



Courtyard Counseling Center

We're here to help



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Lying Around:

Part 2 - Marriages and long-term Committed Relationships

People can lie in any and all environments and situations. But most of us are more likely to lie to those closest to us and nowhere is lying more common and more destructive than in marriages and long-term committed relationships.

Paradoxically, the reason we lie to those closest to us is that they are more important to us than strangers. With them, we have more to gain, more to lose, and more reasons to be ashamed of our behavior. Our lies to strangers tend to be impersonal. They are designed to throw the other person off or to gain an advantage.

Some lies that we tell to strangers and acquaintances might be acceptable. A child who is home alone might tell a caller that his mother is busy and can't come to the phone. This is an acceptable lie for the sake of personal safety. In this case, telling the truth might have dangerous consequences. We might lie to a neighbor for reasons of privacy. "Hi Jack. How are you?" Jack's response, "I'm fine." Jack might be concealing that he and his wife Brenda are considering a divorce. It's none of his neighbor's business. These are lies that we tell to avoid social consequences and to maintain privacy. We easily justify such lies and they carry less guilt.

Understanding our motivation for lying and the lies of others gives us important information about who we are and who the other person is to us. Lies to those closest to us are more personal. We must remember these lies and make them a part of who we have now become. We must conceal a part of ourselves from that person. Emotional intimacy is damaged.

It is important that we differentiate between what is private and what is secret. Private is what we might do in the bathroom. A secret is a dead body buried in the backyard. That is, secrets are much more likely to get us into trouble, hurt others, embarrass and motivate us to lie. Perhaps the most common lie or secret in marriage is a physical or emotional relationship with someone other than our spouse.

Lying wreaks havoc in our relationships, as does the knowledge that we can't trust our partner. It may be the single most common reason marriages fail. The most damaging of lies involve the crises of infidelity. In fact, affairs, especially "romantic" ones, are probably more about lying and betrayal than they are about sex. It is also this type of lie that makes people the craziest. This is true for both the liar and the lied to. The person having the affair is usually lying to the spouse, lying to the affairer and lying to him or herself. The act of concealing something so serious requires pretending that everything is OK when it is not. Many times the spouse senses this performance and that something is wrong. Inquires by the spouse are often met with more lies; "Oh, it's all in your head." "How can you say such a thing about me?" Such a response begins to make the spouse feel crazy because all of his or her instincts shout that something is wrong and yet they don't want to believe it. Some might argue that non-romantic affairs have less affect on a marriage. Regardless, they can still destroy intimacy.

When the lie of an affair is exposed, the world of the relationship crashes in. The spouse feels stupid for not believing his or her instincts. They hurt because the one they trusted betrayed them, often repeatedly. They are angry that this occurred. They are confused about who their spouse is and they are frightened about what all of this means about them, for them, their future, their children, other family members, friends, and so on.

Once marital trust is damaged, rebuilding it is difficult and lengthy. In my experience as a marriage and family therapist, I have learned that the younger or less mature the individual or couple, the less likely they will survive an affair. More mature couples are more likely to understand that there is much to lose by acting precipitously. Less mature couples often bail out of the marriage not feeling equal to the task of repair. Mature couples often grow to understand that everyone is imperfect and they begin the process of forgiveness. This is no small task. It requires a heartfelt apology and recommitment by the unfaithful spouse. It also requires an understanding by the betrayed spouse that the affair has less to do with them and more to do with the ego state of the person having the affair.

While an affair might be symptomatic of an individual or marital problem, they can also occur in good marriages. Affairs don't always involve sex, and no matter how defined, affairs are not the fault of the spouse. Why someone goes out of the marriage has more to do with him or her than it does the spouse. Regardless of the justifications (and I have heard them all), the reasons for affairs rest with the one who has them. Coping mechanisms and options abound in unhappy marriages; there are confrontations, counseling, medical help, and sublimation in the form of hobbies. The point is: affairs are a poorly conceived solution to marital difficulties. Affairs don't cure depression and almost always make everyone feel crazy often more depressed.

Marriage can survive many things. It cannot survive continual lying. If one lies to their spouse, they will have a poor marriage. Once a patient told me that he was having an affair because his wife was a shrew and his girlfriend was a sweetheart. I suggested that if he began telling his wife the truth and lied to his girlfriend, his wife might become the sweetheart and his girlfriend would likely become the shrew. Unfortunately, he didn't appreciate my wit.