

Even Little Lies Can Hurt a Marriage

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The happiest, most passionate couples are those who are emotionally open and unafraid to reveal themselves to each other. Yet the potential for deception always is present. The "big" lies, such as having an affair, tend to have the worst repercussions (often divorce). Yet a lifetime of small lies also can erode a relationship.

Examples of little lies: Maybe you bought something that you didn't really need -- and lied to your partner about the cost. Or your partner noticed your lingering glance at another person -- then you swore up and down that you really didn't find that person attractive.

We tell ourselves that these small lies are harmless -- or even beneficial because they protect our partners' feelings. But little lies can be just as detrimental to a relationship as telling a whopper. They just take more time to tear couples apart -- and are not always easy to detect.

People who tell lies really are protecting themselves by hiding their own true feelings. When the truth is discovered (it almost always is eventually), the other person naturally feels betrayed. Here, the many kinds of lies...

INDIRECT COMMUNICATION

Rather than stating clearly what they do or don't want, people tend to talk around subjects that they find uncomfortable. The more afraid you are of rejection or potential criticism, the more likely you are to communicate indirectly. The "lie" is not owning up to what is wanted.

Example: I once counseled a couple who had been married for 12 years. The husband, who was in the restaurant business, had once been arrested for selling drugs. His wife noticed that he recently had a lot more money. She also noticed a spike in their cell-phone bills and a spate of hang-up calls.

She secretly wondered whether her husband was back in the drug world -- but rather than confronting him about her fears, she tried to gather information indirectly. She suggested, for

example, that she might start spending more time at the restaurant. He said he didn't need extra help, but she kept pressing and their disagreements escalated. Finally, she blurted, "You're hiding something. I know it!"

If a couple is going to argue, they should at least have a disagreement based on an accurate understanding of each other's position. With indirect communication, no one is even sure what the argument is about. In this case, the real issue was the wife's (unfounded) suspicions.

Solution: Openly request information. Had the wife stated directly what she was worried about or had the husband asked why coming to the restaurant was so important, they could have had a real conversation instead of an argument. If you're uncomfortable making a request, say so -- "I feel uncomfortable asking you, but..." That's the truth. To circle around it is to avoid the truth.

BROKEN CONTRACTS

How often have you made a promise and failed to keep it? Not keeping your word is a kind of lying that can seriously harm a relationship by undermining trust. Even when the promises are trivial -- maybe you agree to start projects but fail to follow through -- breaking your word can make everything you say seem unreliable.

There is a concept in psychology called "secondary gains." It means that someone gets positive reinforcement from negative patterns. We're all guilty of occasional broken promises. Someone who consistently "forgets" may be unconsciously creating emotional distance -- forgetting puts the other person off -- so that the "forgetter" feels less vulnerable.

Solution: If you're a forgetter, try to understand the secondary gains that arise from disappointing your partner. Merely understanding this concept can be a powerful step.

Also helpful: A *quid pro quo*, which roughly means "a favor for a favor." If someone is persistently forgetful, his/her partner can insist on having something done before giving something in return. While this is a bit adversarial, it's sometimes warranted.

Example: The forgetter asks you to mail a package at the post office. You respond, "Absolutely - as soon as you clean out the backseat of the car as you promised to do two weeks ago."

WITHHOLDING INFORMATION

We all have a right to privacy, but some people take this to extremes and withhold important information. This is a form of concealment that borders on lying -- and is the opposite of true intimacy.

Example: A husband might avoid certain issues -- for example, his feelings about a mutual friend -- because he feels that his wife is critical of his opinions. If he gets in the habit of not saying what he thinks, she might criticize his persistent silence -- at which point, he'll conclude that his wife is too critical.

Solution: This is a slippery slope and should be addressed by sharing everything. It is the premise of a good partnership. Sharing private personal thoughts with each other creates intimacy. If sharing is met with harsh judgment, don't withdraw. Talk this out with your partner to clear the way for future nonjudgmental discussion.

BLAMING

When something goes wrong, the aggrieved party knows precisely whom to blame. It's the other person's fault. When a person blames someone else, he/she is omitting his part in the issue -- that's the lie.

In all of my years as a therapist, I've rarely encountered a conflict that truly was just one person's fault -- and blame never makes things better.

The person who is blamed feels defensive. He/she will probably respond with counterblame and anger.

Solution: Instead of pointing fingers, the partners should avoid the language of blame. Substitute sentences that start with "I" for those that start with "you."

Example: Rather than saying, "You never help in the kitchen," say something like, "I feel resentful when you don't help out."

Unlike "you" statements, which typically lead to adversarial reactions, "I" sentences are more honest and less confrontational. They can lead to understanding rather than a continuation of the disagreement.

SEXUAL SECRETS

Sexual desires are among the most sensitive secrets. A partner might reveal something about his/her sexual desires (or sexual history) and then be judged harshly. It's natural for that person, under these circumstances, to be reluctant to reveal himself again.

At the same time, sharing sexual desires with one's partner can build intimacy.

Solution: When you take responsibility for what pleases you, you increase the probability of being pleased. For a couple to have a satisfying sex life, both partners need to be aware of their preferences. If you find it hard to initiate this kind of conversation, perhaps an opportunity will arise while watching a sexy scene in a movie. "Would that kind of thing be exciting to you?" could be a way to start the conversation.