

Keeping secrets

Intimacy is a tell-all, no-holds-barred proposition, right? Not necessarily, suggests **Catherine Davis**

You smoke, but your partner doesn't like the habit. So you let him think you quit and you smoke only when he's not around. That's a big secret. What if your husband maintained a relationship with someone you despised? And they kept it a secret. Can you imagine the hurt and betrayal both couples would feel when they discovered the secret?

Keeping secrets does not have to mean lying. But the secret should not be something that would profoundly disturb your partner to discover.

Being honest with each other doesn't mean you must share every single thought, dream, fear, or fantasy with your mate. Knowing what to share and what not to share is a vital communication skill for couples to learn and use in their relationship.

"Communication is of paramount importance in order to continue the development and growth of any relationship, as well as to ensure that past interpersonal connections remain intact. However, as the relationship progresses, people often feel they own the other person, that they have a right to demand that every little detail be shared," says Johannesburg psychologist Leatia Stemmet. "Keep in mind that you started the relationship as individuals, and even though communication forms the cornerstone of any relationship, it is possible that your partner does not need to know that you went to exchange shoes that were one size too small."

If your partner expects you to share every little piece of information about yourself and your life, then perhaps there are some unresolved insecurities that need to be addressed, either from the specific partner's past, or perhaps within the relationship, suggests Stemmet. What about the other person makes it difficult to trust them? Or perhaps, what about your own history makes it challenging to allow the other person their individuality?

Why do we keep secrets?

Much of what we conceal from our lovers is the stuff we're trying to get away with, exactly in the way that we deceived our parents as children. The content of these deceptions varies from couple to couple. Interestingly, say psychologists, little of

it is monumental. Infidelity is the classic marital secret, but more often than not, it's about the day-to-day deceptions people employ to avoid conflict or to maintain control. Spouses lie to each other about whether she ate a whole slab of chocolate, if he remembered to pay the phone bill, the cost of his golf clubs, or the number of drinks she had.

People lie because it's easier than telling the truth. Look at children. Kids lie to stay out of trouble or to get something he or she wants. Us adults aren't as grown-up as we like to think. When you lie to your partner and justify the lie because the truth would hurt them, what you're really saying is the truth would hurt you because they would be angry with you.

What you said

"I don't subscribe to the tell-all thing. I think sometimes white lies, as my mother calls them, are a good thing. When I got married I didn't lose myself to my husband and all of a sudden have no thoughts of my own. Some dreams or things from my past are my own. Saying that, I tell him a lot. But I don't think he would be interested in some things about my friends, and I do feel I have a duty to my friends to be loyal."

— Lenina Jefferies

"The truth and honesty are important in relationships but I think there's a line and I don't think we are required to tell everything, all of the time."

— Erika Smythe

"I tell my boyfriend he's a great cook because this lie makes him absurdly happy; he lies and tells me I don't look fat because he knows I need the confidence boost."

— Liza Rainer

"If a friend told me a secret and made me promise not to tell anyone, would I tell my partner? Do I believe in 'marital privilege'? Yes. When I tell a friend something, I automatically assume that she will tell her partner."

— Gayle Ryans

When is it OK to hold it in?

Each little lie in a marriage chips away at intimacy and breaks down trust. As US psychiatrist Frank Pittman stated, infidelity is not "whom you lie with. It's whom you lie to". However trivial the distortion, every time you lie to avoid conflict, you take a small step away from your partner. Emotional distance does not grow great love.

But irritated husbands do not make great lovers, either. You are two separate people and some of what you each do will inevitably infuriate the other. There is a definite argument to be made for shielding your mate from the parts of yourself that he or she finds most difficult to love.

Relationship coach Shelley Lewin says, "Consider your intention in exposing the truth. If the reasons are selfish, like to relieve guilt or to be vengeful, don't share it. If the reasons are altruistic, like for the sake of intimacy, and out of respect for your partner and the relationship, share it."

Her advice: "Be responsible for your words. I have heard people share 'the truth' like a weapon, brutally wounding the listener. Key questions to ask yourself before you spill any beans: How will telling my partner this information benefit him? How will telling my partner this information benefit our relationship and levels of intimacy? What am I hoping to achieve by sharing this information?"

So perhaps husbands who have issues with money sleep most peacefully when they don't know what you spent on your shoes, particularly if you earned that money yourself and it's yours to manage independently. And partners with shaky sexual confidence could be spared the anecdote about the flirtatious seatmate on the plane. In both cases you are withholding information that you might enjoy discussing with a friend, but you are doing it in recognition of a partner's soft spots, balancing the pleasure of sharing your experience with its likely painful outcome. That kind of emotional accounting makes sense.

"Each couple needs to negotiate their own set of boundaries"

But if you're routinely hiding dresses in your cupboard, you're not being considerate; you are sneaking around like a guilty child, and that's no good for any relationship. If you habitually withhold the airplane stories in order to hold open your options for follow-up, this is not sensitivity, it's betrayal.

How do I know if it's a secret or lie?

"Each couple needs to negotiate their own set of boundaries – what needs to be shared and what not, and what is allowed behaviourally and what not," says Stemmet.

"Emotional safety within a relationship aids the negotiations, and this mean your partner's emotional wellbeing is of paramount importance and determines the decisions you make. You respect your partner's boundaries, and value a different perspective, which contributes to diversity within the relationship." She says you need to take into account the other person's emotional triggers, where awareness is shown as to what might serve to either build the security of the relationship, or break it down. **S**



When honesty isn't the best policy

There are some things that you shouldn't tell your partner, no matter how harmless they seem. (These are meant as a means for keeping harmony in your relationship, not as a first step towards lying whenever you feel like it. In most other cases, honesty and openness will be a much better approach.)

1 Things that he can't change

If there is something about your partner that bugs you, or that makes you wince when you see it, or something that you simply wished were different about your spouse, don't tell him about it if it's something he can't change. For example if you secretly wish you had married someone taller, or shorter, or more intelligent, that's your thing. Your spouse can't do anything about it. Telling him about it would only make him feel insecure with you and resentful.

2 Good memories of your ex

One thing that really makes a partner boil, is hearing about an ex in a good light. Even if everyone doesn't admit it, every mate hopes deep down inside that all the exes you might have had, pale in comparison to him. This is especially true about things that go on in the bedroom. "When it comes to your past, vaguely describing certain aspects is enough," says Lewin. Making an honest attempt to share your life story is good for intimacy, but it is unkind to share sordid details that will upset your partner, she says. So there's no need to mention that you've slept with 39 people either!

3 Negative things about the in-laws

Saying nasty things about your partner's in-laws is a cardinal sin, one for which, you will pay for, for as many years as you and your partner are together, which may not be as long as you think if you say bad things about their parents.

4 Certain things about your sex life

Few things are trickier or more of a touchy topic between couples in a marriage than sex. This is because everyone likes to think that they are great in bed. If this is not true, pointing it out to your partner is likely to cause not just a riff, but a rend in your relationship. Nothing good can come of it.

5 That you think their sibling is hot

Probably an obvious one, but if you think your partner's brother is good looking and/or sexy, keep your mouth shut. If you don't every family get-together for the rest of your life will be ruined.

6 Their vulnerabilities

Whatever it is he feels vulnerable about, if you think they have good reason, keep it to yourself. If he thinks he walks funny, don't agree with him. If he thinks his voice is weird, tell him it's not.