that I grew up in. I just knew that they were fighting for their marriage. And it wasn’t anything given or easy.

Following this role model, NP3 and EP3 were also intentionally committed to a structured Christian household and encouraging the high performances of their children. However, they gave little consideration to the relational needs of husband and wife, and a drift took place within the marriage relationship. NP3 had gotten to a place in life where he realized that life was not about him. He reported feeling like,

The marriage took a backseat. And I [started thinking], “Man, what about me?” ’Cause that’s the easiest thing to say…. And it wasn’t necessarily that I was feeling that consciously…but somewhere deep down, I was missing something, and I longed for it…I couldn’t put my finger on it. [But that need] led to the other things.

The other woman was in C3’s cohort of friends who were doing life together, such as hanging out at the children’s sports practices, celebrating birthdays, and sharing group dinners. NP3 and the other woman “just kind of gravitated toward one another,” talking and building a strong connection. “There was a mutual attraction…she was younger…more outgoing…just
different…” he said. Once stuck in the doldrums of routine, NP3 described himself as feeling “invigorated” again and having “a new breath of life” around the other woman.

**EP3’s view of the marriage before the infidelity.** EP3 stated that her dating relationship with NP3 was “rocky.” There had been transgressions and dishonesty over the 10-year dating period. However, EP3 never anticipated that those breeches of trust would flow over into the marriage. Her mind-set was that marriage would make all of that go away. “We were always in church. We had our children in church. I guess you just think everything’s just fine because you’re there,” she said.

EP3 grew up in a single-parent home. “My dad left when I was seven. He was very self-centered…and he finally just left when he couldn’t get his way all of the time,” she said with an annoyed expression on her face.

I grew up watching her raise me by herself working three jobs. And paid for [college], paid for my wedding, and he never gave her a dime…. So, I think I look at that and go, “That’s not what I want to happen to my family.” Maybe your kids shouldn’t be a part of it…why you stay, but I think it’s only natural that they are. And that’s not the only reason…. I think I just remember my dad leaving, and I just kept thinking this is not what I want for my kids, and this is not what I want for my marriage.

She never wanted her own children to experience abandonment and brokenness, and she never wanted to experience those feelings herself again. Therefore, EP3 and NP3 agreed early in their marriage that divorce would never be an option for them no matter what challenges they faced.

Overall, EP3 thought her marriage to NP3 was healthy. They seemed to think alike and seemed to work well as partners in managing the home and the family. They were trying to raise
their children in church and live godly lives, so EP3 was “blindsided” the day that she intercepted a text from another woman on her husband’s phone.

**NP3’s view of the disclosure of the infidelity.** NP3 said that his wife became suspicious that something was not right when she noticed excessive communication between him and the other woman. Then, the other woman’s husband also noticed excessive calls and text messages between NP3 and his wife on their phone bill, and he called EP3 to discuss his concerns. In the meantime, NP3 and the other woman had already begun to realize that their relationship was not going anywhere, and they were in a “lose-lose situation.”

Me and the other person met one time, because we had already said, “What are we doing?” I mean, “What in the heck! How did we end up here?” We were both in, like, shock. And, then, I suggested one time, I said, “I’ll tell you what I want you to do, ’cause we’re getting ready to wreck two families. We’re getting ready to just destroy two families.” I said…and neither one of us are thinking properly at this time…I said, “I’ll tell you what. You write on a sheet of paper the pros and cons of us leaving our families. And I’ll write on a sheet of paper…”

However, their clarity on what their behavior would culminate in was too late. Within days of that epiphany-based conversation, EP3 called NP3 at work and told him to come home because “she knew,” and they needed to talk.

NP3 recalled thinking, “You’re busted. Not that I felt this remorse because I had been sinning against God and my wife…just a fear of being caught.” NP3 met with his wife and confessed his adulterous behaviors. EP3 was “broken” and began asking “why” questions. He immediately went into damage control and tried to do all that he could to hold his fragile marriage and family together. A myriad of questions spun around in his head, such as “What is...
this going to do to our kids? What is this going to do to our community? What is this going to do to my personal testimony?” In that moment, NP3 felt overwhelmed with the realization of what he had done and said to himself, “All right, dude, you have started a wildfire, and there is no way that you can control it at this point. So, you’re at the mercy of God.”

**EP3’s view of the disclosure of the infidelity.** EP3 asked NP3 about the text message from the other woman that she read on his phone. Although the message seemed generic and nonthreatening, it was odd that this woman would have a reason to text NP3. Her husband made up a clever excuse for the text, and EP3 let the conversation drop. It had been her habit throughout their marriage to not be confrontational. Her mother had given her some marital advice. It was, “Don’t be a nagger, don’t be high maintenance…. You can’t do that stuff ’cause you’ll lose him.” As a result, EP3 kept her concerns to herself, but she began to watch her husband and the other woman’s interactions more intentionally.

One day while at work, the other woman’s husband called EP3 and asked to meet with her. The man showed EP3 his phone record and proceeded to threaten NP3. EP3 touched her hand to her throat as she recalled the memory:

We lived in fear for almost a year after [other woman’s husband] even suspected there was a problem because [the other woman’s husband] would text me and say, “If I find out anything, I’m coming to your house tonight.” [This man] was texting me all the time. He went to [NP3]’s work, he went to [NP3’s workplace] and pulled [NP3] out of work. And told him, “I’ll kill you if I find out that anything happened between you and my wife; I’ll kill you. So, I’m just telling you what I know, and what I find in the phone records.” And he told [NP3] that he was going to get a court order to pull the texts. Did you know you could do that? You can actually pull the texts.
One day, after a visit from the other woman’s husband, EP3 called her husband and asked him to come home. He did, and EP3 sat in shock while her husband of 14 years disclosed that he had been engaged in a sexual relationship with this other woman, this family “friend.”

**NP3’s view of the process of recovery from the infidelity.** NP3 and EP3 decided to fight for their marriage. He acknowledged the children were the primary reason that EP3 was willing to stay. However, he also said, “one of the things that we had said early in our marriage, thank the Lord, is that we would never discuss divorce.” EP3 reminded him that divorce was not an option.

When she reminded me of that, it reminded me of God’s love, and that God was speaking. God was speaking through her saying, “All’s not lost. All’s not lost…there’s a new day, so just make the next best decision that you can make.”

NP3 was and remains awed by that demonstration of grace. It was this grace that brought him to a place of genuine remorse and repentance.

NP3 took several intentional steps to put boundaries around him. He contacted a couple of his Christian brothers, confessed his behavior, and asked for them to serve as accountability partners. Next, he found a Christian counselor, who worked with him individually and also with him and EP3 as a couple. Then, NP3 put into place the practical things that EP3 needed in order to reestablish a sense of safety in the relationship:

1. He went to his boss at work, who was also his uncle, and told him about the infidelity.

   He asked that EP3 be allowed to see the phone records of his work phone upon request because he had used his work phone previously to communicate with the other woman.

2. He left his phone out and completely accessible to his wife at any time.
3. He deleted his Facebook account.

4. He created the habit of calling his wife each morning when he got to work and each afternoon on his way home from work.

5. He called his wife throughout the day.

6. There was improvement in the quality of communication and the depth of communication between him and EP3.

7. There was no further communication between him and the other woman.

8. He made himself completely transparent and fully available to his wife.

9. He answered any question as many times as EP3 needed it answered.

One of the most significant changes in the relationship was NP3’s intentional pursuit to truly know God. NP3 said that before the infidelity, he “was checking all the boxes” for religious busyness and acceptability. He described himself as “Prideful…and…good in everybody’s sight except God’s.” He elaborated on this perspective:

When God revealed to me just how wretched and prideful and self-serving and faithless I was, I had to just start taking inventory of myself, and He just allowed me to see how frail I was…how fallible I was, and that every breath that I take needs to be dependent on Him. And that God wasn’t a God of checking boxes. He was a God that cared about me in my deepest and darkest moments and that His ways were so much higher than my ways, and His thoughts were so much higher than my thoughts. So, you know, I feel like He humbled me. He allowed me to be able to see grace bestowed on me through my wife, and He’s given me a greater concern and compassion for other people who fall short. Whereas before, [I looked at others] in my pride and in my haughtiness and
arrogance, [which] I guised as being spiritual…. He’s allowed me to be able to see it how He sees it.

NP3’s new love for this God of mercy and grace birthed a new love for his wife. He believed that God had given him a fresh understanding of what marriage was meant to be. Instead of chasing the American dream, which he defined as get married, have a family, and make much of yourself, he saw

…how my marriage was to be a reflection of [God’s] covenant with me, and His love for me, and His commitment to me. And that my marriage needed to be a light in a dark place to reflect the character of God and the work of the Trinity and the cooperation and the unity that thrives within the Trinity.

**EP3’s view of the process of recovery from the infidelity.** “I started thinking, ‘Who did I even marry?’” said EP3 as she recounted the moment when NP3 confessed his extradyadic behaviors. Once they decided to fight for the marriage, NP3 started counseling. After a few sessions, EP3 joined him in counseling. She was convinced that she must have driven him to the other woman. She questioned her worth, her attractiveness, her ability to be what her husband needed.

Initially, I blamed myself for all of it. Uhm, but through him talking with the counselor and us working together with that counselor, [NP3] would say, “This is not her fault. This is all on me.” But I do think there are things that make someone go, “The grass is greener on the other side.” I do think there are things that the other spouse does that makes the person think that. But what I read and what people say, says that’s not true, so I don’t know. I blamed myself for years. But he would always say, “It’s not your fault.” I kept saying, “I need to know what to do differently, so this doesn’t happen again. I
need to know how I need to change. I need to know when did this change in our marriage. I need to know.” You know.

Therapy helped her understand that she was not to blame and her worth was not on trial. EP3 did not continue counseling for an extended period of time, although NP3 continued with individual counseling.

NP3 put many practical helps in place that begin to shore up her safety in the relationship. The couple rekindled their friendship, developed healthier communication patterns, committed to total transparency with one another, and put healthy boundaries around their marriage. EP3 said NP3 was even willing to move the family away. However, they decided that God had established them in their present community, and they made a joint decision to stay. All communication with the other woman and her spouse, however, ended.

EP3 felt somewhat isolated in her pain because she did not have a close friend outside of the couple’s normal social circle to confide in, whereas NP3 had other Christian friends. She decided to go to the library and check out books on marriage and overcoming infidelity. She found three books that were useful resources. One book, in particular, was *Unfaithful: Hope and Healing After Infidelity*, by Gary and Mona Shriver (2005). EP3 believed the book was written just for her. The book not only told the story of a couple that survived infidelity, it seemed to be telling her story. Like the book’s author, “My husband was my god,” said EP3. She realized she had put her husband on a high pedestal. She also related to the author’s immense embarrassment, her lack of self-esteem and self-worth, and her intense grief that all resulted from being betrayed by a spouse. EP3 believed if the author could overcome this type of trauma in her marriage, she could do it, too. It infused EP3 with a sense of hope.
EP3 also leaned heavily on her personal relationship with Christ. She read her Bible and prayed daily. She played worship music constantly. She said the music was a huge part of the recovery of her mind.

I play it all day long. It’s constant in my car…and [home]…. I’ve got it on my phone and on my laptop in my bathroom [while getting dressed]. It’s been huge for me. Especially when I wake up. Like, there are times…I’ve seen [the other woman], and I go to bed with that on my mind. I’ll have nightmares. When I get up, I’m like, “OK, that was yesterday. I didn’t sleep last night because of it….” the worship music is playing because I’ve got to clear my mind. It’s uplifting. I mean, you just praise Him…you’re just praising Him.

She said the songs not only spoke to her pain but also reminded her how to deal with that pain through Christ. The songs gave her hope for each day. The worship music encouraged her and befriended her.

**Summary of the current condition of C3’s relationship.** C3 is almost nine years post disclosure of the infidelity. They have reordered their priorities: God first, spouse second, children third. NP3 and EP3 have rebuilt trust in the relationship. They have learned that marriage is precious and fragile and should not be taken for granted. C3 stated the Lord had redeemed every part of their relationship, including their sex life. EP3 struggled in the weeks and months after the disclosure with having sex with NP3. She stated that they now have a more satisfying and intimate relationship than ever before. “He’s more aware of my feelings…the act is not just about him,” she said. The couple has also experienced posttraumatic growth over the last several years, and they trust God has used this pain to grow them relationally and spiritually, and He will use their story of hope and healing to encourage others.
Findings Related to the Research Question

In this section, the research question is restated, and the findings related to the research question are discussed. These findings emerged from the coding of the interview transcripts. The researcher used open coding to develop initial categories of words and phrases. Next, axial coding was used to disaggregate core concepts. Finally, selective coding was used to identify the essential key themes. The researcher identified six key findings based on the analysis of the interview data (see Table 4.2 below).
**Table 4.2 Coding of Key Words and Phrases**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Words and Phrases</th>
<th>Open Coding</th>
<th>Axial Coding</th>
<th>Selective Coding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Angry, hollering, asking questions over and over, lying, avoid confrontation</td>
<td>Need to express emotions; Need for answers; Need for truth; Need to avoid</td>
<td>Communication affected by anxious and dismissive patterns</td>
<td>A need to develop healthy communication habits that build security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>confrontation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor, Christian brothers, trusted friends, lonely, accepted, tell me what I</td>
<td>Need for moral support; Need for transparency; Need to be fully known;</td>
<td>Identifying resources for holding self accountable; Identify next steps for</td>
<td>Tell someone else for support and accountability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>need to hear, I just need someone to tell me what to do</td>
<td>Need to hear truth</td>
<td>moving forward</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lived in our neighborhood, lived in our town, in our cohort of friends, my best</td>
<td>Need to feel safe, Need to avoid trigger of other woman</td>
<td>Identifying need to remove proximity from other woman</td>
<td>Physical separation from the other woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>friend</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Divided, lack of attention, her life, my life, marital drift, ruts, boredom, living</td>
<td>Need for unity; Need for togetherness; Need for better prioritizing; Need</td>
<td>Identifying deficits in the interaction patterns; Identify ways to help rebuild</td>
<td>Practice security-priming behaviors: Need for intentionality in the marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>separate lives, business, chaos, children, pursue my wife, access to everything,</td>
<td>to pursue spouse; Need to connect</td>
<td>trust and safety</td>
<td>relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>phone records, phone calls throughout the day, location apps</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bible became a textbook, religious, performance, perfection, my dad was</td>
<td>Need to connect with God through Bible reading, prayer, and praise and</td>
<td>Discovering God as intimate friend and Savior full of mercy and grace</td>
<td>God as secure base: 1. Attachment needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tough, my husband became my god, checking off the boxes, washing my mind,</td>
<td>worship music</td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Grace &amp; mercy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>experienced grace through my wife</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read books, others’ made it through this, worship music, remembering power of God</td>
<td>Need to believe, Need to know it’s possible to overcome; Need for direction</td>
<td>Anchoring to the belief that our marriage can overcome this trauma; Belief in</td>
<td>Source of hope: 1. God is Sovereign</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sovereignty of God</td>
<td>2. Stories of others</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Question

The research question for this qualitative study was “What helps evangelical marriages recover after sexual infidelity by the husband?”

