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Warning Sexual Addiction Ahead!

Day 2 of 3

Guest: Brenda Stoker and Susan Allen

From the series: The Healing Choice

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Bob: Susan Allen had been through a failed marriage – a marriage to a man who was unfaithful to her. When she considered marrying a second time, the warning signs were there again, but she ignored them.

Susan: Clay was wonderful in so many ways – he was good-looking and romantic and gentlemanly, and there were all these wonderful attributes, and I thought this was my knight in shining armor, but there were these things that just weren't adding up. So, again, I had an awful feeling in the pit of my stomach going into that marriage and why a girl would do this twice to herself. It was about fear, and fear drove me to make so many poor decisions.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Thursday, April 2nd. Our host is the president of FamilyLife, Dennis Rainey, and I'm Bob Lepine. We'll hear today how Susan Allen responded when she found out that what she'd experienced in her first marriage was happening all over again in her second marriage.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today, thanks for joining us. You remember back last fall when the movie, "Fireproof" came out, and was in theaters, one of the things that I really appreciated about that movie was that they took on – it wasn't the central theme of the movie, but they did take on the issue of guys being off dabbling in pornography. The lead character in that film was looking at stuff on the Internet that he shouldn't be looking at, and it was one of the things having an impact on his marriage relationship.

Dennis: And they also took you into the mind of a wife who was feeling betrayed and violated by her husband's wandering eye, and his heart being divided between pornography and her. I'll never forget the scene in that movie where she was angry saying she's not going to share him with that stuff. I think our guests on today's broadcast both understand what a wife feels because both have been married to men who have experienced pornography and have brought forms of it into their marriage relationship with their husbands.

Brenda Stoker and Susan Allen join us on FamilyLife Today. Susan, Brenda, welcome back.

Brenda: Thank you.

Susan: Thank you.

Dennis: Susan is a counselor. She and her husband, Clay, have been married for 26 years. They have one daughter, and she works in groups that take women into the experience of how they have been betrayed around sexual abuse, pornography, and she has created a workbook around their book, "The Healing Choice," to really guide women in that healing process. Brenda is a registered nurse and a mom of four, and she does a great deal of teaching along with her husband, Fred. And some of our listeners, Bob, may recall Fred Stoker, who wrote the book, "Every Man's Battle." And, together, they are really giving their lives and their message to helping marriages of all kinds recover from the impact of pornography.

And, Susan, on today's broadcast I want to talk with you just about your own journey, and to do that, take us into the home you grew up in and kind of how that started, and then your marriage and how you met your husband, Clay.

Susan: Okay. I grew up in what looked to me like a pretty normal, average family. There were six kids. I grew up Catholic and pretty well-to-do, and my dad, he earned the money, and my mom stayed home and took care of all of us. My dad golfed on the weekends, and it was – as I became a teenager that there was more stress in the household. My dad took a new position in a new location, and I don't know what the change was about, but he started drinking more. There was more fighting with my mom and dad.

She was searching for something new in the spiritual realm. The Catholic faith wasn't doing it for her, and that created all sorts of division between my mom and dad. In addition to that, my mom was a very nurturing mother when we were smaller, but when we became teenagers, and there were four teenage girls all within a five-year span in the household at once, so it was – there was a lot of teen going on all at once; didn't really quite know, I think, how to handle it, and her marriage was having a lot of stress. Unbeknownst to me, my dad was having affairs – had had probably an affair now and again.

So that certainly made her – I can see, from having lived that myself – that made her probably very emotionally unavailable, and she had a real hard time dealing with us as teenagers and knowing quite what to say and what to do with the dating period. We were allowed to date too young. Our father wasn't really involved in those kinds of decisions. My mom carried out those decisions.

I started dating at the age of 13, and, really, without any instruction but more condemnation.

Bob: Now, when you say started dating at 13, what are you describing as a dating – did you have a steady boyfriend?

Susan: Boyfriends, going steady ...

Dennis: Lots of time alone with the opposite sex?

Susan: Yeah, way too much time available without really understanding any kind of boundaries around it. I had some of my own personal boundaries that I wouldn't have sex, but, you know, that was a line that was – there was everything else to do besides that.

Bob: So at 13, sex was off limits, but your experimenting with all kinds of things physically with a boyfriend?

Susan: Yeah. And, of course, not even knowing what's going to happen, you know, the boy is leading the way and ...

Bob: Right.

Susan: When I was about 16, I was engaged to my first husband.

