

The Truth about Lies: Dealing with Dishonesty in Couples Therapy

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Reflect on a recent situation when you were tempted to lie.

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Reflect on a recent situation where you were lied to.

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What Does the Hiding Reveal?

- About the person doing the lying?
- About the other partner?
- About the topic specifically?
- About the relationship generally?

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Lying Isn't a One Person Job

- Lies are a social behavior that occurs between two or more people
 - Therefore both people have the power to make them more or less likely
- The truth is earned and both people need to do their part
 - Lying leads to bad reactions—but also vice versa

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Some People Can't Handle the Truth

- Some people have chronic and pervasive struggles with honesty
 - May reflect a lack of empathy for others
 - May reflect severe conflict avoidance or a fragile self-image where they can't tolerate being seen in a bad light
- Best option may be to shrink the relationship to the parts that work
 - Especially if they deny outright facts and rewrite history—the relationship contract is broken

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Honesty seems easy,
but takes really hard work.

And is therefore a great target and goal of therapy.

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DEFINE LYING

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It's All About Intent

- **Lying**: saying something false with an intent to deceive
 - Saying something incorrect isn't lying if you believe it
- Some folks (e.g., ADHD, anxiety) sometimes get the facts wrong, misremember, or their stories evolve
 - We look for a pattern of behavior to infer intent, and they've used up their free passes
 - We may not assume intent, but still doubt the veracity

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Lies Benefit the Present

- Lies make the present easier, more comfortable, less stressful, or less conflictual
 - The price is paid later (but hopefully not!)
- Lies let us have it both ways:
 - Doing what we want without suffering the social consequences
 - Getting the credit without doing the work
 - Getting things our way without a difficult negotiation

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It's Not Always Black and White

- Some lies are factual—right or wrong
- Sometimes we shade the truth
 - Conveniently round up or down to suit our needs
 - If you're standing on a technicality, then you know you're lying
- **Lies of omission**—knowingly withholding information that the other person would want
 - Also ongoing when continue to allow other person to maintain their belief

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Past, Present & Future

- Most lies involve the past
 - What did or didn't happen
 - And perhaps in the present if we stick to it
- Sometimes lies involve intentions for the future
 - **False agreements** are lies and involve an intent to deceive
 - But some conditions/situations can make it harder to convert intentions consistently into actions—so was it a lie?
 - Is it a problem of intention or execution?

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Lies Double the Problems

- Lies make one problem into two:
 - The initial problem
 - The lie—which may actually be worse
- Lies can change how the other person sees the liar
 - And how they see themselves if they feel foolish for believing
 - Here comes the crazy!

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Sometimes We Lie to Ourselves

- We lie to ourselves when we optimistically let ourselves believe something overly convenient
 - "I'll get to that in a minute."
 - "I'm not really drinking that much these days."
 - "We mostly talk about work stuff."
 - So if we believe it, then are we not lying to the other person?
- How does the person respond to exploration/challenge by partner or therapist?

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ADHD Can Make Lying Easier

- ADHD makes it harder to hold back impulsively blurting out the desired answer
 - Without really pausing to think it through—good intentions but bad follow through
- ADHD can create more situations where it's tempting to lie
 - Specifically in the moment when there are no good options
 - Generally when life feels more chronically overwhelming
 - Not wanting to yet again be the one who messed up

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So Can Other Conditions

- Depression/Anxiety
 - "I didn't get to it because I was busy with other things."
 - "I didn't feel like going anyway."
- Substance abuse
 - "I only had a couple drinks."
- Infidelity
 - "I had to take a work call."
- Sexual performance problems
 - "I'm too tired tonight."

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So Can Some Relationship Styles

- Passive aggressive
 - "Huh? What do you mean?"
 - "Sorry, I forgot."
 - "Oh, I didn't realize that's what you wanted me to do."
- Generally wanting to keep it vague
 - "Umm. . . I don't remember."
 - "I don't think that's what happened."
 - "What? I wasn't angry."

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So Can Bad Situations

- Problematic situations are harder to deal with directly and honestly
 - No easy solutions that both partners will be happy with
 - E.g., financial problems, bad behavior, work burdens, or over-taxing situations
 - Exceeds one or both partner's differentiation/problem-solving
- Does the situation itself need to be addressed?