Finding 1

The first major finding of the study was that couples needed to develop healthy communication habits within the marriage that help build security. This theme entailed two components: addressing family-of-origin role modeling and moving toward dyadic security.

Each couple appeared to have a distancing partner who wanted to minimize, dismiss, or avoid confrontation, and an anxious preoccupied partner who wanted to talk about feelings and concerns and have questions answered. Some of the participants consciously traced these patterns back to childhood and family-of-origin role modeling. The husbands self-identified as “prideful,” “performance-minded,” and frequently “dismissive” of their wives’ emotional needs, much like the pictures they painted of their own fathers. The wives self-identified as being “fearful” and “needy,” much like the descriptions of their own mothers. These seemingly generationally influenced insecure communication patterns among the spouses added to the distress of the relationship.

NP1’s distancing communication pattern: I wanted to run from it, and she wanted more information. So, every one of them was “oh, here it comes,” and I’d be…I don’t want to go there. And in a lot of cases, I didn’t want to, I didn’t want to put myself back in that…to try and recall it…I was trying to put that chapter behind. I wanted the chapter to go away. Bringing it back out, I was worried…it was dangerous for me.

EPI’s preoccupied communication pattern: [I] started to struggle with…fear and…shame, you know. I think…gosh, what if everybody finds out that I’m just so
defective that, you know, my own husband doesn’t want to stay with me. [The] quotes or whatever you hear out there about people is you couldn’t keep a man or something. I mean, it’s like, oh my gosh, you know, I’m not worth [anything to my husband].

NP2’s distancing communication pattern: The question that she asked in the summer of 2013, “Are you having an affair? Are you thinking about having an affair?” [I said], “No, I’m going to bed.”

EP2’s preoccupied communication pattern: What did I do wrong? What’s wrong with me? I think I was in bed for probably 2 months. I mean, I really…I don’t think I even ate for 6 weeks after. So, it was really just completely starting from figuring out how to get out of bed for a little bit. Then, it became making it through the week or the weekend. And when I started working again, I really didn’t, I wasn’t super thrilled about having to do that, but I think just that routine was really helpful. But then at that point the weekends became bed! So, I mean that, it’s just been a process of being present and engaged with at home.

NP3’s distancing communication pattern: I think what got me to the point of where I was just I was searching…just searching. ’Cause I had gotten to that point in life where, “There’s got to be more than this.” I think [I got bored]. I think…there’s a thousand things that contribute to things like that. I mean, one of the contributing factors is I had realized that life wasn’t about me. You know, uhm, that my kids were at an age where our focus was solely on them. You know, [EP3] and I…we were afterthoughts for one another [and my attention was drawn elsewhere].

EP3’s preoccupied communication pattern: Uhm, and I really thought we were OK, besides my… the only issues we really had was my communication. Where I would, if
something was bothering me, I wouldn’t tell him. ’Cause I didn’t want to bother him. Uhm, I…I don’t think I was afraid of his response. Well, I may have been. Yeah. Just because he was so hard-core, I mean…for him, it’s just black and white. Uhm, he, whatever is on his mind will come out of his mouth. It’s just he’s real honest with people…brutally honest….when he shouldn’t be sometimes. He’s always been real sensitive with that kind of stuff…preinfidelity he was sensitive, and he still is. But what I thought he was going to think of me…. My mom always told me, “Don’t be a nagger, don’t be high maintenance, don’t be…” all of this stuff when we got married. She was like, “You can’t do that stuff.” ’Cause she was divorced. She said, “You can’t do that stuff ’cause you’ll lose him.”

Counseling identified the communication needs in each of the marriages. In particular, C1’s third counselor used emotionally focused couples therapy (EFT) as part of their connection healing. “With all the EFT, you know, I’d gone through all of the attachment stuff…that’s part of what helped me heal,” said EP1. Through counseling, the couple learned how to understand and label their own emotions but also how to become more emotionally engaged with one another.

**NP1’s communication pattern to build security:** I realized that her needing to know was part of her rebuilding security…. Because over time, like I said, I think what really happened when I got to the bottom of my junk, I could relook at [EP1] and see the pain that I put her through, and, uh, it made me go, “Oh my God, this is awful.”

**EP1’s communication pattern to build security:** We talk. We are completely connected on all three levels [physical, emotional, spiritual]. And we pretty much talk about everything. Even when we do have disputes now, we know [it’s safe].
C2’s counselor took a cognitive approach to working with the couple’s communication needs. The therapist identified patterns of negative thoughts in NP2 and EP2, which included holding critical views of self in their roles of husband or wife. Therapy helped C2 see how their thoughts made them vulnerable to pessimistic or dismissive feelings. According to EP2, she realized that she had been depressed and withdrawn for a long while. She attributed that mindset to all of the moving throughout her marriage, which left her feeling disconnected not only from her husband but from other support systems as well. This was difficult to face because she believed that ministry required her willingness to make certain sacrifices. Additionally, NP2 was able to identify the fact that his negative thoughts about himself resulted in performance-driven behaviors that ultimately moved him away from God and his family. C2’s counselor created a safe space in the sessions where NP2 and EP2 could explore, communicate, and reconstruct their negative thoughts.

**NP2’s communication pattern to build security:** If she asked me that question now [from the summer of 2013], we’re going to stay up and talk about “Why are you feeling that way?” So, that’s the change that’s happened… I think that’s how things have altered and changed in my life. Whereas, going back to the parental thing, I mean, that nonconfrontational lifestyle was just what I was raised in and who I was.

**EP2’s communication pattern to build security:** The levels of conversations we have now are just different…. There’s depth to them. Conversations aren’t avoided. We have them, and we are able to talk through them. Even give each other space…but you know it’s just safe.

C3 did not identify a particular therapy used by their church counselor. Their experience was “a godly man” who had a lot of empathy and wisdom. The counselor helped EP3 reframe
her belief that sharing with her husband was the equivalent of “nagging,” as taught to her by her mother, by integrating biblical truths about a godly wife into the session. For example, Proverbs 31:26 describes an excellent wife as one who “opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue” (ESV). Consequently, EP3 learned that she could have a voice and that NP3 wanted to know her thoughts and concerns.

**NP3’s communication pattern to build security:** [What] probably disturbs me more than anything is that she…see, she comes from a broken home. She comes from father who abandoned her…and, then, there I did, too. When I should have been the one who said, “No, that’s not the way it works, that’s not how it looks, that’s not…you are loved, and you’ll never be abandoned again.” And then I did…that was…that was probably more hurtful to me than anything. But, you know, that was one of the things that we discovered, you know, because sometimes she would get very, very…just hard to talk to, you know, bottled up emotions. And so we began talking, and we went through a whole bunch of stuff, and, uhm, that got us to the point of realizing that communication was a big thing. But it’s something I have to press in on and go, “Hey, hey, hey—I can read it, I can feel it, I know when you’re going through these times, and we’ve got to talk it out. We have to talk it out.” But she’s gotten a lot better. It takes a conscious effort on her part, uhm, so, but that’s been a big one. And we still have to wrestle a little bit over that. But that was a big hurdle for us.

**EP3’s communication pattern to build security:** We worked through a lot of that communication stuff…a lot…often. He would say, “I can’t read your mind. I don’t know what you’re thinking.” “You just seem mad,” or “You just seem upset,” or “I just
need for you to tell me what’s going on,” you know. So, I got better at it. We worked through that stuff.

**In summary.** Each couple found value in what they learned in counseling about how to develop healthy communication. They made intentional choices to engage in productive communication styles, which included exercising self-awareness and empathy and reframing negative thoughts. For EP3, it also included an intentional focus on biblical truth. The healthier communication resulted in the partners experiencing movement toward security in the dyad.

**Finding 2**

The second major finding of the study was that each partner chose to tell someone else about the infidelity for personal support and accountability. This theme consisted of three primary components: the need to feel safe, the need for guidance, and the need to be transparent.

The experience of believing their spouses had a secret that they were excluded from was both “painful” and “fearful” to the wives in this study. The marriage no longer felt like a safe place to the wives. A sense of personal security needed to be restored. This was cultivated somewhat through the support of family and friends. Additionally, the husbands’ willingness to be transparent helped reduce the threat secrecy posed.

NP1 considered “his secret” to be a position of power that needed to be relinquished for the reconciliation of his marriage. “It’s an important part. And [EP1] and I used to talk about it, uhm, if you have secrets, it’s because you have more power and more control over whatever, and that’s not being humble.” Subsequently, exposure of the infidelity removed the threat the secret held over each individual, and the spouses were then able to turn their attentions back to the preservation of the marriage instead of being focused on self-preservation. Thus, the dispelling
of “secrets” and the embracing of honesty helped participants regain a sense of being on stable ground.

Counseling was another action taken by the couples. They decided to reach out to a counselor because the spouses wanted the marriage to heal, but they “needed help knowing what to do next.” Each thought having a professional mediator who also shared their Christian beliefs and values might help.

EP1 felt that her counseling experience lacked practical direction in the immediate aftermath of disclosure when she wanted someone “to just tell [her] what to do.” She was thankful that she had a close-knit family to lean on for support.

**EP1 on support and accountability:** We both had individual counselors during the process [but I felt like something was missing]…. [My family was] amazing [support]. I mean, they looked me in the eye and said, “If you can do this, we can do this.” So, I have a pretty close little family anyway. They said, “…We’re going to not pretend it didn’t happen, but we’re going to respect your decision.”

Other participants believed their counselors served as objective voices that facilitated forward movement through psychoeducation as well as spiritual and practical interventions. EP2 found scripture reading and maintaining a thought journal especially helpful. She also appreciated the Christian women who were in her support system.

**EP2 on support and accountability:** Like, we had [a counselor] that helped a lot, [and] we had friendships and relationships that never let up, because it’s a long road.

Initially, NP2 did not think he needed to go to counseling. He said his pride told him, “I do counseling for [other] people.” However, NP2 soon realized that he needed support and direction; he needed people, too. Counseling provided NP2 the opportunity to reappraise his
thought processes and identify areas of vulnerability in his life, which included “pride” and “isolation.”

**NP2 on support and accountability:** There were other relationships and friends that God brought around and other influences, but counseling was definitely one of the major influences.

The participants’ faith system taught them to turn to others for accountability. Specifically, scripture texts such as Proverbs 27:17, “Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another” (ESV), and James 5:16, “Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed” (ESV), reminded the men of the strength found in accountability to another.

**NP1 on support and accountability:** Several men in the church…asked what they could do…. [They prayed for me and spent time with me]. [My public failure] was something that was deeply personal to me, but I’d also say…I think what it really taught me was apart from God my heart is wicked.

Counseling was one type of accountability for NP3. Telling a trusted friend provided NP3 with another layer of accountability by asking “the tough questions [about his thought-life, his attitude toward his wife and family, and his walk with Christ]” and by “tell[ing] me what I needed to hear.”

**NP3 on support and accountability:** …one of the first things I did was reach out to [trusted brothers in Christ]. I said, “Hey, look, I’ve got this going on, and this can go one of two directions…” [These] guys I went to weren’t going to tell me, “It’s OK” [NP3 laughed]. No! They were my…and are still…my guys…that aren’t going to tell me what I want to hear. They are going to tell me what I need to hear. And then the second…was
a counselor that I got hooked up with. And then [I] just started laying…the parameters
[that] would guideline my decisions. You know, some of the groundwork [for]
accountability to my wife.

EP3 was fearful of telling another person about her heartache. She felt vulnerable and
trusted no one. However, she eventually realized that her pain was too great to bear alone, and
she wanted direction for how to move forward and rebuild trust in her marriage, so she
apprehensively agreed to let others know.

**EP3 on support and accountability:** [NP3’s friend] asked [NP3] if he cared if [his wife]
knows because [his wife] is a prayer warrior. “She’ll pray for y’all.” And [NP3] asked
me, and I was like, “That’s fine as long as she doesn’t tell anybody.” Because I just felt
like, and this might sound cheezy, but I felt like the Lord had just put this bubble around
it and just protected it [from a lot of people finding out]. For some reason, I don’t know.
So, [NP3’s friend’s wife], she’s different. And she was, like, asking me questions, like,
“So you still believe what he’s saying? And you’re going to let him stay?” She was,
like, questioning what I was doing. But [the only other person I told]…was, like,
encouraging me, “You’re doing the right thing. You’re on the right track. You’re trying
to save your marriage.” That helped me, but I [still] didn’t feel comfortable telling
anybody because at that point I trusted no one…. Then, we went [to a counselor]. I
loved the guy. He was great with NP3.

