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Why do Lovers Lie to Each Other?

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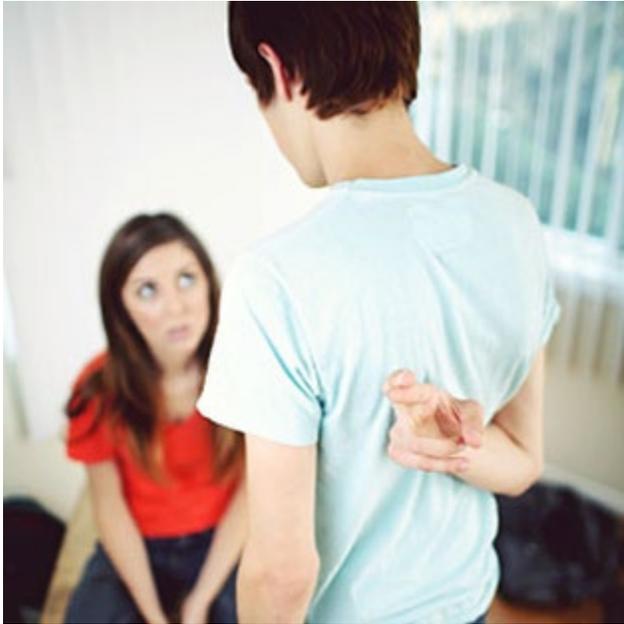
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Why do Lovers Lie to Each Other?

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The Surprising Research About Deception in Relationships

Mel was a foreman for a big box store, where he oversaw shipping and unloading. He was a husky blonde who was addicted to Juicy Fruit gum. He told me in therapy that he had a “little gaming issue.” He didn’t want his wife to know, because he felt like she wouldn’t understand or would give him grief. Our conversation began with me asking him what, exactly, he was referring to. He explained:

“I sometimes play online poker or other online gambling.”

“For money?”

“Yes, but I often win, and I think I will make it all back soon.”

“How much are you in the hole?”

“About \$130,000.”

[Pause] “Say again?”

“But I am paying it down. Do you think I should tell my wife?”

Avoiding Conflict or Protecting Feelings

Mel’s claim that he didn’t want to upset his wife is one of the most common reasons for lying. [1] He said he didn’t think his wife “would understand,” or that she would be angry “over nothing,” but these were excuses. It was easy for Mel to claim he was protecting his wife by keeping her in the dark, but do you think she would want to know about his house-sized debt? I bet she would. The reason he didn’t tell her was because he didn’t want to stop gambling, and he didn’t want the fight that was going to erupt when his wife

found out. Most people don't like conflict, and it is easier to sweep things under the rug than confront some hard truths.^[ii]

Lying for Love

Humans also lie because they love. Our raging desire to find a mate leads to schmoozing, preening, and pretending. In one study that examined lying between strangers, the highest rates of deception were from those who were instructed to try and "be likable."^[iii] Imagine a situation where Jack and Jeanie are starting to date and are feeling the love. He may not be as excited to see *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* as she is, but will happily go to appear sensitive. She doesn't really care about his carburetor collection but will nod and listen to his stories about them, saying nonsense like, "Wow, that is really cool!" They will each watch for signs that their efforts are paying off, and they adjust their words and bodies accordingly in order to woo the other. Like Jerry Seinfeld said about his twenty years of dating, "That's a lot of acting fascinated."

The irony of course, is the foundation of a relationship is trust. If you impress a future mate with bogus tales of adventure or fake interests, it won't bring closeness. The bigger the deception, the more likely it is to backfire. It is one thing to discover that your flirty friend isn't into a TV show that he claimed, and it is another to find out he is married and didn't mention it.

Although most agree lying is bad in principle, in practice, people are morally flexible about their deceit. People say they want honesty from their spouse but admit in some situations, their own lies are acceptable.^[iv] This leaves a door open for interpretation, depending on the situation. What one decides not to share ("Surely he wouldn't want to know that I bought three dresses") might be considered important by the other ("Hey, why didn't you tell me you spent \$350?"). When things are hazy or complicated, people often shape events in a way that favors them.

On one survey, only 6% of people said it is better to lie if it prevents conflict, but when asked if there was ever a time that honesty was not the best option, about two-thirds could think of times they wouldn't be honest.^[v] In other words, people are saying something like: "It is *not* okay to lie to me, even to avoid conflict. But sometimes I need to fudge things just to keep the peace." Huh? We clearly struggle with this double standard. Should we be strictly honest about everything we think and feel? Watch for other posts that discuss other reasons couples lie, and some of the consequences of deception. We will discuss what honesty really means in a relationship.

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

Cedar Fort Publishing, 2016

^[ii] Tim Cole, "Lying to the One You Love: The Use of Deception in Romantic Relationships," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 18,

no. 1 (2001): 107-129.

[ii] Bella M. DePaulo, Deborah A. Kashy, Susan E. Kirkendol, Melissa M. Wyer, and Jennifer A. Epstein, "Lying in Everyday Life," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 70, no. 5 (1996): 979.

[iii] Robert S. Feldman, James A. Forrest, and Benjamin R. Happ, "Self-Presentation and Verbal Deception: Do Self-Presenters Lie More?" *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 24, no. 2 (2002): 163-170.

[iv] Katlyn Elise Roggensack, and Alan Sillars, "Agreement and understanding about honesty and deception rules in romantic relationships," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 31, no. 2 (2014): 178-199.

[v] Susan D. Boon, and Beverly A. McLeod, "Deception in romantic relationships: Subjective estimates of success at deceiving and attitudes toward deception," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 18, no. 4 (2001): 463-476.