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So Can Unresolved Disagreements

- If a couple has yet to resolve a recurring disagreement, they keep ending up in the same dead ends
 - It's tempting to lie or shade the truth to avoid that familiar ditch
- Does the couple need help to come to some sustainable resolution on the disagreement?
 - What is getting in the way?

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Lies are diagnostic that something is happening.

But what?

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LIARS AND LIE INVITERS

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Where Does the Circle Begin?

- Lies cast long shadows
 - You can't blame others for not being trusting if you aren't trustworthy
- Bad reactions also cast long shadows
 - You can't blame others for not being trustworthy if you over-react
- Each person's behavior justifies the other's
 - But neither is happy

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Honesty is Hard

- Two laws of honesty:
 1. You can't punish honesty and expect the truth
 2. You can't lie about one thing and expect to be believed about the rest
- Liars are the obvious culprit, but is the other person inviting lies? (Ellyn Bader)
 - If so, this is an important but often neglected point of intervention

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How to Punish Honesty

- Bad reactions to disclosure:
 - Anger, threats
 - Guilt, piling it on, character attacks
 - Falling apart, playing the martyr
 - Silent treatment, withdrawing, threatening to leave
- Does partner's response to bad news open up or shut down honesty and discussion?
 - Empathize with the hurt, but also challenge to respond better

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Anxiety Invites Lying

- A low tolerance for uncertainty can invite lies
 - Demanding an answer (but not bad news) is a set up for yessing
- Lie inviters may over-rely on external anxiety management (addressing problems)
 - They may benefit from working on internal anxiety management (calming one's response)
 - They may also benefit from considering whether they need to be the solution to this problem

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Some Relationship Dynamics Drive Lying

- Enmeshed couples have a harder time sharing and receiving on difficult topics—whose job is this anyway?
- Some problematic dynamics:
 - Under- and over-functioner
 - Over- and under-controller
 - Worrier and reassurer
 - Avoider and chaser
 - Exploder and tip-toer

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An Escalating Dynamic

- A history of lying can make the other person more of a micromanager/fact-checker
 - It can become more about power and self-determination than the topic of the lies
 - Or it's about slippery slopes/tip of the iceberg
- Both people can feel like the other person has too much influence over their destiny/happiness
 - Let the tug of war commence!

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THE TRUTH SHALL SET
YOU FREE

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Perhaps Start by Making Better Situations

- Directly address whatever makes life harder
 - E.g., sleep problems, financial issues, problematic expectations, substance abuse, chronic disorganization, anxiety/depression, sexual issues, etc.
 - Prevent set-ups for failure that exceed liar's abilities
 - Improve liar's batting average and earn back some free passes
- This makes for fewer problematic situations
 - And gives liar more credibility to address the lie inviter's reaction

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How Good is Good Enough?

- Every couple will have disagreements that remain unresolved
 - What needs to change?
 - What needs to be accepted?
- Help the couple persist to an agreement
 - If stuck on the what, then explore the why—help each partner understand their own and partner's motivations
 - Use negotiating mundane matters to drive differentiation

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Truth is an Inside Job First: Self-Differentiation

- In those difficult moments, we need to first be honest with ourselves, so help liar to:
 - Hold onto a solid enough sense of self to be able to go towards a potential conflict rather than away without blowing up or collapsing
 - Develop enough self-differentiation to accurately see their part in the situation (including the less desirable parts)
 - Calm down enough to own the painful truth and address the issue productively
 - Know what they can sustainably agree to

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Truth is an Inside Job First: Other-Differentiation

- Then we need to face the repercussions from others, so help liar to:
 - Develop enough other-differentiation to accurately predict their partner's reaction
 - Develop a solid enough sense of self to be able to tolerate the lie inviter's judgment (or expectation of it)
 - Identify when past bad reactions were mostly about the lying
 - Identify how the liar's inconsistencies can evoke a sense of instability in the lie inviter and drive strong reactions (anxious or hostile/dependent attachment)

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Do the Details Matter?

- Relationships aren't court rooms, so sometimes the exact facts don't matter
 - Is it a difference without a difference?
 - Is pursuing the details obscuring the deeper dynamics?
- When the details aren't helpful, focus on understanding the other's feelings and meanings
 - He said/she said
 - Can't prove a nonevent

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Sometimes the Details Do Matter

- Does someone have a habit of rounding up or down?
 - Clarifying the details is in the service of addressing a larger pattern
- Wait out the chronic "I don't knower"
 - And stop their partner from reacting first
- If partner took it court, how good a case would they have?
 - What are facts vs assumptions?
 - And what does this reveal about the assumer?