**In summary.** The injury of the infidelity left the spouses with a need for safety, a need
for direction, and a need for transparency. All either were advised to attend counseling by a
family member or realized the need on their own. Some counseling was viewed as ineffective
due to lack of immediate practical helps (such as separate or stay under the same roof with the
NP, tell the children or don’t tell the children, and open a separate bank account from the NP or not). Other counseling was viewed as very useful because it provided support and helped participants “get unstuck.” The levels of support and accountability varied among the partners. Nevertheless, each reached out to at least one other person.

**Finding 3**

The third major finding in the study was the couples’ need to ensure physical separation from the other woman. This theme involved intentional boundary setting in order to move the dyad toward a sense of safety in the marriage.

For each couple, the other woman was in their social circle, and nearness felt like a looming threat to the wives. Therefore, spatial boundaries were exercised to promote safety for the wives. The proximity of distancing looked different for each couple.

*EP1 on physical separation from the other woman:* Well, as God would have it, NP1 lost his job…. So, we picked up and moved [out of state]…where he could work from home. And I always marvel at couples that don’t have that. So, we picked up and moved here, and so we had one-on-one time with each other 24/7, good or bad.

*NP2 on physical separation from the other woman:* Well, [the other woman and her husband] lived in our neighborhood, and…they moved away, but initially we had to drive a different way to get out of the neighborhood just to avoid going by their house. So that lasted for a year? [NP2 asked EP2 for verification of the timeline]. I mean, that lasted for a long time. That is a very specific, intentional choice that we had to make. We talked a lot about wanting to just move, uhm, and praying through it. We just know that this is where we are currently living now. I don’t think the reminders are quite as fresh, hopefully, but we haven’t talked about that recently…. But we’ve been like, “We don’t
want to live in the same house.” It’s almost become a recovery house in a way. You
know, in our bedroom we have this recliner, this awesome recliner, [but] it’s almost
become the recovery recliner. It’s in this spot by the window, and I think God has
already redeemed that in a way…kind of changed that. It’s still our desire to be out….  

**EP3 on physical separation from the other woman:** We never did anything as couples
again with anybody. And…I think [her husband] badmouthed [NP3] to some people
early on…. He said, “[NP3’s] a snake in the grass, and he’s not very trustworthy,” and
things like that to a few people. But that just kind of went away. We never did anything
with anybody else—with that group.

**In summary.** The decision to put physical distance between the other woman and the
couple was seemingly a survival instinct. None of the couples had to be advised to take this step,
although their counselors validated it. This instinctual step reduced fear triggers for the wives
and the husbands, and it helped each couple move toward security.

**Finding 4**

The fourth major finding in the study was that security-priming behaviors helped rebuild
trust and safety in the relationship. This theme involved intentionality toward the spouse in the
forms of transparent behaviors, empathy, and consistent touch points throughout the day that
demonstrated the mind-set of “I care about you, I’m for you, and you are safe.”

The participants described the ways that busyness, ruts, and lack of intentionality in
pursuing a spouse contributed to experiencing loneliness, boredom, or being on separate paths.
Recovery, to them, meant that each partner had to become more aware of the other’s relational
and emotional needs and move toward meeting those needs.
Early in the process, C1 felt like they had no direction or practical helps. They were engaged in counseling, but their first two counselors did not equip them with tools on how to coexist on a daily basis or how to begin repairing the trust breach. NP1 used the metaphor of following a recipe card when you learn to bake a cake for the first time. However, there were no step-by-step instructions for how to recover from infidelity. They did “the best [they] could” and simply reached out to one another.

**NP1 on security priming:** It would have been nice if we had a recipe card to follow [NP1 laughed]. We were doing a lot of stuff together…we were immersed in kind of rebuilding some [togetherness-type behaviors].

**EP1 on security priming:** Basically, uhm, he was an open book with everything…. I would check [his phone any time I wanted] because it would settle me down.

According to EP1, the first two counselors focused only on behavioral changes. Their third counselor, however, provided useful tools to finally help C1 get unstuck emotionally.

**EP1 on security priming:** The third counselor told NP1 that his heart and his head were completely disconnected. [In that session, NP1] could not name even three emotions [that he was experiencing]! We didn’t have that key [to know how] to create vulnerability [with each other].

Through EFT, the counselor taught C1 how to identify their insecure patterns and how to acknowledge their feelings and attachment needs. As a result, the couple learned to how to create intentional emotional engagement and trust-building vulnerability with each other. Additionally, they learned how to manage the triggers that led to emotional dysregulation.
C2 engaged in frequent brief conversations throughout the day and more meaningful in-depth conversations in the evenings. They found comfort in the sound of one another’s voices and discovered that words were healing.

**NP2 on security priming:** Whenever she calls, I always try to answer my phone. I try to respond right away. One of the things that I still do to this day is every morning I text her when I get to work. I started doing that four years ago, and every morning I still do that when I get to work. And when I leave work, I’m texting her to say, “Hey, I’m leaving work….”

When NP2 was fired from his position at the church, EP2 was forced to resign her position as the women’s ministry leader there. This came as a significant loss to her. NP2 acknowledged the domino effect the consequences of his behavior had on every area of his life and every area of his wife’s life. NP2 knew he could not control the undeserved consequences his action had on EP2, but he could draw near to his wife and walk with her through the pain. NP2 described how he intentionally reached out to EP2 to help her process her losses and manage the negative thoughts she had about herself. He also discussed the need to keep Jesus in the forefront of their marriage in order to guard against this type of injury in the future.

**NP2 on security priming:** [The women’s ministry that she led at church] was gone, and by none of her doing [she lost her position as women’s ministry leader when I got fired from my position at the church]. And, so, that’s another loss, and in that there’s that shame [for her], too, of “Wow, I was leading this ministry”—I’ve heard her say, “What a fool I was to think I was doing these things, and yet I couldn’t even keep my husband from cheating on me.” Well, that’s the enemy speaking, and so we’ve worked through those things.
I think one of the things we learned early was the idea of “drift.” The concept of drift and basically the idea of if you’re in the ocean and you’re just enjoying life...all of a sudden you look up, whether it’s 15 minutes or an hour later, and you’re not where you were. And that’s what happens in life, but that’s really what happens in marriages no matter who you are unless you are intentional and you are fixed. So, we talked a lot about what are the things that will help us avoid drift, marriage drift in the future, and how you have to constantly be realigning, not with what we want but what Jesus wants for our marriage.

NP2’s security-priming behaviors of talking intentionally and listening empathetically to EP2 had positive effects on her. She felt understood and more connected to her husband. However, healing was a slow process. Sexual intimacy remained a trigger-point for EP2. The sexual exclusivity that she once held with NP2 was a great loss for EP2, but his presence and responsiveness to her needs helped in those moments of dysregulation.

*EP2 on security priming:* We talk more deeply. Like, I do feel like we are connected...but I also think that [having sex] is still one of the greatest triggers [for me]. Well, I think the hurt comes from knowing that that level of intimacy is no longer just between us [but we talk about it].

C3 credited God and godly counseling for their movement toward one another. NP3 used the “wisdom” and techniques he learned in counseling and reframed his once negative thoughts of “what about me” to more positive thoughts of “I get to.” This change in mind-set freed him to experience the joy of loving his wife again.

*NP3 on security priming:* Like, just calling my wife every hour or, like, when I was at work, if I had to leave work, I would call her when I was leaving work. I called her when
I got to my next destination. I called her when I was leaving my destination to come back…. I think she trusts me. I can only imagine that there has to be some residual effect where there will never be 100% trust. I just don’t…I don’t know if I ever had it. I would have hoped to have had, but maybe I haven’t. But, and that could be due to the fact of who I was when I was younger, could be due to the fact of her background and feeling abandonment, so I don’t know. But, to where we are at this point, and I don’t know how long it’s been since the infidelity took place…it’s been 7, 8, 9 years ago, uhm, but I think I have done everything that I could possibly do that would have regained my wife’s trust and security. And…I work consciously daily on affirming those things in her life. I tell her she’s beautiful…I love my wife more than ever. Now more than I ever have. And, uhm, that’s because I now walk with God in a different way than I did before then. And, so… it’s 180 degrees different…I just love her now more than I ever have, and I don’t get tired, I don’t grow weary in doing good to my wife. I’m a long way away from perfect. There’s a lot of other things I know I could do. But I am intentional in trying to see that she is, uhm, secure and knows that I love her, and that God’s done a mighty work in my life.

Similarly, EP3 reflected on her view of their family life and then tried to look at their life through NP3’s perspective. EP3 realized that she needed to reorder her priorities. In doing so, she experienced a more secure position in her relationship with Christ and in her relationship with her husband.

**EP3 on security priming:** Taking my focus maybe off of my kids and more on [NP3] changed. Taking my focus off of him and more on the Lord changed. I think [NP3] was my…I think he was my god. If that makes sense. He was more important to me than the
Lord was. Uhm, I think that’s the thing for both of us that’s changed [EP3 said referring to a changed mind-set from a “work-based faith” to a “genuine relationship” with Christ]. You can be busy, busy, busy in the church, and the rest of your world is falling apart. So, I think we’ve both changed for the better. But part of the issue, I think, was communication, so I’m trying to be more open. And if it’s going through my head and I think it’s legitimate and not just Satan playing with me, you know, I feel like I should say, “I’m a little leery here,” you know. Uhm, and that hardly ever happens. I mean, it’s not even once every 6 months.

**In summary.** Through counseling that focused on building secure emotional connections in the relationship, the couples discovered their need for security-priming behaviors, such as deliberate thoughts, empathetic listening, emotional vulnerability, and demonstrative actions toward one another. The mind-set of intentionality adopted by the participants produced positive outcomes in structuring secure attachments within their dyads.

**Finding 5**

The fifth major finding in the study was the need to establish God as a secure base. This theme included security-priming behaviors that enabled them to see God as a benevolent and dependable attachment figure Who accepted them on the basis of His love and not on their works.

Each of the participants described insecure attachment styles within the marriage dyad. These insecure attachment styles were also reflected in their relationships with God before the disclosure of the infidelities. The men demonstrated a need for approval. However, they viewed God as an exacting Father, much like their biological fathers. They had perceived God as
judging their “busyness” and their “work.” As a result, they experienced emotional distance from their spouses and an inflated sense of self-importance the more they worked.

**NP1 on self-importance and working for God:** I’ve gone back and gone through my own life of, you know, how did I get to such a performance sort of mind-set that, uhm, you know, I was going to have a crash and burn, I just didn’t know where. Now, I can look back almost at some level…you know, sports does it to you, you know, military, there’s sort of this shutdown emotion message on males. But I think even equally on leaders, we don’t want leaders to be vulnerable. We want them to be perfect. We want you to be out here distant. And I’ve made people feel less without even trying.

**NP2 on self-importance and working for God:** And I quickly got involved in the church that I was working at, and, uhm, God’s Word had value, but growing the church was more important than God’s Word… In hindsight, I allowed, and we’ve talked about this, I allowed Jesus, [EP2], and the kids sometimes an improper view of what I was doing in ministry. I was, “Man, it was important.” It had a lot of value, eternal value, and it did, but I allowed those things to begin to creep up to almost become synonymous with Jesus.

**NP3 on self-importance and working for God:** You want to know who this God is Whom you are serving. You want to know about Him. So, you spend…you…it’s just all about service. It’s all about do. What can I do for God. What can I do for God? What can I do to earn my merits?

The women, on the other hand, demonstrated a need for safety. They turned to God in response to their brokenness and feelings of “not being enough.” At the same time, however, they experienced the dysregulation of being disappointed and “mad” at God for letting this happen to them.
**EP1’s dysregulation with God:** OK, so now I’ve moved to another city, and I decide to risk my marriage, and financially 2008 [we hit hard times]—so I had another talk with God, and I’m like what the heck?!

**EP2’s dysregulation with God:** I did, I definitely went through [disappointment with God], but I distinctly remember somewhere early on making the choice that even if I was mad at God or whatever, I was going to make myself read the Bible.

**EP3’s dysregulation with God:** God was not on the top of my list…he was, [NP3] was. Uhm, but that’s all flipped. And if that’s what the Lord needed to do to get my attention…

Through their faith system, the wives realized their need to connect with God through Bible reading, prayer, and praise and worship music. As they did, their secure attachment system was activated. The worship music, in particular, “saturated” their minds and renewed their minds with biblical truths that fear had tried to extinguish. A sense of “being OK” even in the midst of difficult circumstances was a common experience for each wife. As a result, each wife was able to respond to her husband with an attitude of grace and mercy.

**EP1’s discovering God as a secure base:** You know, when you’re with God in that way…you feel…love, and you don’t struggle with some of the poorer, or…difficult emotional connections, you know.

**EP2’s discovering God as a secure base:** And [Bible reading and worship music] really truly, I think, was the game changer for my healing…that Truth constantly coming in just kept my heart soft.

**EP3’s discovering God as a secure base:** Bible reading…prayer…and worship music [were] uplifting to me. I knew it was not God’s intention for us to divorce. And…there
was scripture that I read that told me that…that encouraged me to keep the course and keep the marriage, because it is never His will.

Receiving this undeserved grace from their wives impacted the husbands, and they discovered God in a different way. Instead of being an aloof authoritarian, He was found to be an intimate Father, Who was full of mercy and grace and extending His love to them through their wives. This shift in perception helped them move beyond self and the mind-set of “What about me?” It also helped them develop a heart of true repentance instead of an attitude of “being sorry” out of a fear of being caught.

