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Is it Ever OK to lie to Your Lover?

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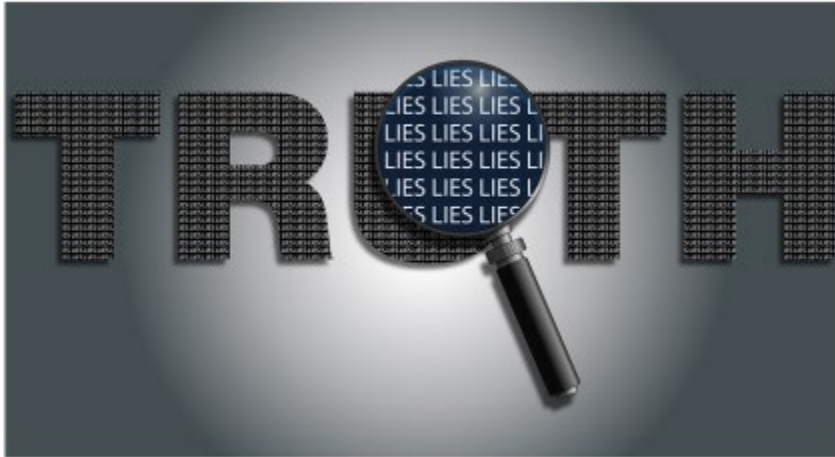
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Is it Ever OK to lie to Your Lover?

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The Dilemma of Honesty versus Kindness

The healthiest relationships have a high degree of trust. However, it is surprisingly easy to be deceptive in an intimate relationship. Research has shown that about 10% of interactions between intimates contain deceptive elements, like exaggerations, excuses, or other lies. Not surprisingly, these have a distancing effect. But are all deceptions damaging? Isn't it kind to protect each other from painful truths? It may depend on the motive.

Dan Ariely is a professor of behavioral economics at MIT who studies dishonesty, but his time in hospitals after a burn recovery led him to wonder if certain white lies could be protective. He suggests that, "This will sting a bit" may be better than, "Brace yourself, because you are going to feel horrendous pain." If the pretense is from a desire to help, it is different than if it is a selfish dodge. Also, some half-truths occur because words have many meanings. When a spouse says, "How are you?" They likely mean: "I am acknowledging you with a generic greeting we both understand." Clearly, most of us get these unspoken relationship rules. Exact truth may not particularly matter if the intent is harmless. And it may not always be a great idea to share everything you think, like

when my client who told his wife a lifeguard was looking good, for which he was immediately busted. So, what happens when you feel like you should tell the truth, but wonder if it is going to be harmful?

This is a dilemma for many, and most of us just go forward with what seems reasonable at the time. We recognize that some truths to our spouse need finessing. "You have a button undone" is acceptable. "I hate the framed photo of your parents you got me for my birthday," maybe not so much. In some situations, the truth is awkward. Here are some examples of questions that may be asked in various kinds of intimate relationships, followed by two possible answers. Both responses are honest, but one is kinder.

Question: "Do you think that woman is beautiful?"

Less Effective: "Ohhhhhh, yeahhhh."

Better: "She is nice looking, what do you think?"

Question: "Why are you so paranoid about me going out with friends?"

Less Effective: "Because your friends are idiots and you have no self-control and might do something stupid."

Better: "I am having a hard time with the amount of your drinking. I know there are many lonely people out there and you are attractive, and I worry that you will be tempted to do things you wouldn't normally."

Question: "How do you feel about getting married?"

Less Effective: "It may be great for other people."

Better: "I am afraid of that level of commitment, even though I am excited about where our relationship is going."

Question: “Were you mad when I wasn’t in the mood last night?”

Less Effective: “Yes, and I thought you were a selfish brat.”

Better: “I was frustrated, which is why I pouted for a while.”

And the classic: “Do these lime-green spandex shorts make my butt look big?”

Less Effective: “No. Your butt makes your butt look big.”

Better: “I think that your jeans look better.”

There are many ways to be honest and still be kind, even if that means to honestly defer a question or take time to think about it. This happens when you are put on the spot with a question like, “Do you love me?” A glib or fake answer in this instance isn’t good. If the issue is an important one, it is better to be frank. If you are faking or evading, then you need to ask yourself why, and probably discuss it with your partner.

The takeaway on deception is that it is best to be honest, but there may be times when an omission is irrelevant. For instance, you might not need to tell your lover that they smell funny when you are cuddling, and it may not be necessary to address every concern that arises. But consider carefully what is happening when you find yourself ducking the truth. What is the underlying intent of what you are saying, and what is the effect of it? Are you trying to avoid something that should be dealt with? To punish? Can you be honest and still be kind? Are you protecting your spouse, or yourself?

Adapted from the upcoming book, *Love Me True: Overcoming the Surprising Ways we Deceive in Relationships*.

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“There are many ways to be honest, and still be kind.”