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Healing Wounds of Sexual Betrayal

Guest:	Sheri Keffer
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Bob: As a college student, Sheri Keffer says when she first met Conner, she was smitten. What she didn't realize 12 months later, as they were marrying, is that both of them were bringing significant issues into their marriage.

Sheri: I had some intimacy issues of my own. I'd grown up with mental illness in my home and so lived a very disconnected past. Because of that, I was drawn up into who he was. I thought, "Great. I've got my ticket out of my life," because my life didn't look as good as he looked, and his family. What I didn't realize is that he had a secret.

Bob: This is *FamilyLife Today*. Our hosts are Dave and Ann Wilson, and I'm Bob Lepine. The "secret" that Conner had that Sheri Keffer didn't know anything about when she got married was a secret that would ultimately bring a lot of pain into their marriage. Stay with us.

And welcome to *FamilyLife Today*. Thanks for joining us. I was thinking about the conversation we're going to have today, and Ann, I was thinking about you and thinking that as a pastor's wife, and a woman who has worked with wives of professional athletes for years, this is probably you've heard first hand from a lot of wives over the years.

Ann: So many times, and not only from pastor's wives, but women in our congregation, players' wives—all across the board. This is a topic that women will resonate with.

Bob: The topic is the big picture of sexual betrayal, or betrayal of marital intimacy. Dr. Sheri Keffer is joining us to talk about this.

Dave: It's good to have a doctor in the studio. [Indistinct chatter] The level just went up.

Bob: Sheri, welcome to *FamilyLIfe Today*.

Sheri: It's great being here with you all.

Bob: Sheri is in private practice as a counselor and therapist in southern California. She's been doing that for nearly 20 years. She's written a book called *Intimate Deception, Healing the Wounds of Sexual Betrayal*. This is not just a book for the people you work with. This is your story.

Sheri: It's my story. I hate to say—and Ann, you just opened that with the players—it's a lot of people's story. It's a lot of women's story. Even more men, now, are being betrayed.

Bob: When you first opened up about your story, were you surprised at how many people came out of the woodwork and said, "This is my story, too."

Sheri: I was. When I first opened up about my story, I was surprised I opened up about my story. That in itself is telling. There's a ton of shame when you've been betrayed, whether it's through pornography, affairs, cybersex, prostitutes, whatever it is—the shame attaches to you. It's like bad Velcro—just like a tar baby. You feel so shameful about what's happened.

Bob: You're saying you feel that as the one who was betrayed?

Sheri: Yes.

Bob: I can understand a betrayer feeling that way, but the one who was betrayed—I would think you would feel righteous indignation.

Dave: How does the shame be part of *your* story. Like Bob was saying, you're the innocent one.

Ann: Yes.

Dave: What does that look like?

Sheri: You'd think. There's reasons for that. There's a lot of science behind that, believe it or not. A quick story about science. The way our brain is wired—it's wired to protect ourselves. When we're hurt, when there's trauma, we're impacted by pain—the brain does a tricky thing. It puts a negative belief about us on ourselves in order to protect our self from harm. It feels backwards, but it's really not. It's about self-protection.

So, if I believe I'm not enough, if I believe I'm shameful, if I believe I'm not pretty enough, if I believe I can't trust anyone, if I believe I can't trust my judgement, do you think I'm going to expose myself to any more hurt? No. Shame causes us to isolate and pull away. It guarantees our safety, but it also guarantees that we're alone. It guarantees that we're not really bringing our story out there. It guarantees that we're not talking about it and getting help.

That's why I love you all for doing this today and having your listeners listen because I know there are so many people listening right now that have never told anyone their story. They've found porn on their husband's computer. They know of an affair. They've

found something, and it's like this silent death. You go inside instead of coming out and talking about it.

Ann: I think that's true of not only that kind of abuse, but sexual abuse. I can remember the day that it happened to me multiple times. I thought, "Something must be wrong with me." That inward shame that we carry—it's a secret because we feel so embarrassed and shameful that we don't really share our story or seek help.

Sheri: So true.

Bob: Sheri, let's go back to the beginning of your story. This happened when you had your head turned by a handsome, head-turning kind of guy.