NP1’s discovering God as a secure base: I’ve said it this way, and I believe that part of the reconciliation that God showed me that my wife will always represent to me what grace looks like—unmerited favor. And I’ll always know what the price is for mercy. I had to rely on mercy, and I think it wasn’t what I wanted it to be, as a male, you know, that I have to stand on mercy, but it was a very real picture to me in this. So, I think kind of at the core of the question is my wife’s part of it was grace, and mine was needing mercy. And I was at a bizarre place for someone who had walked in faith, uhm, to be in, but it also made it really clear to me that that’s how our Heavenly Father functions.

NP2’s discovering God as a secure base: I mean, she displayed, uhm, tremendous grace and forgiveness, but one of the things we’ve learned is forgiveness is free, trust is earned.

NP3’s discovering God as a secure base: But since then…[I understand] He was a God that cared about me in my deepest and darkest moments…. I mean, I can’t describe it. It’s been a miracle. It’s been a miracle of God. We were able to look at our own humanity. Realize how far short we fall. How much work it takes. How much maintenance it takes. How much grace it takes. How much forgiveness it takes.
Endurance. Uhm, and so, I began to see what marriage was to God. And how my marriage was to be a reflection of His covenant with me, and His love for me, and His commitment to me. And that my marriage needed to be a light in a dark place to reflect the character of God and the work of the Trinity and the cooperation and the unity that thrives within the Trinity.

The feeling of being safe in God’s hands and being accepted by Him increased the individual’s overall sense of well-being. In turn, this bolstered new dimensions of relational and spiritual intimacy within each dyad as demonstrated in the following interview extracts:

**NP1 on relational and spiritual intimacy:** We spent a lot of time in worship music. And I don’t think at the time I knew why, but I think, you know, you need spiritual washing at some level. And I think that it’s necessarily something that people put on the menu, but when I look back, I think there was really a time of being in His presence. Not even with an agenda, there wasn’t, you know, but I think we both came out of that loving to spend time in worship. …I think more than a program…you need healing showered with worship.

**EP1 on relational and spiritual intimacy:** [Before the infidelity], I think that we weren’t really involved in each other’s faith [now we’re unified in our worship]. [We learned to accept forgiveness]. I think to truly be healed, you can’t pick [the offense] up. You can’t [continue to] carry it. But it doesn’t mean that God can’t carry it. It doesn’t mean that I just give this away to the universe and I hope the best turns out. And that is why I’m sure that forgiveness doesn’t work, you know, to the world. But it means that I don’t have to carry that burden. To me, it means that. It does not mean that I excuse. It does not mean that I need to clearly be in some relationships that I don’t choose to be in. I know all of
that. But I think unforgiveness is heavy. ‘Cause it means that I’m in a remembrance mode. I could do that today. I could sit there and go to some of this painful stuff and let that door be open. Still, you know, and start getting all worked up within myself…like, yeah, these bad things happened to me. But I choose not to live in that…’cause that is not peace, that is not the joy, peace, and rest that the Bible talks about. I guarantee you, because I’ve lived it, you know, that peace.

NP2 on relational and spiritual intimacy: Now, my priorities are Jesus, [EP2], and the kids. Going back to that principle of being fully known, that’s something that we’ve talked a lot of about, and I want to make sure [I am]…there is zero things that she doesn’t know or have access to.

EP2 on relational and spiritual intimacy: Yeah, like, even our conversations before about God or whatever were centered around the church. But now, [conversations about God] really just center around the Lord is just our life. [This is] who we are now, [and we pray together]. I think there’s a constant presence. If I’m talking about this struggle, “Well, let me pray about it right now.” Like, it has just become…woven into who we are now, uhm, across the board as a family in our home.

NP3 on relational and spiritual intimacy: [Because I know she gets triggered at times]…I don't get impatient. Uhm, I just try to put myself in her position. And it’s so painful when I put myself in her position…. ‘Cause there’s no way I can relate to what she feels like. I can only attempt to relate to what she feels like, and uhm, when I attempt that and just scratch the surface of what it would possibly feel like, I take off mentally out of that situation quickly. ‘Cause I realize that has got to be [long pause]…ungodly…how that feels. So, no, I don’t get impatient with her. So, I don’t take it for granted. And I
don’t take my security for granted. So, I don’t look at it like “We’re secure. We made it to the other side. Praise the Lord.” You know—“Let’s sit back and kick our feet back.”

**EP3 on relational and spiritual intimacy:** God was not on the top of my list…he was, [NP3] was. Uhm, but that’s all flipped. And if that’s what the Lord needed to do to get my attention…. [Now] Bible…prayer…worship music is huge! Like, last night, [NP3] was sitting here and said, “You’re not going to believe what the Lord showed me yesterday morning.” And he was telling me all about it. Just sharing, I think, opening up, and teaching each other.

**In summary.** The participants’ faith system taught them that God was a loving Father. However, it was not until the individuals engaged in security-priming behaviors, such as Bible reading, prayer, and listening to worship music, that they reframed their thinking and saw God in a more secure way. As a result, they moved away from insecure patterns and established God as a safe base. Being tethered to God increased their self-confidence to risk pursuing their spouses and fighting for their marriages.

**Finding 6**

The sixth major finding in the study is that the couples needed to see hope while moving through the recovery process. This theme entailed finding hope in their belief that God was sovereign over their pain and finding hope in the stories of others who had survived marital infidelity.

EP1 believed that God demonstrated His sovereignty over the infidelity through the impact it had on the lives of her sons. According to EP1, she trusted that God had the authority to “make good out of bad.” She referenced Genesis 50:20, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they
are today” (ESV), and then told how the impact of the experience on her sons inspired them to
share their faith in God with others.

**EP1’s source of hope:** It’s going to be years of you restoring this and finding your way
back to your emotional safe place. So, you’ve got to know that because He [God] knows
the end [and because] He knows the other side of this…. He’s got the ultimate good…for
you…[and] for your family…. [God] flashed pictures of our three sons in front of me,
and, you know, I just started to laugh because they are completely sold out for the
Lord…. You know, spiritually, God dumped on them [through this trauma in our
family]. They’re the ones who were reaching the lost and starting FCA…. That’s the
multiplication of a testimony. And I think a lot of us as Christians don’t know, or don’t
remember, or don’t dwell on the fact that I have a destiny. I mean, I was put on earth,
created to do something that God knew before the beginning of time. And He’s going to
fulfill it. And I want to be in place to have Him fulfill it through me.

Having hope motivated EP1 to keep moving forward during tough days, and it imbued a sense of
purpose for her pain that helped her heal.

Another source of hope came from people who were willing to share their stories of
recovery from marital injuries. EP2 experienced hope through women who had recovered from
the trauma of infidelity in their marriages.

**EP2’s source of hope:** Well, I think for me…Jesus [was a source of hope]…. And I also
think the two pastors’ wives that I had met years before…. They shared their stories very
openly and very publicly. I knew it could be done. And I had direct access to them. I
would call them. I would text them. So, I think having those two people that God had
placed in my life years before anything [had happened in my marriage] and created that
friendship was really a gift because I knew it was possible [to heal]. And I could look at them and see that [recovery] could happen, and...[that] gave hope.

When asked if she had found a purpose for her pain as a result of her faith system, EP2 replied:

Yeah, I think...like, our marriage has improved. I think the way that we parent our children...like, there’s purpose in that good things that have come from what we have learned through the healing process, but I’m not sure that it’s now this great purpose now we know... like, I don’t think we are there yet. We’re still like, “OK, God, what are You doing?” [EP2 smiled and patted NP2’s knee].

In the early days after the infidelity, it was difficult for the three wives to trust people, even close friends. This was due to the fact that the other woman in the extradyadic involvement was a personal friend or acquaintance. EP3, in particular, struggled with being vulnerable to another woman. For this reason, she incorporated self-help in the form of reading. The written accounts of others who had recovered from infidelity became a source of hope for her.

EP3’s source of hope: Well, at first it was “Why?” Like, “How could we even be here? What happened? Who’s at fault? If anybody? If not both of us?” Uhm, and then [after reading three books on Christians who had recovered from marital infidelity], it was “What are we going to do from here? What can we do to fix it? And make it even stronger and glorify the Lord? How can we use what’s happened to help others?”

[Unfaithful: Hope and Healing After Infidelity, by Gary and Mona Shriver (2005)] was one book that I will never forget. It was like the person wrote this book just for me. And it was incredible, and it was kind of the same situation, and the book told how she worked through it. And it was like you can do this, you can do this!
EP3 felt like the authors in the books befriended her and counseled her when she needed comfort and direction. She discovered that reading the stories of recovery was both safe and encouraging. EP3 was no longer alone in her pain. She had God, NP3, and Mona Shriver.

**In summary.** Hope was a necessary element for moving forward in the recovery process. The participants found hope in two main sources. The first was in the sovereignty of God as a healer and a redeemer of pain. The second was in the stories of others, both verbal and written, who had recovered from infidelity.

**Summary of Findings Related to the Research Question**

What helps evangelical marriages recover after sexual infidelity by the husband? Based on the data collected and analyzed from three evangelical couples that recovered from infidelity by the husband, the answer to this research question was to repair the injury with six specific attachment mending elements: develop healthy communication, obtain support and accountability, maintain physical separation from the other woman, practice security-priming behaviors, establish God as a secure base, and find a source of hope. These components were interconnected processes that moved the insecure spouses from the attachment injury toward recovery by building secure connections in their relationships with God, self, and spouse. Thus, the couple moved from being disconnected to a more fortified, secure covenantal union of three.

Figure 4.1 illustrates how the attachment injury of infidelity caused the insecure spouses to become disconnected. It is important to note that the insecure attachment style is reciprocal with injury, meaning injury feeds insecurity and insecurity is prone to injury. However, as the spouses made intentional choices to move toward the six interconnected processes of the attachment repair hexagon, recovery was possible. Each spouse reconnected to God as a safe base and then was able to pursue his or her spouse for healing in the marriage.
Infidelity was a traumatic breach in the covenant relationship for the participants. The emotional injury was multifaceted. Among the myriad of emotions felt by the husbands and wives were shame, anger, confusion, betrayal, embarrassment, unbelief, unlovedness, and worthlessness. The spouses tried to give voices to their pain, but their preexisting insecure attachment styles stymied productive dialogue. Instead, communication took on the form of partners hollering at one another, endless questioning or browbeating, lying, accusing, begging for truth, or avoiding confrontation.

One step toward recovery required the couples to override their learned maladaptive patterns of communication and to develop new healthy communication habits. Counseling was
beneficial to each of the couples in achieving this goal. C1 learned how to identify and own their emotions through EFT. Additionally, they cultivated a sense of safety in the relationship by learning how to listen to and empathize with their partner’s emotional needs. C2 improved their communication style by learning cognitive restructuring skills, such as how to identify cognitive distortions and how to challenge their own irrational thoughts. They also learned to reframe their thoughts and emotions in order to produce a more positive outcome. Avoiding catastrophizing thoughts, giving each other the benefit of the doubt, and remembering that they were fighting for a common goal became the basis of C2’s new communication style. Likewise, C3 learned how to reframe thoughts and how to express empathy. Additionally, EP3 embraced biblical truths to fortify her self-confidence and rescript her inner narrative of “don’t nag or you’ll lose him.”

**Obtain Support and Accountability**

The act of infidelity was frightening to both the husbands and the wives. There was a sense of aloneness and a need for direction. Therefore, another step in the recovery process was that each partner reached out to at least one other person as a means to meet those needs. Counseling provided a safe, nonjudgmental space to be fully seen and heard. It also provided needed tools to move toward healing in the relationships. Additionally, trusted family members or friends served as encouragers, wound binders, and boundary guardians.

**Maintain Physical Separation from the Other Woman**

The anxious attachment style of the wives was hyperactivated in times of distress. One of the distressing triggers was the close proximity of the other woman. Therefore, the couples took intentional actions to avoid crossing paths with the mistress. Minimizing the fear of seeing the other woman was a seemingly instinctive and necessary step in the recovery process.
**Practice Security-Priming Behaviors**

The biblical description of a husband and wife was that of a unified person, “They shall become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24, ESV). Infidelity, however, inflicted a gaping attachment wound on the dyad. It left the couples divided instead of united as their faith system taught them. Therefore, a vital step in recovery was to repair the attachment rift and recover a sense of oneness in the marriage. Counseling coached the couples on security-priming behaviors that met the attachment needs of acceptance, love, and safety. A phone call or text throughout the day, a meaningful conversation at night, a shoulder to lean on, or an emotional validation were all primers meant to assure one’s partner that “You matter” and “You are safe with me.”

**Establish God as a Secure Base**

The NP and the EP needed God for their recovery. Specifically, they needed God to be a secure attachment figure that anchored their emotions and provided them with a sense of safety. The participants embraced the biblical account that God’s acceptance and care for them was based not on their performance but only on His love, grace, and mercy extended to them. In doing so, they transformed insecure attachment styles that originated from their parents into more secure attachments to their Heavenly Father. The couples also discovered that as they found surer footing in their relationships with God, they felt more emboldened to risk moving toward their spouses.

**Find a Source of Hope**

The participants identified hope as a necessary component to recovery. It helped keep them afloat during their storms of suffering. They needed to believe that it was possible to overcome their pain. Faith in God was one source of hope. The belief that God could heal their pain and that He could even redeem it for a greater purpose filled some participants with a calm
assurance that the circumstances would not remain indefinitely. Hope was also found in the victorious stories of others who had weathered the storm of infidelity and recovered. The stories were both oral and written. Nevertheless, the knowledge that someone else made it served as encouragement to those who were in the process of trying to make it.

Evidence of Quality

The quality of this research study is evidenced by the measures taken by the researcher to assure the accuracy and trustworthiness of the data and its interpretation. The researcher took observational notes (see Appendix G) during the participant interviews and personally transcribed the audio recordings. Then, the researcher sent the verbatim transcripts to the corresponding participants for member checking. The participants approved the information as recorded by the researcher. Next, the researcher used triangulation by collecting the data from multiple participants and by looking at the data through a theoretical framework of two specific theories (attachment theory and social constructivist theory) to reduce bias. Last, to ensure the findings truly represented the phenomenon of recovery from infidelity, the researcher used peer debriefing in the form of an impartial dissertation committee to ensure the validity of the data collected and its interpretation.