Bob: You were engaged to be married at 16?

Susan: Well, actually, I started dating him, I'm sorry – I started dating him, but we were serious about then, and when I was 18 I moved in with him and married within the year. And I was really – it was kind of a running away from home legally sort of thing. I was looking for my way out from my family setup. I wasn't really a rebellious sort, but that was my way of getting out of the craziness of my family home that looked normal on the outside, but I knew the craziness that was going on within the walls.

Bob: So the boundary you had set in terms of sexual involvement, I presume that had eroded at some point in your teen years.

Susan: Yes.

Bob: And at 18 you move in with your boyfriend, at 19 you're married, and are you thinking, at that point, now life is finally going to be all I want it to be?

Susan: Sort of. I already saw red flags before we got married. I saw that he had an anger problem, and I still went forward with it, and I had this sickness in the pit of my stomach that this was a problem, and I told myself it would go away, but I was afraid of being alone, afraid of how I was going to make it on my own, and I walked into that marriage with fear and trembling that this was already doomed.

Bob: And anything going on spiritually in your life at this point?

Susan: I didn't really give Christianity or anything about faith much regard because of all of the stress that it brought, all the chaos that it brought into my family home, and my husband considered himself an atheist, and so from my pathetic thinking at the time, it was just going to add more strife. Look what it was doing with my parents.

Dennis: Your husband ended up becoming unfaithful to you, is that correct?

Susan: Yes, he did, and it was fairly early in our marriage. I think we'd been married about three years, and it was a couple that we were friends with – the husband said, "Watch out for my wife when I'm gone on a business trip," and he watched too well, and then my husband felt guilty about it and confessed and hoped that that would be the end of it, but I didn't know how to deal with the pain, and I didn't know how to forgive, and ...

Bob: Was that what led to the end of that first marriage?

Susan: It did. He said, you know, "Forget about it," or "Get out of here," and I stayed because I didn't know how to get out of here. But I saw myself leaving, and I was kind of setting myself up unconsciously to leave, and Clay was my exit plan that I didn't know.

Dennis: How did you meet him?

Susan: I went into real estate, and Clay had also gone into real estate at the same time, and we met both there as associates, and he was young and single, I was married and single – no – I was young and married.

Bob: But very unhappy.

Susan: Yeah, yeah.

Bob: And so how long after you met Clay before you took the exit?

Susan: It was probably about 18 months, I think, yeah. There was flirting, we went into an affair before I ended up leaving.

Dennis: And so then you ended up leaving your husband, divorcing him, marrying Clay, and how long was it in that marriage before you realized you now had another problem.

Susan: Mm-hm, before we got married.

Dennis: Really? So you knew you were getting into a marriage where pornography or where sexual sin ...

Susan: Something, yeah.

Dennis: Something was going on.

Susan: Yeah. So, again, I had an awful feeling in the pit of my stomach going into that marriage, and why a girl would do this twice to herself – have my head examined, but it was about fear, and fear drove me to make so many poor decisions. Clay was wonderful in so many ways. He was, you know, good-looking and romantic and gentlemanly, and there were all these wonderful attributes, and I thought he was – my first husband was very nice and had good attributes, too, but they seemed to be so different – kind of sophisticated and I thought this was my knight in shining armor, but there were these things that just weren't adding up.

Bob: What things? What were the clues before you got married that told you there are some problems here?

Susan: One was the phone rang at 2 in the morning, and we were both asleep, and he got up and answered the phone. I mean, I was groggy, but I had the clear impression that he answered the phone, and there was some sort of conversation, and I didn't hear anything of what the conversation was, but as I asked him, his answer didn't make any sense.

And then one evening, he said he'd been with clients, and we would have late appointments, but this was quite a bit later, and there was one of those, sort of, like a lipstick on the collar kind of a thing that was a telltale that he had been with someone, but he wouldn't acknowledge it.

Bob: You've just brought up two of what are kind of those classic warning signs that a wife ought to be aware of in terms of extramarital affairs. But when we're talking about this whole issue of a husband being off into pornography or any kind of sexual sin, and I want both of you to speak to this – what would you say to a wife to look out for – what are some of the warning signs that she might think, "Oh, that's nothing," but maybe it is something. How can a wife know ahead of time if her husband is struggling with some kind of sexual sin?