Sheri: He was. He was. Yes, one of those beachy guys, and sun-tanned. When we met, I was in Bible college. I had gone to school with his brother, and he came to visit. I was in the ministry program. He said, "I have a brother I want to introduce you to." I thought, "Perfect. His brother's in ministry." My former husband was a pastor. We ended up meeting when we were on a singing tour, and I was smitten. Got to know him long-distance.

We had a fast long-distance relationship. We dated long-distance for a year. I saw him 12 times before we married. That should let you in to a secret, right? I had some intimacy issues of my own. I'd grown up with mental illness in my home and so lived a very disconnected past. Because of that, I was drawn up into who he was. I thought, "Great. I've got my ticket out of my life," because my life didn't look as good as he looked, and his family. What I didn't realize is that he had a secret and some intimacy issues, too.

Ann: But you wouldn't assume that because he's a pastor.

Sheri: He's a pastor! Everything looked good. I thought, seriously, I thought, "I'm Cinderella—slipper—stick your foot in, girl, and run!" [Laughter] I found out one piece of information—which I regret today that I didn't ask more. To be honest, I didn't know I should ask. He told me at one point during our courtship that he had called a 900 number. Again, I was in Bible college at this time.

Dave: You say in the book you didn't even know what that is.

Sheri: I didn't. I had no idea what a 900 number was. I talked to his brother. I said, "What's a 900 number?" He said, "It's like a sex line." I said, "Ok." Then he said, "But all the guys listen to that here. Probably every guy on campus listens to that, so I wouldn't worry about it."

Dave: Wait, wait, wait. You're in a Bible college, and that's what he said?

Sheri: Yes.

Dave: “All the guys listen.” Wow.

Sheri: So, I minimized it. I forgave him because I thought that’s what you’re supposed to do. Who am I? I’m not perfect. So, I forgave him, and I didn’t ask any more questions.

Ann: Were you thinking—because I think a lot of women think this—it’ll be better after we’re married. He won’t struggle with that anymore.

Sheri: Totally thought that. “Our marriage is going to change things.” Little did I know that there were years he had been struggling with porn and acting and acting out. So, yes, I had that hope. It was a false hope. I think for me it was a level of denial. I just didn’t know, but I also think there was a part—I didn’t want to know. I see that in so many women. When they find something in their home—denial is that thing that makes us put our hands over our eyes, ears, and mouth and hope it goes away over time. But it usually gets worse.

Bob: If you were to discover what was true, the dream you were pursuing would have gone away.

Ann: The fairy tale.

Sheri: You’re right, Bob. It would crash and burn, and so many of us don’t want to do that—especially when we’re falling in love, and we’re wanting to have a story to build on in our family.

Bob: I think this is so important, whether you’re married or single, wherever you are in a relationship. When your antenna goes up, when there are warning signs, and you want to push them away because you want to preserve the fantasy—you need to know—you’re not doing yourself or anyone else any favors in doing that.

Dave: Yes. There are red flags, and that’s a big one.

Ann: I would add this, too. If you’re dating someone—I think it’s a good question to ask. Ask the male and female, both ways. Have you now, or have you struggled, with porn in the past or now?

Bob: I might say, “Tell me about your struggle with porn,” rather than, “Have you?” In this culture—? We sat down with a group of dads and sons at church—all of us in a circle. These were high school and junior-age kids, young men, and their dads. I said, “We’re going to go around in a circle. Dads, I want you to tell us about your first exposure to pornography.” We went around the circle, and every dad in that circle has a first-exposure story. Nobody said—”

Ann: "—if."

Bob: "I've not looked at it," right? Some guys could tell a story like, "I was 12 years old. I saw this. It's been an isolated thing." Other guys got pretty candid. "I got pulled down the rabbit hole, and it was a problem for years."

Dave: If Bob's group of guys—they've all experienced that, and some women have as well. You found that with your husband before you were married. That's going to be a common thing you're going to find out. "I called a 900 number, or I been visiting porn sites." What do you do with that information?

