

6.2 Historical Honesty

Reveal information about your personal history, particularly events that demonstrate personal weakness or failure.

Whenever you and your spouse make a decision together or try to resolve a conflict with the Policy of Joint Agreement, one factor that must never be ignored is your past. That's because mistakes and successes of the past often provide evidence of what's likely to happen in the future.

While many people feel that embarrassing experiences or serious mistakes of the past should be forgotten, most psychologists recognize that these are often signs of present weakness. For example, if someone has ever had an affair, he may be vulnerable to another one. If someone has ever been chemically dependent, he is vulnerable to drugs or alcohol abuse in the future. By expressing past mistakes openly, your spouse can understand your weaknesses, and together you can avoid conditions that tend to create problems for you.

No area of your life should be kept secret. All questions asked by your spouse should be answered fully and completely with periods of poor adjustment in your past given special attention. Not only should you explain your past to your spouse, but you should also encourage your spouse to gather information from those who knew you before you met your spouse. I have encouraged couples that are considering marriage to meet with several significant people from each other's past. It's often a real eye-opener!

I carry this Policy of Radical Honesty about your past all the way to the disclosure of all premarital and extramarital sexual relations. That's because those experiences are among your most important experiences in life, and your spouse should know anything you regard as important. Past sexual experiences also create a contrast effect in marriage, and it's inevitable that you will compare your spouse sexually with all other past sexual relationships. Knowing your sexual history can make present sexual problems much easier to understand.

I've had clients argue that if they tell their spouses about mistakes made decades earlier, their spouses will be crushed and never trust them again. Why not just leave that little demon alone?

My answer is that it's not a "little demon." If you've had an affair, it's an extremely important part of your personal history, and it says something about your predispositions. If you've had an affair in the past, your spouse shouldn't trust you -- I certainly wouldn't.

But what if you haven't strayed since it happened? What if you've seen a pastor regularly to hold you accountable? Why put your spouse through the agony of a revelation that could ruin your relationship forever?

I'd say you don't give your spouse much credit! Honesty does not drive a spouse insane -- dishonesty does. People in general, and women in particular, want to know exactly what their spouses are thinking and feeling. When you hold something back, your spouse tries to guess

what it is. If he or she is right, then you must continually lie to cover your tracks. If he or she is wrong, an incorrect understanding of you and your predispositions develops.

Maybe you don't really want to be known for who you are? That's the saddest position of all. You'd rather keep your secret than experience one of life's greatest joys -- to be loved and accepted in spite of your weaknesses.

Some counselors have argued that the only reason people reveal past infidelity is because of anger. They are deliberately trying to hurt their spouses with that information. Or they might be doing it to relieve their own guilt at the expense of their spouse's feelings.

While it's true that the spouse usually feels hurt, and vengeance or feelings of guilt motivate some, whenever correct information is revealed, an opportunity for understanding and change is presented. That opportunity is more important than unhealthy motives or momentary unhappiness.

Some revelations may need to be made in the presence of a professional counselor to help control the emotional damage. Spouses sometimes have difficulty adjusting to revelations that have been kept secret for years. In many cases, they're not reacting to the revelation as much as the fact that they'd been lied to all that time.

Some spouses with emotional weaknesses may need personal counseling to help them adjust to the reality of their spouses' past. The saints they thought they married turn out to be not so saintly. But the most negative reactions to truth that I've witnessed have never destroyed a person or a marriage. It's dishonesty that destroys intimacy, the feeling of love, and marriages.

When a couple first see me for counseling, I have them complete my [Personal History Questionnaire](#), which systematically reviews many of the significant events of their past. I ask them to share their answers with each other and feel free to ask any questions that would be triggered by them.

I offer you the same opportunity to investigate each other's past. I have posted that questionnaire for you to copy and complete. Simply click the name of the questionnaire in the previous paragraph and be sure to make two copies, one for both of you. Leave nothing out and be willing to pursue any line of inquiry that will help you better understand each other's past.