Susan: Some of the ones that are typical, and this can be including pornography or other kinds of betrayal – going to shows, whatnot – he's unaccountable for his time away and also how he spends his money. He'll spend a lot of time on the Internet, and he may refuse to have any kind of filtering device. That would be really common. He may start blaming you for his unhappiness, for his anger, for any of his shortcomings.

His sexual interest in you can either wane or increase dramatically. There could be a huge shift in his patterns. He may grow emotionally distant from you or from the family, at large. He is there, but he's not really connecting with the family. And he may start demanding or asking for some sexual performances or acts that make you uncomfortable, or you've never quite seen before and wondering where that's coming from. And you really end up feeling used or empty during sex.

And then there's this just underlying – you feel – you're wondering if you've been lied to regularly. Those are some of the – just the more average things that women that – particularly with pornography – will see again and again.

Brenda: One thing that I really pay attention to, and I notice it with Fred or with our sons, is their eyes. If you're watching TV and something comes on, are they really focused in on it, or do they tend to look away. If you're walking down the beach, and somebody comes by in next to nothing, do they tend to follow with their eyes, or do they tend to look away. Just a simple little thing like that can tell a lot as to whether how much purity they've got going on.

Bob: I have to tell a story here, if I can, because when your husband, Fred, first came to be with us on FamilyLife Today, and he's written the book, "Every Man's Battle," and has told his own story about dealing with pornography, he talked about this principle of bouncing your eyes.

Brenda: Right.

Bob: And I thought that's a good principle. I went home, and I talked to Mary Ann about it. It's a – debriefing about the interview, I just said, "This was really good, I thought it was good counsel, I need to remember it as we're raising our boys."

Well, one day Mary Ann and I are in the airport in Phoenix, and we're going down this escalator, and there is a woman coming up the escalator on the other side, and I looked over, and this woman was advertising, okay? I mean, that was just – that's just what it was. I look over, and as soon as I saw it, I just looked over to the other direction, right? And it had to be maybe three seconds later that Mary Ann looked and saw the woman come up the escalator. And you know what she did the very next thing, right?

Brenda: Turned around and looked at you to see where you were looking.

Bob: Exactly. She looked straight up at me, and I looked back at her and said, "I'm bouncing, I'm bouncing," okay? And so we just had that as part of our conversation, but it was good accountability because she wanted to know – what's going on with his eyes when something like this is on parade?

Dennis: And, Bob, you just modeled for a lot of men what a healthy marriage relationship looks like – men letting their wives know what's going on inside them and how they think and what they are attracted to as men. And I don't think it's wrong that a man is attracted to a beautiful woman as long as that beautiful woman is his wife, okay?

But his wife needs to understand how he thinks and, at points, needs to do what Mary Ann did – turn around and watch.

Now, Susan, in your marriage, you suspected something was wrong. How long was it into your marriage before you suspected Clay was being unfaithful to you.

Susan: Less than a year into our marriage, I started seeing some of the signs that cropped up before, and that gave rise to that there were problems brewing again.

Bob: Did you call him on it? Did you say, "What's going on here?"

Susan: I did, I did.

Bob: Did he confess?

Susan: He did, and I had receipts and some evidence of some very specific things. So I got him to go to counseling with me, but really not understanding how to find a good counselor.

Bob: Was he repentant at all for what he'd done, or was it kind of like, "It's not that big a deal."

Susan: He was ashamed of what he did, but he really didn't frame it that way. He was more avoiding taking responsibility for what he did.

Bob: And so what had been an occasional one-night stand, you tried to get some help and maybe it was better for a while but not for long, right?

Susan: Yeah. He would – once I found out, you know, he would back away from his behavior, but then he would slip back into his patterns because he had developed from his – again, his teenage years not unlike Fred's pattern. It started early on in his early teen years, and these things were ingrained with him – the fantasizing about certain images and the prostitutes and ...

Dennis: Yeah, in fact, he had actually visited some prostitutes, and you knew that.

Susan: That's what had happened prior to our marriage, and that's what he had confessed to.

Dennis: So here you had this growing body of evidence that your husband is betraying you. What was your response at that point? Was it typical of how a lot of women respond? You didn't leave. Instead, you went into a what – a makeover?

Susan: I went into a makeover, that was certainly a part of it. I was already slim and reasonably attractive, but I started looking at what else, what else? You know, I would stand on my head, do anything in bed, I would dress to wear anything. I had costumes, I had – and starved myself – whatever it took, whatever I thought would please him. This is not uncommon. It's not every man, but it was not uncommon for men, and it was typical of Clay that he was always finding fault with me.

