Should an affair be disclosed? Risks of hiding or revealing infidelity.

Keeping an affair secret guarantees a relationship chasm, but revealing the infidelity guarantees breaking a partner’s heart.

Advice by Yael Schonbrun
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In their first therapy session, a couple shared that they were trying to decide if their 17-year marriage could be saved. Initial sessions focused on clarifying what each wanted in this phase of their marriage.

But the couple arrived at the sixth session looking shaken. One of them had disclosed an affair.

Infidelity can devastate partners and relationships — consequences that lead to a question I am sometimes asked as a couples therapist: Should an affair be disclosed?

Infidelity happens for many reasons

Estimates show that about 16 percent of people report having had extramarital sex during their lifetime.

It’s tempting to advise people to not have an affair in the first place. But, a host of complicated factors, including feeling mistreated by a partner or poor judgment from alcohol intoxication, can contribute to affairs. Many affair-involved partners experience a profound sense of regret and confusion.

It’s a Catch-22: Keeping an affair secret guarantees a relationship chasm, but revealing it guarantees breaking a partner’s heart.

There is no one “right” or easy choice to disclosing an affair. In certain instances, such as an abusive relationship, disclosure might be unsafe. Disclosing an affair that happened years ago and where the only benefit is to alleviate guilt may be misguided.
In many cases, though, disclosure can be wise. Voluntary disclosure represents a pro-relationship choice that “honors at least the intention to have a trusting, close relationship, even though one person has broken that trust,” said Daphne de Marneffe, psychotherapist and author of “The Rough Patch.”

**Risks of telling a partner you’ve cheated**

Discovering a partner’s affair can contribute not only to heightened distress, but also to a full-blown diagnosis such as a major depressive episode, said Mark Whisman, professor of neuroscience and psychology at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

“The individual who has been betrayed feels like the rug has been pulled out from under them,” said Kristina Coop Gordon, researcher and co-author of “Getting Past the Affair.” “It violates all of their basic assumptions about themselves, their partners or their relationship.”

Mental health effects are not limited to betrayed partners. Affair-involved partners also experience elevated risk for shame, depression and anxiety. And affair discovery destabilizes relationships. Among couples who divorce, infidelity is commonly listed as both a “major contributor” and a “final straw.”

Recognizing that the discovery of an affair can be crushing, affair-involved partners might default to keeping it secret. But considerable costs accompany this choice, too.

**Risks of not disclosing infidelity**

Not disclosing an affair can make marital healing harder to accomplish. "People often think more about the impact of disclosure and not about the impact if they don’t disclose,” Whisman said.

For instance in my practice, the partner who had the affair admitted that carrying the secret had weighed heavily and made it impossible to talk about resentments that had led to the affair.

A person who cheated might assume that carrying the burden is the least they could do to protect their partner from further injury. Yet, not disclosing may cause more harm than disclosing.

A small 2005 study examined the effects of couples therapy for three groups: those without an affair, those who had and revealed an affair, and those who had an affair but kept it secret. Affair couples began therapy with higher levels of marital distress than non-affair couples but improved at a faster rate. Those who kept the affair secret benefited less from therapy. During the five years after therapy ended, over half (57 percent) of the nonsecret affair couples were still married, but only 20 percent of the secret-affair couples were.
What would a partner want to know?

Research shows that getting caught or having a third party reveal the information may be more damaging to the relationship than a partner disclosing. Not all disclosures, however, are created equal.

A staggered or partial confession such as revealing a flirtatious encounter but not the extramarital sex may be less helpful. Partners may feel guilty for revealing partial truths, and if the full truth is later discovered, it can damage trust that has been rebuilt.

If a partner is worried an affair might be discovered, it may be wise to initiate disclosure sooner than later, and to honestly and fully answer if asked directly.

In one study described in researcher Michael Slepian’s fascinating book, “The Secret Life of Secrets,” participants in committed relationships were asked to imagine that their partner had traveled out of town, had a lapse in judgment, got drunk and had sex with someone else.

In this imagined scenario, the affair was not a symptom of a larger relationship issue and was guaranteed never to happen again. Even in these never-to-be-repeated circumstances, over three-quarters of the participants reported wanting to know.

How much to disclose is also a point of considerable debate among experts since sharing specific affair details might be more traumatizing than helpful.

Before you disclose, find support

Consulting with an outside, trusted confidant can help. But confiding to a friend carries the risk of judgment and of the confidant revealing information to others. Consider discussing it with a therapist instead. Therapists are professionally obligated to refrain from judgment and keep information confidential, and they can help with both partners’ mental health symptoms.

People can overcome affairs, and thoughtful disclosure increases that likelihood, even though the process can be scary and painful.

In therapy, my patients worked to understand why the affair happened, to rebuild trust, make amends, offer forgiveness and reconstruct a more mutually satisfying relationship. It was agonizing work, and also productive and healing, they said.
“Many couples say that they wouldn’t wish this experience on anyone else,” infidelity researcher Gordon said, “but that the growth involved led them to a much better understanding of themselves and their relationships, and often a stronger relationship.”

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