

# YOU ARE NOT ALONE

“The only person who feels greater shame than the sex addict himself is often the addict’s wife . . . surely if she were ‘woman enough,’ her man would not need to ‘have his needs met’ elsewhere. This line of thinking is a cruel lie, but it places innumerable women under a tremendous burden of guilt, and prevents them from seeking the counsel and support they so badly need.”

—Steve Arterburn<sup>1</sup>

MY EYES DARTED NERVOUSLY AROUND THE circle. I longed to share the story I’d guarded for 10 years, desperate for a safe place to release it. Yet I dreaded to speak the words already constricting my throat: prostitutes, lies, and betrayal.

The facilitator, Carol, began the meeting, and my stomach felt queasy. Others shifted in their chairs. She read the rules: the most important one to me was that everything shared was strictly confidential. No names or information were to be repeated, not even to our husbands. We went around the room and shared our first names. I couldn’t remember a single one.

Books were opened with stories of recovery and hope written by others who had experienced healing. Carol began reading. After each paragraph we were welcome to comment.

Sandy spoke up first. She introduced herself as a missionary. A recorded message on her husband’s cell phone had exposed his affair. The mission board requested they return home immediately. Sandy withdrew her three children from school. Unable to explain to her confused children, she watched tearfully as they were separated from their closest friends.

Relationships with other missionary wives became awkward;

how truthful could she be and remain a respectful wife? Her isolation increased, as did her anger toward her husband. A week later she sat on a plane, feeling more alone than ever next to the man who betrayed her.

“Did I go to language school for a year, raise support for another year, and then move my family halfway around the world for *this*? God has failed me. I am really angry with Him right now.”

Tears ran down her cheeks, and I wished my compassion could wipe them away. I was surprised at the depth of Sandy’s pain. I came to this meeting assuming my pain would be the greatest. Here was someone who had lost far more than I had.

My pain wrapped itself around me like chains, choking what little energy I had. Waves of self-pity assailed me. I thought I had a right to feel sorry for myself, but Sandy’s story stirred my doubt.

Lucy shared next. Her husband was addicted to pornography. I strained to hear her words as she told of long lapses in their sexual relationship. She’d tried to fill the emptiness in her heart with food, but the comfort she searched for backfired. Her tight clothing constantly reminded her she was only making things worse. “I hope I’m not responsible for it—you know—his addiction.” Her downcast eyes finally looked up.

Reassuring looks comforted Lucy. Several of us were overweight. Chocolate obsessed my mind when painful thoughts tortured me, and I also felt undesirable. *I wonder if everyone here feels the same.*

This group was going to be good for me. Only two women had shared, and I already felt something changing inside me. Before coming to this meeting I’d felt isolated. As my gaze traveled around the room, I knew I was just like the others. They had suffered—some even more than I, and I knew I wasn’t alone. The sum of my resources over the past 10 years was one book on the subject written for women, a workshop, and general recovery groups at my church. This was the first support group I found solely devoted to spouses of sex addicts.

I came out of my reverie as Valerie began to speak. She had

often wondered why they always seemed to be financially strapped. One day the phone company called about an enormous unpaid bill. Assuming it was a mistake, she asked her husband to check on it. When she brought it to his attention, he stammered. As he made excuses, her heart beat faster, fear rising within her. He broke down, confessing his shameful addiction to phone sex. Valerie's face reddened and her jaw tightened as she related how hard she worked while he financially sabotaged their marriage. "But that is nothing compared to the emotional sabotage I feel!"

Tina was young; in fact, she had just returned to college. "My counselor thought I should join this group. I was married to a sex addict for a year. He didn't think anything was wrong with his addiction. Our divorce was final last month. I wanted to put the past behind me, but my counselor said that I chose an addict because of my codependency issues. I'm likely to repeat the pattern if I don't deal with it, so here I am. I never want to go through anything like that again. I'm relieved something good can come out of what feels like a failure."

Jennifer described how her husband's attention seemed diverted when an attractive woman passed by. Curious glances gave way to lustful stares, held too long to be innocent. Occasionally, women smiled coyly back, and she felt anger rise within her. Was she imagining it? No. She admitted she even stopped talking when his eyes wandered from her face to gawk, waiting for the interruption to pass. If she said something, wouldn't it hurt their relationship more? One day she found a pile of magazines hidden under the couch. She was horrified as she thumbed through the pornography.

Her anger grew, empowering her to confront him as he walked through the door. His denial fueled her anger, strengthening her resolve for the truth. He finally admitted how ashamed he felt, and meekly accepted responsibility for his behavior. Her relief came when he agreed to counseling. She already noticed a change.

Denise told of countless nights when her husband worked in

front of the computer long after she was in bed. One day she checked the memory log. More than 100 porn sites appeared. Something was desperately wrong. Just reading the names made her feel dirty. “My greatest fear is that my son will model my husband’s behavior.” I realized the danger for my own boys. Her story brought many sighs. Apparently on-line pornography was a common problem.

In a flat voice, Linda described her husband’s emotional affairs. He gained a feeling of importance from relationships with women who were overly-friendly. While he’d gotten his needs met elsewhere, she’d been lonely and unfulfilled. “It’s been hard to identify exactly what’s wrong, since he seems friendly and caring.” But too often uneasiness washed over her when he was attentive to other women in social situations. “I was tempted too . . .” Her voice cracked and then tears rolled down her cheeks. “But I wanted to be loyal to him. This is so unfair!” Several other women wiped tears from their eyes.

So far no one had shared anything as awful as my husband had done. Was I still going to feel alone?

Sarah’s husband was in jail, arrested for soliciting a prostitute. He had hidden two prior offenses from her. The first time she learned about his sexual misconduct was when he called her from jail. One phone call—and her life was shattered. “When our friends ask where he is, I don’t know what to say. I’m sure he’ll lose his job.” How would she survive financially? She was so hurt that she didn’t even want to see him, but their young children missed him terribly.

Even the heartbreaking behavior of my husband couldn’t help me imagine this kind of shock. Sarah’s identity had been publicly undermined. Not only did she bear the humiliation of her husband’s arrest, but she was suffering the enormous rejection his unfaithfulness caused. I ached for her.

Sharon had been weeping quietly throughout the meeting. I doubted she would share, but she cleared her throat and my eyes turned toward her. Holding a tissue to her eyes, she told of her husband’s attraction to the same sex. “He struggled with ho-

homosexuality years ago, but now it's returned. I wish I had *your* problems," she said. "I'm so ashamed my husband wants another *man* instead of me." She buried her face in her hands and sobbed. Her grief was reflected in stricken faces around the table.

I felt a deep kinship with this woman that I didn't anticipate. We'd both been betrayed, our hearts were broken, and it didn't matter what caused it.

It was finally my turn to share. In the last 10 years I'd told only a few of my closest friends about Timothy's addiction. My palms grew moist, and my stomach churned. The room grew quiet.