Chapter Summary

The researcher identified six key findings from the firsthand stories of three evangelical Christian couples that recovered from sexual infidelity by the husband. The findings were develop healthy communication, obtain support and accountability, maintain physical separation from the other woman, practice security-priming behaviors, establish God as a secure base, and find a sense of hope. This chapter used vignettes that allowed the reader to hear the participants’ stories in their own words. Each person gave his or her account of the marriage relationship
before the infidelity, at the disclosure of the infidelity, and during the process of recovery from
the infidelity. Next, the researcher discussed the six key findings individually and then provided
a detailed summation that wove together the study’s findings in one comprehensive model of
recovery. The chapter concluded with a discussion on the evidence of the quality of the research
data.
CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the knowledge on recovery from infidelity in marriages among the evangelical Christian population. The study was designed to replicate the work of Abrahamson et al. (2012), who conducted an interview-based qualitative study with a mixed group of two nonexclusive partners (NP) and five exclusive partners (EP). The focus on evangelical Christians is significant due to the dearth of empirical literature on recovery from marital infidelity. Glaser (2014) warned that in the absence of such information, applying a therapeutic treatment or technique could prove ineffective and might even cause harm. Therefore, this researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with three NP and EP partner dyads, who identified as evangelical Christians (as defined in Chapter 1 of this manuscript), to better inform clinicians on the processes and resources that this population have used to recover from the marital trauma of extradyadic behaviors by the husband. This final chapter presents an interpretation of the research findings with an integrated discussion on how the findings relate to theory, a chronicling of the study’s implications for social change, recommended actions, recommended future research, limitations, a look at the researcher’s experience with the study, and concluding statements with an exhortation to clinicians working with this population.

Review of Study

This study used a qualitative approach to collect firsthand accounts of recovery by evangelical Christian couples who were a minimum of two years post disclosure of infidelity by the husband. Grounded theory provided the conceptual framework for discovery and interpretation of the data. The key question guiding the research was: What helps evangelical marriages recover after sexual infidelity by the husband? Pursuant to the goal of this study, the
researcher conducted two semi-structured interviews with the NP and EP within each of the three dyads. (See Appendix F for the complete list of interview questions.)

**Summary of the Findings**

The interviews provided insight into each marriage before the infidelity, at disclosure of the infidelity, and during recovery from the infidelity. Six major findings satisfied the research question. What helps evangelical marriages recover after sexual infidelity by the husband is developing healthy communication, obtaining support and accountability, maintaining physical separation from the other woman, practicing security-priming behaviors, establishing God as a secure base, and finding a source of hope. Interpretations of the findings, which are discussed in the following section, subsumed attachment theory to provide clarity to intrapersonal factors (Allen et al., 2008; V. M. Russell et al., 2013) and social constructivist theory to consider the impact the family of origin had on the transmission of values, beliefs, and behaviors (Allen et al., 2008; Atwood & Seifer, 2007; Moller & Vossler, 2015).

**Interpretation of Findings**

In this section a comprehensive interpretation of the findings is presented. This is accomplished through a conclusion to the research question as bounded by the data of the research and a comparison to similar literature on the topic. Attachment theory and social constructivist theory are highlighted, as these theories comprised the theoretical framework for the study. A summary to synthesize the findings and address the practical applications of the findings will conclude the interpretation.

**Conclusion to the Research Question**

The research question explored what helps evangelical marriages recover after sexual infidelity by the husband. Data collected and analyzed from the three participating evangelical
couples revealed that recovery was achieved through six primary components: develop healthy communication habits, obtain support and accountability, maintain physical distance from the other woman, practice security-priming behaviors, establish God as a secure base, and find a source of hope. The existing literature on attachment theory and social constructivist theory resonated with these key findings.

Comparison with the Literature

Healthy communication. Communication was a primary theme in the recovery process for this study’s couples. This theme had two components: addressing family-of-origin role modeling and moving toward dyadic security.

Family-of-origin role modeling. From a social constructivist perspective, a person’s mental models of social interactions are largely shaped by parental attachment styles and communication styles (Walker-Andrews & Hudson, 2004). The link between communication and attachment styles of couples and communication and attachment styles of their parents has been empirically demonstrated (Alexandrov, 2010; Crowell et al., 2002; Ebrahimi & Kimiaei, 2014; Gillath, Selcuk, & Shaver, 2008; Luke, Sedikides, & Carnelley, 2012; Smith & Ng, 2009; Weger & Polcar, 2000). Research has revealed that these attachment styles frequently follow a pattern of gender matching, meaning sons match to fathers and daughters match to mothers (Mikulincer & Florian, 1999; Smith & Ng, 2009). The common phrase “like mother, like daughter” is especially relevant for this population given the biblical reference, “Behold, everyone who uses proverbs will use this proverb about you: ‘Like mother, like daughter’” (Ezekiel 16:44, ESV).

Gender matching was apparent in the participants of this study as they each discussed their own parents. This was exemplified in the following sample quotes by NP2 and EP3.
NP2 relayed a conversation between EP2 and himself where she was frustrated by his lack of communication. His response was that he had learned how to communicate from his dad:

NP2: My MO [modus operandi], going back, has been very evasive. I’ve been very nonconfrontational [like my dad]. That’s something that these last four years [post infidelity] has opened a lot up for me. Like, even my family, like the way I grew up [we never talked about anything]. [My wife asked me], “Did y’all not talk about this as a family?” I’m like, “No, it’s just you don’t talk about this.” So…my dad’s not confrontational…. [My parents] don’t talk about anything really important. Well, at least, I don’t think that they do. We didn’t as kids, and that’s just kind of who I was.

EP3 was taught how to communicate in a marriage relationship by her mom, which was keep your mouth shut if you want to keep your husband. Her mother’s divorce reinforced the fear-based advice. Consequently, EP3 heeded her mother’s words and lived an anxiety-laden existence in her marriage.

EP3: My mom always told me, “Don’t be a nagger, don’t be high maintenance, don’t be…” all of this stuff when we got married. She was like, “You can’t do that stuff.” ’Cause she was divorced. She said, “You can’t do that stuff ’cause you’ll lose him.” …[Because of Mom’s advice], I’ve always been independent…. I’ve never been high maintenance, I’ve never been like “I need you” a lot. Does that make sense?

Uhm, but once [disclosure of the infidelity] happened, it was like [NP3] wanted to do everything for me. He wanted to be with me all of the time. And I kept thinking, “I don’t even know if I like this. ’Cause it seems like I’m so needy.”

These parentally influenced insecure communication patterns and attachment styles (Mikulincer & Florian, 1999; Smith & Ng, 2009) added to the distress of each of the
participant’s relationships. Consequently, therapists working with couples recovering from infidelity should focus on developing healthy communication skills that build security in the dyad (Egeci & Gencoz, 2011).

Moving toward dyadic security. The participants reported that healthier communication skills were necessary for them to move toward recovery in their marriages. Studies have suggested that communication styles directly impact marital satisfaction (Ebrahimi & Kimiaei, 2014) and sexual satisfaction (Khoury & Findlay, 2014) and that attachment styles directly impact communicative behaviors within relationships (Weger & Polcar, 2000). Relatedly, research by Askari, Noah, Hassan, and Baba (2012) found that most couples with maladaptive communication styles had problems in their overall relationship because interpersonal interaction styles had a direct link to marital satisfaction. Additionally, Litzinger and Gordon (2005) discovered that ineffective communication styles contributed to coldness and distance within the dyad and produced deeper levels of distress. On the other hand, couples with secure attachment styles demonstrated greater dyadic cohesion in communication and problem-solving skills than those with insecure attachment styles (Egeci & Gencoz, 2011).

This study’s participants experienced the negative impact of ineffective communication styles before the infidelity, at disclosure of the infidelity, and in the early aftermath of disclosure. Through marriage counseling, however, C1 was taught EFT, and C2 and C3 learned cognitive-based therapy interventions for building healthier communication skillsets. The EFT approach to communication focused more intently on the person’s affect and ability to relate emotionally, because according to EFT, attachment required an emotional connection (S. M. Johnson et al., 2001; S. M. Johnson, 2005b). The positive result of EFT for C1 was demonstrated during the researcher’s observations of the couple. NP1 and EP1 shared frequent touches and glances of
affection. Additionally, NP1 talked freely about his emotions, both past and present. He was able to identify the emotion and its effect on him, and he empathized with the effect it had on EP1. The couple considered this a victory for their marriage, since he had been told years ago by the therapist that “his heart and head were disconnected.”

Likewise, Dr. John Gottman’s research was consonant with the theoretical tenet that partners must be able to effectively communicate emotionally in order for the relationship to thrive. He identified emotionally intelligent husbands as a key ingredient to successful marriages in his book *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Emotional intelligence was described as the ability to engage the wife in an understanding way. This concept ran parallel to the admonition that husbands were given in the Bible, “husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way” (1 Peter 3:7, ESV). Gottman and Silver (1999) noted that the husband who created a love map of his wife became intimately acquainted with her (likes, dislikes, passions, needs, etc.). Through emotional intelligence, the husband is better equipped to communicate love and safety to his wife in a manner that will increase her sense of well-being. Additionally, Gottman and Silver (1999) found that this communication skill increased positive sentiment in the minds of the husbands and wives, which in turn decreased automatic negative thoughts about one another.

Also notable is the research conducted by Vazhappilly and Reyes (2017) on the effectiveness of emotionally focused communication. They investigated the Emotion-Focused Couples’ Communication Program to enhance marital communication and satisfaction among distressed couples. Thirty-two couples from Maharashtra, India, participated in a two-group randomized control trial, which consisted of 10 biweekly sessions over a five-week period. The experimental group participated in nine intervention modules that consisted of lectures,
interactive activities, and homework. The modules moved the participants through the process of learning how to create connectedness, how to accept self, how to activate compassionate listening without judgment, how to express the needs of self, how to allow one’s partners to freely express needs, how to soothe painful memories of the past, how to adopt an attitude of thankfulness, how to nurture camaraderie and mutual respect, how to rebuild affection and romance, and how to maintain and sustain growth (Vazhappilly & Reyes, 2017). The control group did not receive treatment. Instead, they carried out their normal daily routines. All participants were given a pretest/posttest consisting of the Primary Communication Inventory and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale to measure levels of communication and marital satisfaction. The pretest scores of both groups were similar; however, the posttest scores of the experimental group indicated a significant increase in levels of positive communication and marital satisfaction.

The strength of this model was its integration of emotion-focused psychoeducation and interventions with Indian religious components, such as prayer, mantra, yoga, and pranayama (Vazhappilly & Reyes, 2017). Further research should investigate if this model would work well with an integration of spirituality based on the evangelical Christian faith.

Support and accountability. A second major component in the recovery process was to tell someone else the story. This theme dealt with the participants’ need to feel safe, their need to be transparent, and their need for guidance.

Support. Mikulincer and Shaver (2009) stated that support-seeking behavior is activated by the attachment behavioral system, “which governs the selection, activation, and termination of behavior aimed at attaining protection and support from stronger and wiser others” (p. 9). While it is most commonly associated with the parent-child relationship, it is actually “active
over the entire life span and is evident in thoughts and actions related to seeking protection, support, and guidance in times of need” (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2009, p. 9).

According to research, repeated experiences of support contribute to positive mental representations and play an integral part in emotional stability during times of distress (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2009; Simpson & Rholes, 2012). Support from others can create a sense of optimism and instill a more hopeful mind-set in a person, which subsequently may affect reappraisal of one’s problems as manageable (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2009; Simpson & Rholes, 2012).

**Accountability.** Transparency with close personal relationships can promote self-regulation in an individual by helping monitor and reduce discrepancies between one’s observed behaviors and one’s desired behaviors (Orehek, Vazeou-Nieuwenhuis, Quick, & Weaverling, 2017). Thus, accountability helped prevent relapse into secret-keeping behaviors. NP3 stated that he felt safeguarded by Christian friends who would keep a light of transparency on him and “tell me what I need to hear.”

The literature has addressed how secrets impact marital well-being. A 2009 study by Finkenauer, Kerkhof, Righetti, and Branje questioned 199 newlywed couples to examine how perceived concealments between spouses influenced marital well-being. The study suggested that the belief a spouse had a secret had deleterious impacts on the well-being of the partnership and elicited powerful feelings of exclusion and estrangement in the nonincluded spouse; and such a threat was inconsistent with a sense of closeness, caring, satisfaction, and intimacy in relationships (Finkenauer et al., 2009). Whereas trust declined and conflict increased with perceived concealment, removal of the threat mediated these effects (Finkenauer et al., 2009).
**Guidance.** Notably, each couple turned to a counselor after the disclosure of the infidelity. The literature has validated the fact that the threat of divorce is a major reason both males and females would be significantly likely to seek counseling (Bringle & Byers, 1997).

The wives in this study had a seemingly desperate need for guidance and help with decision-making in the early aftermath of the disclosure. Questions about next steps in the marriage, effects on the children, and managing the financial impacts of a broken union swirled through their heads. EP1 described her experience this way: “I feel crazy! I need just help. Like, should I, like, make some moves? Help me problem-solve some solutions here.” It was important to them, however, that they receive direction from someone who was aligned with their personal belief system. The literature has suggested Christian clients, in general, strongly prefer a Christian counselor who provides secular therapeutic techniques and uses spiritual interventions (Bannister, Park, Taylor, & Bauerle, 2015; Hathaway, 2008; Worthington, 1988).