Sheri: Let me say this. Let me back up the story. I think the porn industry is the perpetrator here. There are young kids—just like you said, Bob. Most of us find it when we're young. When do you know it's a problem? When you ask someone—and I did when I was dating someone this second time around. I was 17 years single again because I was pretty jacked up after the first marriage of betrayal. I did ask men, "When's the last time you looked at porn? And do you struggle with it?" I

I often have young ladies who are with somebody who's using porn on a regular basis go to a recovery group. The reason I do that is because I want to wake them up out of that denial into reality. I want them to get a feel for what it's going to be like and look like if you don't get help.

Ann: Where would you find that recovery group?

Sheri: There is a group called APSATS.org has a recovery group—groups of women all over. We're starting to build a network so people can find out this more easily. You want to get them connected with other people either online or face to face to start asking yourself, "What is this? And how long?"

And then the guys need to get into treatment, the ones who are struggling 12-step SA groups, or SAA groups. You don't want to try to handle this alone. You need to get into counseling, get into recovery—start peeling back that so that you can stop the acting out. It's hurting them, and it's also hurting you.

Bob: We'll put some links on our website, FamilyLifeToday.com.

Sheri: That would be awesome.

Bob: To folks who would like more information about how they can find recovery groups for sexual addiction and for being a victim of betrayal. Let me go back to your first marriage. All you knew going into marriage was that "I'm marrying a pastor. He's good looking, and he's called a 900 number." That's really all you knew.

Sheri: That's all I knew.

Bob: What was true that you didn't know was that even though he was a pastor, he was looking at porn and was acting out.

Sheri: Yes, he was. That was the most difficult thing to go through because six months into our marriage, I began to notice him pulling away from me, and I didn't know why. I was kind of excited—I'd saved myself for marriage. I thought, "Wow. This is going to be cool—to be married and share myself with someone in so many different ways."

I noticed that when we would be intimate, he would pull away. I remember thinking, "What am I doing wrong? What am I doing wrong?" It didn't make sense, right? We're newlyweds. I talked to my best friend. I said, "Julie, what happens in your marriage after you guys are intimate?" She said, "It's like oil. We're closer the next day; we're more playful the next day." I was like, "That is not my journey." I hadn't discovered the porn yet. Once the porn came out, everything began to make sense.

Some people in relationships, some women, tell stories about how their husband is very sexualized and is asking them to do things outside their moral comfort zone. It's basically, in my mind describing it, they're wanting their wives to be the porn. They're watching it. It's changing the way they're thinking about relationships. It's changed the way they think about their wife. They want their wife to be that. She's uncomfortable, and then she feels bad for not doing what he wants her to do, or she feels bad for what she did do.

It's porn-induced disconnection; it's not porn-induced intimacy. It's porn-induced disconnection. Intimacy has to do with reality. It has to do with, "You've got a normal body," right? "I've got a normal body." We connect; we bond. We explore. But porn takes away curiosity. It takes away reality. There's research that shows that six hours of looking at porn actually pulls the relationship, the marriage, further apart. Six hours!

So, it's not good for marriage. It doesn't coexist with marriage. Porn doesn't coexist with our spirituality. It doesn't exist with our faith. You can't.

Bob: The husband or wife who says, "Maybe we should try this because it will help—"

Ann: "—enhance."

Bob: Yes.

Ann: Counselors, secular counselors, will even suggest that. And you're saying that that will not help.

Sheri: This is what I say. [Makes a buzzer noise] Bad answer. [Laughter] You know why? Because you can't watch porn without comparison. You can't watch porn without, the woman, reflecting on what part of her isn't doing what that other woman is, or parts of her body that are imperfect. There is a sexual appetite that I don't think needs to be

taught that way. That's the wives' tale around it, that you guys can get closer by watching it, but it's really more like having more people in your bed. I talk about that in one chapter of my book, "Remember When Sex Was Good and Skydiving Was Dangerous?"

I talk about a couple I was working with. They had porn in their relationship early on. Eventually, it began to erode her sense of self. She didn't feel like she was enough. The porn got more and more risky and odd. All that to say is she asked him to stop. She got stronger. She was listening and learning a lot and said, "No. I don't want to have it." It didn't go over well because he hadn't started his recovery. He hadn't been facing how it had been hurting him, and he was minimizing that. So, as soon as she drew the line, she started taking care of herself, she started feeling more dignity in her heart—better about who she was. They both got into treatment.

