

An Experiment With Honesty

100% honesty is an excellent goal, but it can be difficult to maintain because of our very human anxiety (or fear) of telling the truth. In all relationships, dishonesty and withholding the truth usually adds bricks in the wall between your loved ones and you, preventing deep intimacy.

As a therapist, I regularly see clients struggle with the issue of honesty, anywhere from saying niceties, to hiding an affair. Even saying you are fine to someone during the day may very well be a form of lying.

When we look at how honest we are in our lives, inevitably, questions arise for us.

Let's look at the couple that I'll call Gary and Liz. Gary struggles with many questions on a regular basis as he attempts to appease Liz by withholding his truth: How much to tell? When to tell? What not to tell? Is it OK to ask for what I want? How honest should I, or can I be? Should I tell her I don't like that dress on her, just ignore it, or compliment her to reduce conflict? Then there is the "big" lie – hiding his affair. Unfortunately, covering over something as damaging as an affair gets its start with the "little white lies" that he believes are OK.

Have you heard the term "a little white lie?" What does it mean to you? Does it mean that the lie is so small it won't hurt anyone? From Forest Gump: "That's what's left after me saying, 'When I was in China on the all-American Ping-Pong team, I just loved playing Ping-Pong with my Flex-O-Lite Ping-Pong paddle,' which everybody knows isn't true, but Mama said **it was just a little white lie**, so it wasn't hurting nobody."

Just so you know, I love Forrest Gump, I just noticed the lie and use it to point out what it does.

Does holding back the truth mean the truth will never be known? Is it just a little white lie if Gary tells Liz that her dress looks great when he doesn't really think so?

Let's look at lies along a continuum like this:

White – Light gray – Dark gray – Black

White: Gary says, "I don't care which movie we go to."

Problem: He might have a preference, but he tends to say things don't matter because he wants Liz to get what she wants, usually to avoid conflict or be nice. Unfortunately, Liz is not getting the real deal – Gary's authentic self. Eventually Gary's truth will, likely, emerge in some other more serious issues. He is laying the foundation for a brick wall between them that prevents intimacy.

Light Gray: Gary says, "That dress looks fine on you."

Problem: He says this to reduce conflict or because he thinks Liz will feel good. Unfortunately, he's added another brick in the wall that prevents intimacy. If he does this too many times, then

he builds a large list of things he doesn't like about or with Liz. These will go into his "resentment box." In a time of crisis or conflict, he will probably dump the entire box of resentments over Liz's head by bringing up seemingly unrelated issues and past hurts. Therefore, withholding the full truth can become poison and why many couples argue a lot about unimportant and unrelated issues.

Dark Gray: Gary says, "I wouldn't think of having an affair with her."

Problem: This one can be tricky if Gary deludes himself by denying that he isn't interested in another woman simply because he thinks he shouldn't be. But if he really thought deeply about this, he might very well come to see that he is interested in another woman (even if mildly) or feeling something for this other woman and Liz is picking up on those feelings. Fear of conflict is the cause of this type of dishonesty, yet Gary has no way of knowing what the outcome would be if he were honest with Liz. Maybe if he were honest from the beginning, then the insecurity between them could be dealt with instead of being an ongoing issue.

Black: Gary says, "I am not having an affair."

Problem: This is the poison that destroys. If he is discovered in such a lie then it will clearly be experienced as a betrayal by Liz and will create havoc because it is so clearly a deception – that is, an intentional deception.

All the above levels of dishonesty result in us not being fully in a relationship – not deeply and intimately connected. How intimate of a relationship can I have if it is based on false assumptions and lies about my true nature, my authentic-self or my assumptions about who you appear to be? If I don't state my wants or opinions or preferences, then who is the other person really having a relationship with? A process like this is typically the one we go through when we first begin dating someone. We get along fabulously and look for all the ways we match but deny or withhold the mismatches that we see. We end up bending our true self so far in the other person's direction and presenting ourselves as what we think the other person wants, that we are not being true to ourselves or honest with the other person. Later the other person says, "You're not the person I thought you were," or "You were so different when we started dating" – sadly, a very common thing I hear in my office. Some people believe the other person has changed, but I believe they are finally being honest. People sometimes refer to this as the end of the honeymoon period.

If you would like to strive for more honesty and try to get to the ideal of 100% honesty, then try the experiment below. You can use this as an inventory of honesty for yourself to see how you're doing over time, or you can use it as a checklist to see where you are in a certain relationship and what you can do to clean things up.

The experiment:

Make three columns on a sheet of paper. Label the left column "White" (things I have been afraid to say, but I am willing to risk saying). Label the middle column as "Gray" (things I think

would create a very bad result). Label the right column as “Black” (things I have intentionally said or not said in order to avoid conflict or protect someone).

The goal of the experiment is to get to the point where everything on the list is crossed off and you have no secrets because you have come clean. Alternatively, if you are already perfect, you can look at the categories at the end of each day and reward yourself for the times during the day when you could have added something to the dishonest list but didn't.

My disclaimer with this experiment is that I cannot be held responsible for the outcome of your choice. What I can say though, is that if the person truly loves you and there is intense commitment to the relationship, you have a stronger chance of getting a positive response. I've worked with many couples in therapy, like Gary and Liz, that have disclosed affairs (and sometimes worse) and the connection and commitment toward each other allowed for healing of the rift. It is not easy. It can be scary. It can turn out badly. You may need the presence of another person to get through it. As a couple's therapist, I have walked many people through a deep process of becoming fully honest with one another. Some have ended their relationships because of it, and some have become closer than ever. The benefit is that, when it's done, both people stand on solid ground knowing that the relationship is real and that is a comforting feeling to both people, even if it means the end of the relationship.

Years ago, I made this up:

“Honesty only causes pain when it's withheld.”

I put it up on my wall to remind me to pause and breath... and... tell it like it is.

I believe it's true because I've seen so much pain and betrayal from the dishonest approach in life. And those people I've known to be honest and those I've watched move in this direction are much more at ease in life and relationships.

It was Mark Twain (a little white lie, because his name was Samuel Clemens) that said: “If you tell the truth, you don't have to remember anything.” Now that is a piece of wisdom that can put you at ease and create the deepest kind of relationship intimacy. Noticing how many times a day you could have lied and didn't can also do wonders for your self-esteem.

If you tell the truth you don't have to remember anything.

[Mark Twain](#) (1835 – 1910)

Son, always tell the truth. Then you'll never have to remember what you said the last time.

[Sam Rayburn](#) (1882 – 1961), quoted *Washingtonian*, November 1978

Honesty is the only way with anyone, when you'll be so close as to be living inside each other's skins.

[Lois McMaster Bujold](#), *A Civil Campaign*, 1999

No legacy is so rich as honesty.

[William Shakespeare](#) (1564 – 1616), “All’s Well that Ends Well”, Act 3 scene 5

Never apologize for showing feeling. When you do so, you apologize for truth.

[Benjamin Disraeli](#) (1804 – 1881)

Courtesy of:



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