**Physical separation from the other woman.** A third theme identified in the study was the need for physical distance from the other woman. This entailed intentional boundary setting in order to prevent activation of hypervigilance in the EP’s attachment behavioral system when the other woman was believed to be in close proximity (Lavy, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2010). According to social constructivist theory, couples construct meaning systems within their marriages based on what they value and believe (Atwood & Seifer, 2007). These meaning systems define acceptable and unacceptable behaviors in the marriage and impact decision-making for the good of the relationship (Atwood & Seifer, 2007). The couples in this study held the belief that extradyadic behaviors are unacceptable for the good of the marriage and used this meaning system to establish protective boundaries from the person threatening the dyad. Consequently, C1 moved to a new town; C2 planned to move, but the other woman moved away
before they could; and C3 rerouted their normal routines to avoid places where they anticipated encounters with the other woman. In taking intentional measures to ensure physical distance from the other woman, the EPs experienced reduced emotional dysregulation.

**Security-priming behaviors.** A fourth key finding for recovery was the need to practice security-priming behaviors. This theme involved intentionality to establish security in the dyad and to meet the relational and emotional needs of one’s mate. Security is the felt sense of being safe, accepted, cared for, or soothed by an attachment figure (Ainsworth, 1973; Crowell et al., 2002; Gillath et al., 2008; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2009). Thus, security-priming behaviors refer to the interactions with an attachment figure that produce feelings of love and safety (Ainsworth, 1973; Crowell et al., 2002; Gillath et al., 2008; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2009).

**Development of attachment figure.** The work of Bowlby (1969) and Ainsworth (1973) demonstrated that people are born with a biological need to be deeply connected to another person. Hazan and Shaver (1987) conceptualized the evolution of this attachment need whereby a person’s attachment style, which is based on attachment representations formed by the parent-child relationship, is converted into adult romantic love. These learned attachment styles are embedded in partner responses to one another and consequently might produce a powerful, secure, trusting connection, or might produce feelings of rejection and an insecure, mistrusting disconnection (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

**Changing one’s attachment style.** Research by Crowell et al. (2002) suggested that spouses could create a secure base within the context of their marriage. Each time a partner reached out or responded to the other, they were co-constructing new mental representations for attachment relationships and for security behaviors within the dyad. “These new co-constructed
behavioral systems may lead to alteration of the existing attachment working models or
development of new relationship-specific models” (Crowell et al., 2002, p. 10).

**Practical application of security-priming behaviors.** According to S. M. Johnson (2005a), the trust that a person is prized and cherished and will never be abandoned by his or her partner is the foundation of secure attachment. Research has demonstrated that the effect of the NP’s extradyadic behavior on an EP is catastrophizing (S. M. Johnson, 2005a; S. M. Johnson et al., 2001). Infidelity breaks down the internal models the EP held about self and mate, which hyperactivates anxious based behaviors, such as questioning, protests, anger outbursts, distancing, and tearfulness (S. M. Johnson, 2005a; S. M. Johnson et al., 2001). Thus, the healing process must address the specificity of the wound; it is an attachment rupture (S. M. Johnson, 2005a). The internal models of self (as safe and loved) and mate (as a dependable attachment figure) must be reconstructed for the marriage to thrive. The literature on attachment therapy has indicated that security-priming behaviors produce positive outcomes for repairing attachment traumas (Gottman & Silver, 1999; S. M. Johnson, 2005a; S. M. Johnson et al., 2001).

**Security-priming interventions by Johnson.** S. M. Johnson (2005b) has researched and written extensively on the topic of marital ruptures and building secure relationships. Her studies have identified concrete steps for couples to take to prime the pump of marital wellness. S. M. Johnson (2005b) designed the EFT model with three stages: stabilization, restructuring the bond, and integration and consolidation. The stages contain nine steps the therapist systematically guides the couple through to create new cycles of behavior for the couple.

**Security-priming interventions by Gottman.** Likewise, Gottman has dedicated much research to the building of secure marriages. Based on his research and analysis on the habits of couples, Gottman published a book identifying seven security-priming behaviors couples can use
to strengthen their attachment bonds: create a love map of one another, foster genuine fondness and admiration for one another, turn toward each other instead of away, accept influence from each other, solve solvable conflicts together, accept that not all conflicts can be resolved, and create shared meaning (Gottman & Silver, 1999).

Security-priming interventions used by C1, C2, and C3. Security-priming behaviors in this study occurred in various forms, including phone calls, texts, words of validation, romantic or thoughtful gestures, meaningful dialogue, and empathetic listening, to name a few. NP2 illustrated its practical application when he said, “I never wanted her to feel like I’m at work now; leave me alone. So, whenever she calls, I always try to answer my phone. I try to respond right away.”

Furthermore, all three couples recognized how the busyness of life caused them to “go their own way” or “take separate paths.” The choice to implement regular daily touches focused them on the reunification of the dyad, which aligned with the concept of “we-ness” (Reid, Doell, Dalton, & Ahmad, 2008) in the literature. In sum, the priming activities of texting, calling, and “being fully known” increased the partners’ felt security in and energy for their relationships (Luke et al., 2012).

God as a secure base. A fifth major component in the phenomenon of recovery was that participants established God as a secure base. This theme entailed proximity-seeking behaviors that moved them toward an accepting and benevolent Father. Participants described this component as crucial in their recovery process because it corrected some of the misconstrued ideas once held about how God viewed them, which provided them with freedom to turn to Him in their moments of distress.
**Changed view of God.** NP participants were active in religious exercises, such as church attendance, teaching a Sunday school class, or leading a small group. However, each of the NP participants also stated that they did not spend much time focused on their personal connections to Jesus Christ during the time surrounding the infidelity. They described busyness in working for their Lord, but not having an attached relationship to Him. They characterized God as more of an exacting Father who expected them to work hard, do good deeds, and behave righteously for His sake. In the face of moral failure, they imagined God’s disappointment with them and found no comfort in His presence. This mind-set changed, however, as the EPs fought for the marriage. Every one of the EPs told her husband divorce was not an option. Despite their woundedness, the EPs extended attitudes of grace and mercy toward their husbands. This encouraged the NPs to see the heart of God in a more accepting, grace-based way, and to see Him as One Who was acting benevolently on their behalves.

Studies on attachment theory identified attachment to God as a probable recompense for insecure attachment experiences with primary caregivers (Granqvist, Mikulincer, Gewirtz, & Shaver, 2012; Hiebler-Ragger, Falthansl-Scheinecker, Birnhuber, Fink, & Unterrainer, 2016; Kirkpatrick, 1999). Furthermore, Miner (2009) found that secure attachments with God influenced an individual’s psychological adjustment more than the attachment bond formed with primary caregivers.

**Proximity-seeking behavior.** Each EP in this study described turning to Christ in her moments of heartache, betrayal, and abandonment. The wives discussed the proximity-seeking behaviors of Bible reading, prayer, and worship music. Meditation on the truth of God helped override the fears the trauma embedded in their minds. God became their safe haven, secure base, and source of strength in the midst of their fearful circumstances. From the secure base of
a loving, benevolent Father, the EPs were able to risk exploration and movement toward their spouses (Kirkpatrick, 1999).

**Attachment language.** Some of the secure attachment language in the Bible refers to God as a “strong tower” (Proverbs 18:10, King James Version [KJV]), a “mother bear” fighting for her cubs (Deuteronomy 32:8, KJV), and a “mother hen” protecting her brood (Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34, KJV). Additionally, the EPs felt as though God spoke directly to them through His Word and through the lyrics of the worship music.

Research on the internal working model of music in relation to attachment has discovered that singing is a form of emotional communication between infants and mothers that soothes and comforts (Creighton, Atherton, & Kitamura 2013; Stubbs, 2018). This type of attachment language is in harmony with the language used in the Bible when God, as Father, sings over His children, “The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing” (Zephaniah 3:17, KJV). Music conveys closeness and bonding through the messages within the lyrics (Creighton et al., 2013; Stubbs, 2018). The findings in this study affirmed previous research on the attachment language of music. The EPs described how worship music felt like a “constant presence” and offered a “spiritual washing” of the mind:

**EP1:** [Referring to the power of worship music]…because this is an emotional problem, it’s caused an emotional hurt, you know, and emotional healing matters. Romans 12:2, “Be renewed by the transforming of your mind.”

**EP2:** I distinctly remember somewhere early on making the choice that even if I was mad at God or whatever, I was going to make myself read the Bible. And I did. There were times, like, I remember thinking, I have to stay connected. Worship music played a
huge part. [It] was kind of the sustaining. When I could not read or pray, I had my phone constantly playing. It was on all night, when I would sleep. So, I would go to sleep to it and wake up to it. And that really truly, I think, was the game changer for my healing…that Truth constantly coming in just kept my heart soft.

**EP3:** I play it all day long. It’s constant in my car…I’ve got it on my phone and on my laptop in my bathroom. It’s been huge for me. Especially when I wake up. Like, there are times, like if I’ve seen [the other woman] out, and I go to bed with that on my mind, I’ll have nightmares. And so the next day, when I get up, I’m like, “OK, that was yesterday. I didn’t sleep last night because of it…” The worship music is playing because I’ve got to clear my mind. I just need something…. It’s uplifting. I mean, you just praise *Him*, and so many of the songs you can relate to and what they’re saying and how you should be dealing with it, you know. So, it’s been huge.

From an evangelical Christian worldview, God is a relational being. The faith system of C1, C2, and C3 taught them God would never leave them or forsake them (Deuteronomy 31:6; Hebrews 13:5). It was in their moment of despair, however, that they tested God as a secure base and found Him ready to receive, comfort, and heal them. God proved to be the ultimate secure base for these couples because He needed nothing in return from them. “If one believes the Bible reveals God himself then we can say with confidence that he is a healing God and that he chooses to break into our lives despite our lack of faith and knowledge of his character” (Monroe & Schwab, 2009, p. 128).

**Source of hope.** A sixth major theme in the recovery process was finding a source of hope. This theme included finding hope in the sovereignty of God and finding hope in the stories of others who had survived marital infidelity. Research on the relationship between hope
and attachment suggests that focused, hope-based interventions frequently produce an increase in goal-directed thinking, positive coping skills, and more secure attachment-related outcomes (Abinoja, 2016; Blake & Norton, 2014; Chan, Chan, Ditchman, Phillips, & Chou, 2013).

**Hope in the sovereignty of God.** The belief in the sovereignty of God and His ability to work things out for good offered an optimistic expectation for recovering from the infidelity. Worthington, Ripley, Hook, and Miller (2007) stated that hope is essential to positive living, and hope is at the “core of the Christian experience. Christ in us is indeed the hope of glory (Colossians 1:27)” (p. 132). The lack of hope leads to a crisis of faith for a follower of Christ (Worthington et al., 2007). For the couples in this study, hope was found in their faith system. The proximity-seeking behaviors of Bible reading, prayer, and worship music reinforced their faith in God’s restorative power. This was necessary because the couples needed faith to motivate them to do the difficult work recovery required (Worthington et al., 2007).

Hope was found in having a sense of purpose for the pain. Culver and Denton (2017) reported that perceived closeness to God bolstered a sense of purpose for individuals. Subsequently, purpose in one’s life was linked to other positive life outcomes and a sense of well-being (Culver & Denton, 2017). It was identifying purpose that helped each NP to alleviate shaming thoughts. These were their hope-focused statements:

**NP1:** And it’s not just turning over control to Him, it’s recognizing that He’s got the ultimate good, not only of each of you, but also the purpose for your family. ’Cause at the end of the day, infidelity, it always comes back to there’s something that isn’t fair. You can’t ever reconcile it. You can’t ever balance that scale. The path [EP1] has had to walk in our relationship is never going to have been fair.
NP2: It’s a delicate thing…, but the result of this is my relationships with Jesus, [wife], and the kids are all better than it ever was.

NP3: Something good must happen, it will happen, it has been sovereignly ordained to happen, it’s gonna happen. Uhm, God’s name will be glorified in this and that is the promise that He has given us. That is the promise that we have held on to as a couple. It says in Romans 8:28, “And, we know, we know, we know that in all things God works to the good for those who love Him and are called according to His purposes.” So, we know that God will work in this. We know that He is going to accomplish His purposes. And through that Christ will be exalted. And, uh, we also know that we have an obligation to live holy and righteous lives before Him through His enablement through the Holy Spirit. So, good will come out of it. Good has come out of it. And good will continue to come out of it for generations, we trust.

**Hope in the stories of others.** The overcoming stories of others were a source of hope for study participants. The accounts were shared in person and through reading books. Studies have shown that bibliotherapy, in the form of self-help books, can help alleviate mild to moderate depression (Usher, 2013). Additionally, mindfulness-based studies have shown bibliotherapy to have a positive effect on reducing stress and anxiety (Hazlett-Stevens & Oren, 2017). Worthington et al. (2007) pointed out that the Bible contains many hope-filled stories of people who have overcome difficulties with the help of God. Thus, scripture can be used as a source of hope and a catalyst for an optimistic mind-set (Worthington et al., 2007).

**Summary and Practical Applications**

The study found healthy communication, support and accountability, physical distance from the other woman, security-priming behaviors, God as a secure base, and hope as the key
components to what helped evangelical marriages recover after sexual infidelity by the husband. From an attachment and social constructivist perspective, the infidelity and recovery were identified as attachment ruptures. Subsequently, the six key findings worked interchangeably to move a couple to secure attachment in the dyad. Additionally, for the evangelical Christian couples, the steps reintegrated the couple with God as a member of the covenant union.