Bob: We're going to continue to unpack how you processed this and what you did as Clay came clean, as we unpack this story this week, but, Dennis, I just have to wonder, for the wives who are listening, and there are the warning signs all over the place, and they feel hopeless, and maybe they've tried some of what Susan is talking about where they've said, "Well, maybe I can lure him back in," or maybe they've gotten angry, and they've confronted. But they feel helpless, and they feel hopeless. Is there anything they can do?

Dennis: Well, you hate to give some kind of cookie cutter answer to such a dramatic problem, but there are a number of things I think a wife should consider doing – number one, pray for your husband. If he shows some of these signs of betrayal, it's going to take God to move the conviction from his head to his heart and to change his behavior.

Secondly, she can begin to pursue him relationally and invite him to have a relationship with her, but she needs to realize she may be competing with a fantasy. She may be competing with a myth, she may be competing with other people who are outside the marriage relationship and family where there is no responsibility. It's not real life, it's a myth.

And, third, I think she can speak the truth in love. She can ask the hard question – is there something going on here that I need to know about? And when a woman asks that question, she needs to understand some men may be able to come clean at that moment, but some men may not be able to tell the truth. And I know that puts wives in a very difficult position who are listening to our broadcast, but I think that's where you go back, and you pray for your husband, and you ask God to begin to convict, and in some cases it may even be similar to how we pray for our children – "Lord, if there is something going on here that shouldn't be going on, would you help me catch him? Would you help me get the evidence so that we can talk about reality about what's happening in this marriage?"

It's much better, Bob, I think, to have a situation like what Susan is talking about here, where it's confronted rather than live a lifetime denying reality and saying it's not taking place and not dealing with the stuff and really not having a real marriage or a real relationship with another person. It's much better to experience the pain even though it's going to unsettle things for a long time than it is to just continue a lifetime of a cover-up.

Bob: And I hear you saying that a wife has got to be in a good place herself spiritually. She's got to be close to the Lord and be responding rightly in this situation before she even initiates this kind of a confrontation, and she's going to need some allies and some resources. She's going to need some friends around her who can help walk her down this path, and she may need a book like the book that Susan and Brenda have written called "The Healing Choice," that helps coach her as she walks down this path.

We've got copies of the book in our FamilyLife Resource Center, and you can go to our website, FamilyLifeToday.com for more information about how to get a copy of the book. Again, it's FamilyLifeToday.com, the information about the book, "The Healing Choice," is available there along with other resources that we recommend to you if you find yourself in this particular situation.

You can also call if you need more information – 1-800-FLTODAY is our number, 1-800-358-6329, 1-800-F-as-in-family, L-as-in-life, and then the word TODAY. When you do get in touch with us, we'll let you know how you can get the resources you need sent to you.

Let me quickly say a word of thanks to those of you who do help fund this ministry. We are listener-supported, and so if it weren't for folks who are not just listeners but folks who contact us either online or by phone and say, "God has used the program in my own life. I know He's using it in the lives of others, and we want to make sure it continues on our station, we want to make sure that this kind of ministry is available in our community." We could not continue to do what we're doing without your support. We do appreciate those of you who contact us and make a contribution.

This month, if you are able to help with a donation of any amount, we have a DVD we'd like to send to you. It's called "Magdalena, Released From Shame," and it tells the story of many of the women whose lives were impacted by Jesus during His ministry; women who were released from the shame of their past and, again, I think it's interesting that we're making this DVD available as we talk about what we're talking about this week.

If you make your donation to FamilyLife Today online at FamilyLifeToday.com, and you'd like to receive the DVD, all you have to do is type "Magdalena" in the keycode box that you find on the donation form – that's m-a-g-d-a-l-e-n-a. Or call 1-800-FLTODAY, 1-800-358-6329, and when you do make your donation, just

ask for the DVD, and we'll be happy to send it out to you. We just want you to know we do appreciate you taking the initiative to make the donation and your support of this ministry. It means a lot to us.

Now, tomorrow we're going to continue to hear about the path that God had Susan Allen on after she learned about her husband's sexual sin and how God brought healing and restoration to their marriage. I hope you can be back with us for that.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, and our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our host, Dennis Rainey, I'm Bob Lepine. We'll see you back tomorrow for another edition of FamilyLife Today.

FamilyLife Today is a production of FamilyLife of Little Rock, Arkansas – help for today; hope for tomorrow.

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