Bob: I want to go back. I'm imagining the engaged man or woman who's listening and thinking, "I'm afraid to ask the question."

Sheri: Who's freaking out.

Bob: Yes. "I'm afraid to ask the question of my fiancé because I'm afraid of what the answer might be. I'm now not sure what an Ok answer is, or if this is the end of the relationship. How can I discern?" If a young woman sits down and says to a guy, "I want to know—"

Ann: "—when was the last time—"

Bob: "—when was the last time you looked at porn?" And he said, "Like all guys, this is something I've struggled with on occasion, and the last time was four weeks ago. I always feel shame when I do it. I always think that I'm not going to do this again, and then somehow I slip up again awhile later. I've tried to figure out how to stop it. I've talked to friends, and I'm trying to get some accountability. I don't want it to be part of our marriage, but that's the truth."

She gets an answer like that from a guy, does she go, "Ok. We're Ok." Or does she go, "Ok. This is over." How does she diagnose in that moment whether it's safe to go forward?

Ann: What is she looking for?

Sheri: Good question. Safety. And integrity. And to watch him over a long period of time. Stop. If I'm in a situation with her, I would say, "How important is safety to you in your relationship? How important is fidelity?" And you want to see that on the dating side. Say they talk, and he says, "Yes, but I can't stop." "Would you be willing to get into the kind of recovery in order to get your sobriety?" It's really about sobriety.

Recovery is getting into some process where you start going and showing up, There's accountability, and you're working toward stopping the acting out. Sobriety is what you want. Sobriety is how many days since you last looked. That's what you want to know. I want a sober relationship. I want to date someone who is sexually sober. I want to date somebody who jumps in and says, "It is a problem for me, but I care enough about you that I want to stop."

Ann: So, what's an appropriate number of days? "I've been clean this many days." Or, "I haven't looked in—." Are they looking for a day, or are they looking for a lifestyle?

Sheri: I would say vote for lifestyle, right? Anybody can white knuckle it for so many days, but even in the recovery world in the 12-step programs—they have a 90-day cooling off program. Whether you're married or single, you don't have sex with yourself or anybody else. That is the cooling off period. You're working on establishing that stop button inside.

Then you work on developing, after the 90 days, 120 days, six months, eight months, a year, two years, three years. So, I want to be with somebody who's sexually sober. Life is better with somebody who is sexually sober. But I want somebody who is willing, if they're struggling, to get into counseling and begin to work on sobriety and begin to stop the acting out because it's hurting—it's hurting the couple—it's hurting the individuals.

My research shows that. I took a survey with 100 women to find out what goes on with sexual acting out. Seventy-nine percent of these women had clinical symptoms of post-traumatic stress. Seventy-nine percent. That's three out of four women who discovered that some form of acting out. Could've been porn. Could've been porn plus affair. Might've been porn plus cybersex, whatever. Seventy-nine percent of them had clinical symptoms of post traumatic stress. That's the same kind of stuff people get when they go out and serve our nation, and they're in battle.

Bob: At war.

Sheri: This is the same measures that are used to test that. So, that tells you something. When Jesus said that when you look at somebody, and you are lusting after them, you already have adultery in your heart. It's not good. Jesus—He didn't have a problem with the line. The Hebrew word for lust, the word is "ava," which means "the nail that hooks you to itself."

The opposite of that, the word "kaveh," is the word for hope, which means "what comes after the nail." I'm in the business of trying to help people get to hope—get to what comes after the nail, right? The acting out hooks us to itself. It's like cancer in a relationship.

Dave: I would say thank you. I'm thinking—have this conversation. Married couples, pre-married couples—so many don't even want to go where we're going. You talk about

PTSD and all the things going on. I hope listeners are going, “We need to talk tonight. Not like I’m scared, but I want to have this conversation.” I would say to them, “Have it tonight.” I know it sounds like you’re going into the tunnel of darkness. Ann and I have this conversation regularly. It’s something every couple needs to do. If you’re not married yet, do not be afraid to have this conversation and see where God takes it.

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