Practical applications of the study are twofold: direction for counselors and direction for couples. Counselors working with this population can develop treatment plans that heal the attachment wound using these six components. Spiritual integration is a vital element in the healing process. Therefore, the counselor should use the clients’ faith system to motivate change. S. M. Johnson’s (2005b) EFT and Worthington et al.’s (2007) hope-focused approach (HFA) provide attachment tools for the counselor. Likewise, couples can use this information to understand the benefit that attachment and hope-based therapy can offer. Self-help tools, such as Gottman and Silver’s (1999) seven steps to marital success, bibliotherapy, scripture meditation, and worship music, can empower the couple with practical helps along the recovery journey.

**Implications for Social Change**

The findings in this study have the potential to produce tangible improvements to the individual’s well-being as well as to the wellness of the couple dyad. The six components of recovery were develop healthy communication, obtain support and accountability, maintain physical separation from the other woman, practice security-priming behaviors, establish God as a secure base, and find a source of hope. The theoretical framework of the study guided the interpretation of the data, which diagnosed infidelity as an attachment wound. As depicted in the recovery model (see Figure 4.1), insecure attachment is reciprocal with injury. The insecure style’s response to pain is fear-driven reactivity demonstrated by anxious or avoidant
behaviors. The therapist has the opportunity to help an individual cultivate a secure attachment to his or her God, and in doing so may develop an individual with a more positive mind-set and autonomous attachment style. These are key ingredients to managing pain, disappointment, or other negative experiences in the future in a more productive manner. Also noteworthy is the influence secure parents may have on future generations of men, women, and the marriage union.

**Implications for Counselor Educators and Supervisors**

Counselor educators and supervisors have a responsibility to help students and supervisees become holistic and culturally competent in their approaches to counseling (ACA, 2014). This includes teaching counseling students to conduct a spiritual assessment in order to understand the client’s faith system and, when applicable, integrate spirituality into the counseling process (Henriksen, Polonyi, Bornsheuer-Boswell, Greger, & Watts, 2015; Hunt, 2014). The findings of this study can help counselor educators and supervisors demonstrate to their students the effectiveness, and often the necessity, of utilizing a client’s belief system to promote health and healing (Henriksen et al., 2015). This qualitative study explained the benefits and applications of religious coping skills, such as prayer, meditation, praise and worship music, scripture reading, and bibliotherapy.

**Recommendations for Action**

The study suggested that help for the relational, emotional, and spiritual needs of this demographic might reside in an integrative approach to therapy that uses security primers in order to activate secure attachment through the evangelical Christian faith system of the NP and EP. The faith system, as experienced in a personal, dynamic relationship with God, may serve as the effectual catalyst for hope, for healing, and for secure relationships. The reunification of God
into the marriage union positioned spouses to explore their relationship while maintaining a dependable secure base. Therefore, therapists working with this population should focus on attachment and hope-based interventions.

Additionally, interventions, such as Christian praise and worship music and hope-focused reading materials, should be used in treating this population trying to recover from infidelity. Therapists should be mindful of the far reach of broken trust and how that transfers onto other people as well. Therefore, because hearing the stories of others is impactful but could activate insecurity at the early onset of recovery, therapists should consider incorporating bibliotherapy. This way, clients can read the success stories of others without the threat of personal exposure. Additional readings should focus on literature that bolsters secure attachment to God for an individual, such as the allegory *Hinds’ Feet on High Places*, by Hannah Hunard (1955/2017), and the Holy Bible.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The topic of recovery from marital infidelity is wide open for exploration. Since attachment styles and attachment needs are prominent in adult romantic relationships, future research should include more exploration on the role of God attachment. Specifically, it could focus on how security-priming interventions, such as faith-centered music therapy and bibliotherapy, may be beneficial in working with couples in distress.

Future research on infidelity should also examine the harm suffered by the other woman in extradyadic relationships. In this research, all of the men were Christian leaders. It would be of interest to investigate the question: How is the other woman’s spirituality and her attachment style to God impacted by having an adulterous relationship with an evangelical Christian church leader?
Finally, future research on infidelity should explore more diverse populations because the social constructs of race, culture, ethnicity, socioeconomics, health, and religion impact a person’s thinking and belief system. In particular, immigrants should be a population examined. The process of cultural assimilation might produce vulnerability to attachment as the immigrant integrates into a new culture and experiences loss of one’s heritage.

**Study Limitations**

The study provided useful insight into the recovery process of three evangelical Christian couples. Nevertheless, as with any research design, it had several limitations. These limitations are as follows:

First, the homogeneity of the participants limited the generalizability of the study. However, the study was designed to investigate a specific group, evangelical Christian spouses. Although it served that purpose, there are possible variations within this population, such as each spouse having a different faith or one spouse having a belief system and the other not following a faith system.

Second, all the participants in the study were of the same race and similar socioeconomic status. It would be useful to know how race, mixed marriages, and socioeconomic status impact the process of recovery from infidelity.

Third, all the couples had children in the home. The children were an important part of the wives’ decision to stay and work through the infidelity. It would be useful to know how the absence of children in the home impacts recovery.

**Reflections on the Researcher’s Experience**

I approached this study from a grounded theory mind-set, which was to let the data tell the story and generate the theory about the social processes that led to the recovery of three
evangelical Christian marriages from infidelity by the husband. There were some challenges at times with keeping preconceived ideas at bay. I was raised in an evangelical home and had some personal assumptions on how Christians recover from marital distress. The main one was that forgiveness would be a major finding of the research, as in previous research on infidelity (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Bendixen, Kennair, & Grontvedt, 2017; Fife, Weeks, & Stellberg-Filbert, 2013), due to it being a foundational tenet in Christianity (van der Merwe, 2014).

Although the NPs apologized to their wives and their wives extended forgiveness, it did not prove to be a major focus of the conversations. Interestingly, the ideas of being “sorry” and getting “forgiveness” were somewhat seen as entitlements by this subset of the evangelical Christian community. According to participants, their faith system teaches they “must forgive.” However, the demonstration of “grace” and “mercy” from the wives produced a revelation in the husbands that they were recipients of something undeserved, which ultimately produced a genuine repentance in the hearts of the husbands. They said this:

**NP1:** I’ve said it this way, and I believe that part of the reconciliation that God showed me that my wife will always represent to me what grace looks like—unmerited favor. And I’ll always know what the price is for mercy.

**NP2:** I had to make the intentional choice to find a job, but in doing so God provided again. [EP2] displayed amazing love and grace, and she actually…went back to work because the job that I got was not making the amount of money that I was making before by any means.

**NP3:** [God] just allowed me to see how frail I was. And, uhm, how fallible I was. And that every breath that I take needs to be dependent on Him. And that God wasn’t a god of checking boxes. He was a God that cared about me in my deepest and darkest moments,
and that His ways were so much higher than my ways, and His thoughts were so much
higher than my thoughts. So, you know, I feel like He humbled me. He allowed me to
be able to see grace bestowed on me through my wife, and He’s given me a greater
concern and compassion for other people who fall short.

Instead of the forgiveness theme, which I had supposed, greater focus was placed on
building security; reestablishing trust; and seeing God as more benevolent and secure, and less
exacting and withholding. I was greatly impacted by the enthusiasm expressed by the
participants over their sense of being “OK” even amid difficult circumstances because of their
common belief that God was and is their strong tower and loving Father.

Another point of interest about the study for me was the difficulty I had finding
individuals willing to share their stories. I shared this challenge with C1, and EP1 remarked, “If
couples are unwilling to talk about the infidelity, I wonder if they are truly recovered.” During
the interview process, I asked the participants about their comfort level in sharing their stories
with me. All six people expressed that they were not “uncomfortable” talking about what they
had overcome, and they wanted their stories to be resources of hope for other couples in distress.
NP3 said it like this:

It’s not uncomfortable. It’s just life. And, like I said at the onset, that’s dirt behind the
cart for us. I done crossed over that bridge. I’m long gone out of there…. And I look at it
[like this]: if you and I were having this conversation just to be having the
conversation, we wouldn’t be having the conversation. Because I don’t live there. But,
uh, for us to have the conversation in hopes that God’s name might be glorified through
this…through what you’re doing…[that’s] our motivation in doing it.
My personal observations of the couples during the interviews validated their willingness and fluidity in sharing their stories. Additionally, I witnessed frequent smiles, winks, and touches between the partners before, during, and after their interviews. The body language among the dyads demonstrated security-priming behaviors and a comfortable level with displays of affection. It was especially interesting to watch C1 engage in moments of flirtatious play since emotional rigidity was a huge part of their attachment style in their marriage before the infidelity.

Lastly, I was surprised that all three wives commented on the remarks of some individuals concerning their decisions to stay in their marriages. They had to combat the social opinion that staying in a marriage after an occurrence of infidelity is a sign of weakness in the wife. Each, however, bucked against the social construct that a broken covenant should result in divorce. After hearing their stories, I agreed with the wives that it took strength and courage for them to fight for recovery. The strength of the covenant in evangelical Christian marriage is it was designed to bind three: God, husband, and wife. Thus, one damaged cord did not mean the covenant was irreparable—“a threefold cord is not quickly broken” (Ecclesiastes 4:12, ESV). EP1 summed it up like this:

I promise you, it would have been easier to get divorced. ‘Cause I see them. I counsel them. I see what they go through. And within a year, you know, they’re dating again, and life seems good…. [But] when you are constantly in the face of the person you hurt or hurt [you], that’s the epitome of having to work out a covenant relationship rather than putting it in a drawer.
Chapter Summary

This chapter discussed six key findings in response to the research question: What helps evangelical marriages recover after sexual infidelity by the husband? The findings were examined with the current literature and research studies to construct a theory of recovery for evangelical Christian couples in distress. The chapter also included considerations of the study’s implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research. It concluded with a personal narrative by the researcher on how the study impacted her.

Final Conclusion

This study’s aim was to contribute to the knowledge on recovery from infidelity in marriages among the evangelical Christian population. The study was designed to replicate the work of Abrahamson et al.’s (2012) interview-based qualitative study on recovery from infidelity using nonspecific demographic participants. Chapter 1 explained the need for the study and clearly articulated the research question being investigated. Chapter 2 reviewed the existing literature on the topic. Chapter 3 outlined the research procedures and methods. Chapter 4 presented the six main findings from the participants’ interviews. Chapter 5 provided a discussion of the study’s findings and offered recommendations for future research.

This dissertation concludes with an exhortation to clinicians working with evangelical Christian marriages in distress to draw heavily from the wealth of insight the three participating couples invested in this study. The evangelical Christian’s faith system is centralized around Jesus Christ. To avoid using security-priming techniques to activate their faith and encourage proximity-seeking behaviors for their God would be a disservice to this population, particularly to injured marriages attempting to recover from the attachment trauma of sexual infidelity.
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Appendix A

Divorce Among Adults Who Have Been Married

(Base: 3792 adults)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population Segment</th>
<th>Have Been Divorced</th>
<th>No. of Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All adults</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>3792</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangelical Christians</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-evangelical born again Christians</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>1373</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notional Christians</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>1488</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associated with non Christian faith</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atheist or agnostic</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All born again Christians</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>1712</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All non born again Christians</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>2080</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>1997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>875</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upscale</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Downscale</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>2641</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>464</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>458</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>1343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>1720</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>474</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Reproduced with permission. See Appendix G.
Appendix B

Phone Script for Researcher’s Initial Contact to Potential Participants from Referral Sources

Hello [Recipient]:

My name is Theresa Allen. As a graduate student in the Counselor Education & Family Studies department/School of Behavioral Sciences at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Counselor Education and Supervision degree. The purpose of my research is to explore the question “What helps evangelical marriages recover after sexual infidelity by the husband,” and I am inviting you and your spouse to consider being participants in my study.

If you and your spouse are 18 years of age or older, in a heterosexual evangelical marriage, and are a minimum of two years post disclosure of infidelity by the husband, you may qualify to participate in the study.

If you and your spouse meet the study’s inclusion criteria, you will each be asked to participate in a minimum of two individual face-to-face interviews. The first interview will last for approximately 90 minutes for each spouse. The second interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes for each spouse. Additionally, any clarifying information may be requested via a telephone conversation. The interviews will be conducted in your home if you feel the interviews can take place in a part of the home where children are not present and confidentiality can be protected. If this is not possible, we will meet in my counseling office, which is located at 2315 North Main Street, Suite 211-F, in Anderson, South Carolina.

The interviews will be video/audio recorded. The recordings will be transcribed, and each spouse will be asked to review the transcription to ensure the data was collected and...
interpreted correctly. Your confidentiality is of the utmost importance. Therefore, your identity will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms, and no personal, identifying information will be collected other than your role in the marriage as husband or wife.

If you and your spouse are interested in participating in this study, there is a screening form that needs to be completed. Depending on your personal preference, I will either email or mail you a copy of the Potential Participant Information Screening form for you to complete and return to me in order to verify that you meet all inclusion criteria. If your screening form indicates that you do not meet all of the criteria for the study, I will call you to let you know and the screening forms will be shredded immediately. None of your data will be included in the study.

If the screening forms indicate that you do meet all of the study’s inclusion criteria, I will call you to set up the first interview times for you and your spouse. The interviews for each spouse do not need to be conducted on the same day, but can be scheduled on the same day if this is more convenient for both of you. There is a consent document that I will bring to this first interview. It contains additional information about my research. We will go over the form together, then you will be asked to sign the form and give it back to me for my records. You may receive a copy of this signed consent document upon request.

If you choose to participate, you and your spouse will receive a $30 restaurant gift card upon completion of the study.

Would you like to receive the screening form? I will send it (email/mail), as you requested, today.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to the opportunity of working with you on this research project.
Appendix C

Potential Participant Information Screening Form

CONSENT to be screened for research study:

I, _________________________________________________, understand the questions below are a vetting process to be a participant in the qualitative research study titled: “In Covenant: A Grounded Theory Exploration of What Helps Evangelical Marriages Recover after Sexual Infidelity by the Husband.” I have had all of my questions answered, and I agree to answer the screening questions for the study.

