

5.6 Dishonesty

If your spouse had an affair ten years ago that was a brief indiscretion, would you want to know about it?

If you had an affair ten years ago that you ended because you knew it was wrong, should you tell your spouse about it?

These are tough questions that go to the heart of our fifth Love Buster -- dishonesty.

Dishonesty is the strangest of the five Love Busters. Obviously, no one likes dishonesty, but sometimes honesty seems even more damaging. What if the truth is more painful than a lie?

When a wife first learns that her husband has been unfaithful, the pain is often so great that she wishes she had been left ignorant. When a husband discovers his wife's affair, it's like a knife in his heart -- and he wonders if it would have been better not knowing. In fact, many marriage counselors advise clients to avoid telling spouses about past infidelity, saying that it's too painful for people to handle. Besides, if it's over and done with, why dredge up the sewage of the past?

It's this sort of confusion that leads some of the most well-intentioned husbands and wives to lie to each other, or at least give each other false impressions. They feel that dishonesty will help them protect each other's feelings.

But what kind of a relationship is that? The lie is a wall that comes between the two partners, something hidden, a secret that cannot be mentioned, yet is right under the surface of every conversation.

And dishonesty can be as addictive as a drug. One secret leads to another. If you start using dishonesty to protect each other's feelings, where will it end?

That's why dishonesty is a strange Love Buster. Lies clearly hurt a relationship over the long-term, but truth can also hurt, especially in the short-term. It's no wonder that many couples continue in dishonesty -- because they feel they can't take the shock of facing the truth, at least right now. As a result, the marriage dies a slow death.

Honesty is like a flu shot. It may give you a short, sharp pain, but it keeps you healthier over the following months.

In the case of infidelity, don't you think that your own affair would be one of the most important pieces of information about yourself? How could you ever expect to have an intimate relationship with someone to whom you cannot reveal your most inner feelings?

I'll admit that infidelity is an extreme example of something you would be tempted to lie about. But "little white lies" can be just as destructive when discovered, and there's even less justification for them. If it makes sense to be honest about something as hurtful as an affair, it

makes even more sense to be honest about something more trivial, such as buying something you know your spouse would not have approved.

I wanted to use the extreme case of infidelity to underscore the curious nature of this Love Buster and how important honesty is, even in extreme cases. But whether the lie is about something as devastating as an affair, or something that would simply be disappointing to your spouse, it's dishonesty, not honesty, that makes matters worse. I draw a distinction between the pain of a thoughtless act and the pain of knowing about a thoughtless act. Honesty sometimes creates some pain, the pain of knowing that your spouse has been thoughtless. But it is really the thoughtless act itself that causes the pain. Dishonesty may defer some of that pain, but it compounds the pain later. The truth usually comes out eventually, and the months or years of hiding it not only creates an emotional barrier before it is revealed, but also destroys trust afterward.

Dishonesty strangles compatibility. To create and sustain compatibility, you must lay your cards on the table. You must be honest about your thoughts, feelings, habits, likes, dislikes, personal history, daily activities and plans for the future. When misinformation is part of the mix, you have little hope of making successful adjustments to each other. Dishonesty not only makes solutions hard to find, but it often leaves couples ignorant of the problems themselves.

There's another very important reason to be honest. Honesty tends to make our behavior more thoughtful. If we knew that everything we do and say would be televised and reviewed by all our friends, we would be far less likely to engage in thoughtless acts. Criminals would not steal and commit violent acts as much if they knew they would be caught each time they did. Honesty is the television camera in our lives. We know what we do, and if we are honest about what we do, we tend not to engage in thoughtless acts because we know those acts will be revealed-by ourselves.

In an honest relationship, thoughtless acts are usually corrected. Bad habits are nipped in the bud. Honesty keeps a couple from drifting into incompatibility-as incompatible attitudes and behavior are revealed, they can become targets for elimination. But if these attitudes and behavior remain hidden, they are left to grow out of control.

So many of the couples I've counseled have been confused as to what constitutes honesty in marriage, that I have created a policy to explain it. I call it the Policy of Radical Honesty, because so many think it's radical. But from my perspective either you are honest or you are dishonest. There is no middle ground.

My next Basic Concept will explain this policy to you, and try to justify something so radical that there are very few counselors who recommend it. And yet, without honesty -- radical honesty -- your marriage has little hope for success, and you and your spouse are very unlikely to be in love with each other.