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Get It Done, Then Move On

- Maybe just focus on fixing what needs to be fixed
- Deal with what the situation is now, not how you got there
 - Minimize projection/over-reading what it means
- When in doubt, partially own it:
 - "I don't know what happened there, but if I did that, then I am really sorry."
 - And then be willing to accept the apology

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Disappoint Early

- It's almost always better to disappoint earlier than later
 - Just bite the bullet—you won't want to do it more later
 - The other person probably has more options earlier than later
- Remind yourself it will only get worse if you wait
 - Waiting adds a second problem if the other person finds out you could have said something earlier
- Don't lie to yourself that it will somehow work out
 - What's your track record on these hail Marys? No, really?

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Regain Your Reputation

- Become more believable by admitting bad news
 - But try to limit how much bad news you have
 - Gives partners more credibility when they say things are good
- Be clear about the rewards for honesty
 - In relationship and own integrity—then hold them in mind when tempted to lie
 - Ask partner how to approach them with bad news to get a good (enough) reaction

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Actively Manage Expectations

- Actively manage what people expect of you so there is less pressure to lie later
 - May mean wrestling it out up-front
 - Don't over-promise or let someone stubbornly over-expect
- “I want to do my best, but I don't want to set me up for failure and you up for disappointment.”
 - Perhaps promise to do your best, but acknowledge that it may not work out as other person hopes

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If You Screwed Up, Then Fix It

- Take the heat in the moment
 - Admit your part
 - Acknowledge the impact on the other person
 - Make amends
 - Say what you will do next time—but don't over-promise (or believe it)
- If you lied, correct the record ASAP
 - Eliminates the ongoing lie of omission
 - Hold strong in the face of partner's punishing this delayed honesty

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Acknowledging Lie Inviting is Empowering

- Partners who expect their comfort to come solely from their partner are giving up half their ability to get there
 - “I want you to have the ability to influence getting more of what you want.”
 - This agency is also how one has trust for the future—not just relying on partner
- This may be especially important to explore for those with a history of dishonest relationships
 - At a minimum, why do they choose dishonest people?

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Why Did You Believe Them?

- Why did the partner believe something that was unlikely to happen?
 - Perfectionism/rigid standards?
 - Over-optimistically want it to be true?
 - Too exhausted to fight?
- Can they challenge their partner's unlikely promise in a productive way?

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Stop Inviting Lies by Managing Your Reactions

- Show that you can handle the truth by reacting well
 - Remind yourself of the bigger picture—there will definitely be a next time
 - Remind yourself of who you want to be—separate from partner's actions
- Be clear about your priorities—what is most important to you?
 - What are you unwilling to flex on?
 - What else are you therefore willing to flex on?
 - Would you rather be right or happy?

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Deal With It, Then Move On

- If you are upset about what happened, deal with it directly
 - Perhaps focus on the future more than the past
- Don't beat a dead horse or run the laundry list
 - Or you will become Charlie Brown's teacher
- A bad reaction changes the topic of conversation to your reaction
 - Or becomes the only thing the other person remembers

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Lying is (Usually) Domain-Specific

- Most people tend to be more dishonest about specific topics or situations
 - But generally honest on most other topics
- Is the other partner over-generalizing their distrust?
 - Are they projecting into ambiguous situations?
 - Would they benefit from getting more clear on their partner's difficult topics/situations?

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The Big Picture

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Integrity Matters Most

- Ultimately, we are responsible to our own conscience and sense of who we want to be
 - Even when the other person isn't doing a good job
- This takes other's feelings into account, but goes beyond it
- The challenge in the heat of the moment is to keep this image of our better self clearly in mind
 - And then requires emotional self-regulation to hold it

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Honesty is a Means and an End

- Trust is belief in the absence of full knowledge
- Trust becomes a shorthand—the past predicts the future
 - "I don't need to get into all the details, because I trust you."
- Creating trust requires good individual and also relationship behavior
 - Creating differentiation requires honesty
 - Honesty requires differentiation

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And is therefore a great target and goal of therapy.

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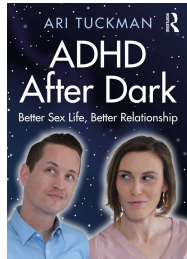
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