As I potential participant in this study, I agree to allow the researcher to use the information collected in this form for the research study. I understand that if I am not selected for the study, my potential participant information form will be destroyed immediately and no data from it will be saved or used for the project.

My signature on this form is my consent to voluntarily participate in the screening for this study.

Signature: ___________________________ Date: ________________
(Participant)

______________________________
Name: _____________________________

______________________________
Spouse’s Name: _______________________

______________________________
Address: ___________________________

______________________________
Phone: _____________________________

______________________________
Email: _____________________________
Key Terms of the Study:

*Evangelical Christian* – will follow the definition provided by National Association of Evangelicals LifeWay Research (2015). The participant strongly agrees to the following statements:

- The Bible is the highest authority for what I believe.
- It is very important for me personally to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior.
- Jesus Christ’s death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin.
- Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God’s free gift of eternal salvation. (p. 2)

**Infidelity** -- will be limited to heterosexual, extradyadic sexual activities that cross the flesh-barrier, such as oral, anal, or penis/vagina intercourse.

***Recovery** -- is defined as forgiveness and posttraumatic growth within the marriage relationship. Forgiveness includes a realistic view of the relationship, release of negative thoughts towards the partner, release of a need to punish the partner. Posttraumatic growth includes a reevaluation of one’s beliefs, a new appreciation for life, a new sense of personal strength, or positive changes in relationships and spirituality.

1. Based on the statements above, are you an evangelical Christian*?

2. How long have you been married to your current spouse?

3. Is this your first marriage?
   
   a. If no, did the previous marriage(s) end in divorce?
      
      i. If yes, did infidelity** play a role in the marriage(s) ending in divorce?

4. Is there a history of an infidelity** event in your current marriage?
   
   a. If yes, by which spouse?

5. Is there a history of recurring infidelity** events in your current marriage?
a. If yes, by which spouse?

6. Is your current marriage a minimum of two years post initial disclosure of infidelity?

7. Do you consider your marriage to be recovered?***

8. Did you and your spouse seek marriage counseling after the disclosure of the infidelity**?

   a. If yes, was the counseling conducted by a pastor or professional counselor?

      i. Was the counseling helpful?

         ▪ If yes, what was most helpful about counseling?

         ▪ If no, why do you think the counseling was not helpful?

      ii. What suggestions do you have that would have made counseling more beneficial to you and your spouse?

   b. If no, explain if marriage counseling was or was not a consideration, and why.
Appendix D

CONSENT FORM

In Covenant: A Grounded Theory Exploration of What Helps Evangelical Marriages Recover after Sexual Infidelity by the Husband
Theresa C. Allen, Doctoral Candidate, LPC
Liberty University
Department of Counselor Education & Family Studies
School of Behavioral Sciences

You are invited to take part in a research study on what helps evangelical marriages recover after sexual infidelity by the husband. You are being asked to participate in this study because your history indicates that you meet the criteria needed for research participants, which is evangelical, Christian, married couple, in recovery stage two-years post disclosure of an infidelity by the husband. Before agreeing to participate, please read the following information carefully in order to make an informed decision. Please ask the researcher if the information in this consent form is unclear or if you need additional information.

Research Study Title: In Covenant: A Grounded Theory Exploration of What Helps Evangelical Marriages Recover after Sexual Infidelity by the Husband

Researcher: Theresa C. Allen, M.A., LPC, Doctoral Candidate
Faculty Advisor: Dr. John C. Thomas, Ph.D., Ph.D.
Counselor Education and Supervision Program
Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA
864.617.6764
tallen2@liberty.edu

PURPOSE: The purpose of this research is to understand how evangelical marriages recover after sexual infidelity by the husband in order to better inform the area of clinical practice on this subject matter.

STUDY PROCEDURES: If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following things:

- Participate in a minimum of two interviews (All interviews will be audio/video taped and transcribed.):
  - The first interview will last for approximately 90 minutes.
  - The second interview will last for approximately 30-45 minutes.
  - Be available for potential follow-up questions or clarifying information by phone.
- Allow the interviews to be conducted in a part of your home where children are not present and confidentiality can be protected, or be available to meet at the researcher’s office in downtown Anderson, SC.
- Review a transcription of your interviews to ensure accuracy of the collection and interpretation of the information that you provide.

RISKS: Due to the subject matter, participating in this study could result in emotional distress. If the process of sharing your personal story causes you emotional distress and you would like to
dining gift card per couple. The researcher will mail the gift card to the couple’s within two weeks of the study’s completion.

•

•

•

•

•

“Consent to Participate in the Study” section below.

•

participants’ identities will be protected in the research study by the use of
researcher's faculty advisor, Dr. John C. Thomas, at the phone number
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY

I, ________________________________________________________, have read and understood the above information about being a participant in the qualitative research study titled “In Covenant: A Grounded Theory Exploration of What Helps Evangelical Marriages Recover after Sexual Infidelity by the Husband.” I have had all of my questions answered, and I agree to participate in the study.

(NOTE: DO NOT AGREE TO PARTICIPATE UNLESS IRB APPROVAL INFORMATION WITH CURRENT DATES HAS BEEN ADDED TO THIS DOCUMENT.)

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record/video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

I prefer to receive the transcriptions of my recorded interviews via (Choose one delivery method):

☐ Via Email at the email address provided below:

___________________________________________________________________

☐ Via Registered Mail at the mailing address provided below:

___________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________

My signature on this form is my consent to voluntarily participate in this study.

Signature: __________________________ Date: ______________
(Participant)

Signature: __________________________ Date: ______________
(Researcher)
HOW TO WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY

I, __________________ _______________________________, ha ve decided to exercise my right to withdraw my participation from the qualitative research study titled: “In Covenant: A Grounded Theory Exploration of What Helps Evangelical Marriages Recover after Sexual Infidelity by the Husband.” I have had all of my questions answered, and I understand that all video/audio recordings or data collected about me will be destroyed and will not be used as a part of this study.

My signature on this form is my consent to revoke participation in this study.

Signature: ________________________________________ Da te: ________________
(Participant)

Signature: ________________________________________ Da te: ________________
(Researcher)
Appendix E

Interview Questions

Interview One:

- Tell me about your marriage relationship prior to the disclosure of infidelity.
- How would you describe your home environment?
- What were the stressors that impacted your relationship (children, work, finances, health, etc.)?
- How was the infidelity initially found out?
- What did the process of full disclosure look like?
- How did the nonexclusive partner (offender) respond to being “found out”?
- How did the exclusive partner (non-offender) respond to finding out?
- What aspects of your family of origin might have influenced your reactions to finding out about the infidelity?
- Describe any apology that may have been offered for the infidelity.
- What factors influenced each spouse to stay with the marriage and pursue healing?
- Describe how the relationship was managed in the days, weeks, months following the disclosure.
- What strategies, including the daily choices and activities of both spouses, were used during the recovery process?

Reflective Questions for Each Participant

- As you reflect on your marriage, what factors do you think might have contributed to the infidelity?
• What was the impact of the disclosure of the infidelity on you? What do you think the impact of the disclosure had on your spouse?

• What hurt most deeply about the disclosure of the infidelity?

• What were things like for you in the aftermath of the disclosure?

• What do you think enabled you to stay in the relationship after the disclosure of the infidelity?

• Discuss the resources you used to gain personal strength from during the time of disclosure to recovery.

• Describe your current level of functioning and security in the relationship, including levels of trust, hurt, shame, or anger.

• How has the infidelity impacted your relationship with your spouse?

• How has the infidelity impacted your sexual relationship with your spouse?

• How has the infidelity impacted your relationship with other family members, such as your children, parents, or in-laws?

Interview Two:

The Role of Faith Questions for Each Participant

• In your first interview, you shared some things that enabled you to stay with the marriage following the disclosure of the infidelity, including (this space will be filled with the personal details of each participant). Tell me about any other factors that also played a role in staying in the marriage.

• Discuss the role of spirituality in your individual life prior to the disclosure of the infidelity.

• Discuss the role of spirituality in your marriage prior to the disclosure of the infidelity.
• How did the infidelity impact your personal spirituality? How do you think the infidelity impacted your spouse’s spirituality?

• How did the infidelity impact your marriage’s spirituality?

• Discuss any changes that the infidelity has prompted in your personal spiritual relationship.

• Discuss any changes that the infidelity has prompted in your spiritual relationship as a couple.
Appendix F

Researcher’s Field Notes

Setting - Participant's private office

"Don't feel" to the room

2 couches

Chair

Desk

Coffee table

Pictures of family members

Picture of couple on adventure

I brought water bottles, but participants had the room set up with water & candies.

EP 1 - Feeling a little under the weather

Sits on couch close to EP1 (he has his arm around her),

blanket over her lap

Interview begins

EP 3, post EP 1

EP 2, interview 2nd

Couple has a light-hearted style

Mutual glances & smiles
EP answers: very pos affect.
I don't feel like quick break - couple plants to continue.

NP: articulates. I can tell he is a question to talking to people. motivator style.

She is cold. Hope she has her seven.

Prayed. Praged, went to see.

NP excuses himself. Go to the bathroom.

Spiritual. Very passionate.

Write a book about their recovery.

Ask if it is. This should be in b.i.d. or App.

NP: cool attitude.

End of that. Couple asking to pray for me, or wish research.
Interview Setting:
- C A met in researcher's office
- Arrived 3-4 min late
  - Texted / had to wait on setter
  - For kids
- Room was arranged w/ 3 chairs
- Water bottles

- EP was able to stay together

- EP taking a moment to settle in.
- Feet rushed

Phase 1 - EP first
- NP second

- EP wet eyes talking about her
  - Friend checking w/ her husband
  - NP reached over & squeezed hand

- EP - "I miss my friend at least
  - Who I thought she was -
  - Crazy, huh?"
EP's voice expressed agitation when she said they had agreed not to be like her parents.

NP - points head - It's crazy how we got there.

EP asked for break (bathroom)

NP - close
- animated talker
- face shows wrinkle forehead
- raised when talking about the other women living in their neighborhood
- She's met in disagreement and never talked about EP being positive as Women's Min Dr @ Church.
- EP puts his knee 7
- smiles at him

Break - Water refill / bathroom

Note: EP - her confident voice talking about worship music (wants @ 7 PM)
- spending time w/ Ed
NP - feels free next church duties
Now focuses on his own God
- Intentional with his kids
Reordered priorities
Counts on God to help
2. EP
3. Kids

Act 2 ends - just realized couple is holding hands.

Hedgecut cuts up
NP stretcher
EP radio in the street
Now we are off
for dinner with
the kids!

Sneaks hands with participants.
Dine 2 hrs to see C3

Dine Setting - Couple's Home
She cooked a breakfast buffet. We ate fun to me.

- Huge dog - family
- Baby

- Huge display window or clear glass
- Coffee and cream
- Breakfast offerings

I got up a good blanket, too, (I spread)

She said you may not
as intense but I feel sad
when I think how the enemy
left to see - I tried to kill our family.

Sad for her, too - "their mother" 4 years who
SPOKES SLOW & DELIBERATE
"My mind feels so much better after a little
worship music."

BREAK - DRINKS (Reps. / 400)

Bathrooms

PART 2 - SEEN BRIGHT-BLIND V
Enthusiastic when she talks about seeing God in
her life.

Excited to show me back by
Barry & None St. Louis.

PART 3 - CHAIRS IN DEN
"Spot lights on me,"
At eves.

KISSES EP - She begins
"I love you."

PART 1
"I don't live there anymore." - Sped

PART 2 - STANDS or SIT in den, Sits
feet in front, hands relaxed

PART 3 - CHAIR INSIDE a CHAIR.
to our forward
Dear Pastor, I was thinking about the potential harm
he brought to his family, and the anger and
tension that followed.

Memories:
- His son's
- His parents' arrival
- Au Pair's arrival
- His expenses
- Religious
- Environment

God not safe if he comes up to hell

Spiritual Staff:
- Convinced of sin of God
- Convinced of God's desire to
- Convincing Jesus of God
- I'm convinced of Jesus' love.
She said, "I'm not sure how we can come back from that?!"

Leaves folded, hands clasped, "I pray my sons never go through this. I want to help them avoid prideful thinking. It feeds their fight in God. People get you here to some degree.

God is good.

If fixed dinner (Wrong).

Once again, we all held hands. No proof flowed. The mood of this research, was left with a smile and laughing.

I gather. Invitation to go back 😊
Appendix G

Permission to reproduce “Divorce Among Adults Who Have Been Married” statistics

Re: Permission to Use Divorce Stats in PhD Dissertation

Barna Group <barnagroup@barna.org>

Wed 4/4/2018 1:00 PM

To: Allen, Theresa <tallen2@liberty.edu>

Hi Theresa,

Thank you for your email and support of what we provide! We grant you permission to use the stats chart information in your dissertation. Please just make sure to reference barna.com and the link you received the information from.

Let me know if you need anything else.

Blessings!

Jess

On Wed, Apr 4, 2018 at 7:27 AM, Allen, Theresa <tallen2@liberty.edu> wrote:

Hello,

My name is Theresa Allen. I am a doctoral student at Liberty University. I am writing to request permission to use the stats chart “Divorce Among Adults Who Have Been Married” from the online article “New Marriage and Divorce Statistics Released” as Appendix A in my dissertation. My research is on evangelical Christian marriages that recover from sexual infidelity. I quote the divorce statistics you provide and would like to include the entire statistics chart in the appendices of my paper.

I read your permissions terms and understand that verbal and written permission is not needed for a dissertation unless it is published. The Liberty University Library will publish my dissertation. Therefore, I wanted to make sure that I follow all of the necessary and legal protocols for citing your statistics.

Thank you for your time and attention in this matter.

Sincerely,

Theresa C. Allen, MA, LPC
Doctoral Candidate
tallen2@liberty.edu
864.617.6764