

# Relationship Secrets: When To Tell or Not to Tell

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I suppose it shouldn't surprise me that many people believe marital happiness requires complete and full disclosure.

The longtime relationship bible *Men are From Mars, Women are from Venus* taught us that clear communication was the best policy. Now, those reading *Fifty Shades of Grey* are convinced that sharing their deepest sexual fantasies will improve intimacy, too. Others, following Don Draper's character on *Mad Men*, are certain his secrets will ultimately destroy his marriage.

In truth, most successful long-term relationships are based on strong emotional and physical connections. But intimacy isn't necessarily equated with complete honesty. There are many couples that don't "tell all," yet maintain a trusting, fulfilling relationship. Likewise, there are some couples that suffer a great deal when well-kept secrets (or ultimately revealed ones) lead to mistrust and hurt. Below is a list of five commonly kept secrets and suggestions about whether it might be best to tell -- or not tell -- your partner about them.

**1) The Affair** -- Revealing an ongoing affair or divulging one from your past has wreaked havoc among many married or long-term partners. While affairs remain a serious breach of trust today, experts are beginning to understand that not all are a direct path to separation or divorce. Some serve to highlight already existing relationship problems and can actually promote working on them.

While a double life will undoubtedly put distance between you and your mate, it may be more important to discuss why the desire for a lover began in the first place, rather than focus on the affair itself. For most couples, affairs suggest disconnection, not just sexually but emotionally as well. If you decide to talk to your partner -- whether about an actual affair, a fantasy about one or one you had years ago -- think about how to use the discussion to heal your current bond or how it can serve to propel you toward an inevitable separation. Neither option is simple, but the most important thing is to be aware of the impact either choice may have on your relationship.

**2) Your Debt** - Keeping a mate in the dark about debt is never a good thing. Many couples today enter long-term relationships burdened with college loans, credit card debt or little money in the bank. Learning about these money matters later almost always leads to feelings of betrayal and mistrust.

One fellow I worked with learned about his wife's debt only after applying for a mortgage for an eagerly-awaited new house. He was furious that they were denied the loan, but even more when he found out why. Another woman who had been married for many years called it quits when she discovered her husband hadn't heeded her warning and had lied -- for a second time -- about how deep he had put their family in debt. She said it was the broken promises and deceit that forced her to walk away for good. Being upfront and clear about what you have, what you owe and your plan for how to deal with it will gain you much more respect and trust than learning about it later.

**3) Lack of Libido and Impotence** - How many women keep their disinterest in sex a secret and fake their orgasms? How many men keep their Viagra in some hiding place? While these secrets are more common among mid-lifers, when hormonal shifts impact sexual performance, some younger couples avoid intimacy altogether rather than reveal their lack of interest. As open as we are about eroticism and pornography in today's culture, sexual secrets are often kept between partners. Some view a lack of arousal as an inadequacy, a lack of femininity or masculinity. Yet partners can misinterpret physical disinterest as lack of emotional interest.

I encourage both men and women who feel low -- or loss of -- libido to talk to their health care providers first. Most often, discussing the issue with a professional paves the way to a more productive discussion with a mate. But remember, not talking about sexual intimacy doesn't make the issue disappear. Ultimately, it will impact the relationship. It's more about *how* you tell your partner than whether or not you tell them. One way or another, your partner will know. And once the elephant in the room is talked about, connection most often improves.

**4) Past 'Bad' Behavior** - The decision to share past illegal or immoral activities is complicated. Some are no-brainers -- crimes and jail time are best revealed and explained, as they are available on public record. Keeping them hidden can create enormous guilt, and if exposed, can cause deep fear that the behavior could be repeated.

But there are some gray areas in this category. How many of us have had wild experiences during adolescence and young adulthood that led to trouble with the law -- speeding, cheating, fist fights, drug use, shop-lifting -- activities we know will never recur and are best forgotten? We want our mates to think well of us and these were often not the best of times. Most of us have a laundry list of actions we are not proud of, but hopefully we have learned from them. Past 'bad' behaviors that are clearly no longer part of our present are secrets that exist even among couples that are intimate about most everything else in their lives. They can lie dormant, safely kept between you and you.

**5) Eating Disorders, Alcohol or Drug Use:** You'd be surprised how often these disorders remain hidden from even best friends, husbands and wives. Many couples fear their addiction -- past or present -- will cause a loss of respect, while often it's the secrecy that does.

One patient I treated who attended Overeaters Anonymous (OA) for years had his wife believing he was an avid churchgoer, which is where he told her he was when he was at his OA meetings. Ironically his wife, who couldn't relate to her husband's so-called religious interests, was struggling with her own addiction to alcohol. She needed help, but was afraid to seek it. After he was encouraged to share his involvement in OA, she was actually relieved and began her own treatment. They also began to tackle the ways they were enabling each others' addictions. Ongoing substance abuse will almost always interfere with a couple's intimacy, as the object of desire is something other than your mate. Unless addressed, addiction will ultimately destroy most relationships

Intimacy and complete openness are not one and the same. A successful long-term relationship means being willing to share your vulnerabilities and strengths, but requires sensitivity to the consequences that sharing brings.

Do you have a secret you keep from your mate? Do you think it would be helpful -- or detrimental -- to your relationship if you shared it?

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