

How to Handle Dishonesty in Your Relationship

Objective

To identify what to do if your romantic partner lies to you.

What to Know

Some lying is common in romantic relationships. For example, some people downplay or avoid sharing information to avoid conflict. Sometimes lying protects the other person's feelings.

Even if your partner is trying to protect you, lies can still cause problems in your relationship by reducing trust and intimacy. Excessive lying is very damaging and might lead to a breakup.

Why would your partner lie to you? Reasons for lying might include:

- avoiding conflict, embarrassment, or having to face the consequences of their behavior.
- having a fear of rejection or losing you.
- hiding something they did or did not do.
- maintaining control of a situation.
- making themselves look good, more successful, special, or talented.
- postponing having to make life changes.
- trying to protect your feelings.

What are some signs your partner is lying to you? Detecting lies is not always easy. However, the following are signs that might be present if your partner is lying or withholding information.

- avoiding eye contact
- being vague or offering few details
- having unusual or contradictory body language (e.g., saying "no," but nodding their head up and down; fidgeting)
- acting defensive while denying accusations
- answering questions in an inconsistent or evasive manner
- sweating
- placing a barrier such as a desk or chair between the two of you
- providing more information or specific details than is necessary or was asked for
- repeatedly saying "no"
- acting smug
- stalling the conversation
- being unusually calm
- being unwilling to touch you during the conversation

Keep in mind you might mistake nervousness, distraction, or lack of eye contact for lying. So, do not just rely on these common signs; otherwise, you might misread or mislabel your partner's behavior.

Even small, infrequent lies can add up to distrust and other significant relationship problems, including:

- reduced trust.
- diminished compassion and empathy.
- decreased intimacy.
- more lies and deception.

What can you do if your partner lies to you? Here are steps you can take.

1. Trust your instincts.
2. Reflect on what your boundaries are when it comes to dishonesty in your relationship.
3. Set and communicate healthy expectations for honesty.
4. Pause before responding to what your partner is telling you.
5. Ask direct questions.
6. Communicate how you feel.
7. If the lie damages the relationship, or there is a pattern of dishonesty, consider counseling.

Whether you forgive your partner for lying may depend on your partner's past dishonest behavior – and how much harm was caused by the lie. Forgiving your partner does not mean you condone lying or their hurtful behavior.

If your partner fails to express remorse for lying or for hurting your feelings – or they show no willingness to change or seek help – you might consider ending the relationship.

What to Do

Answer the following questions.

How has lying affected your relationship? Be specific.

Once you identify your boundaries and you are clear about your expectations, discuss with your partner. Do you both agree on what it means to be deceitful? What is non-negotiable? What is unacceptable to lie about? Be specific.

Do you allow your partner to share information with you? For example, if they are honest and you criticize or reject them, you might be making it harder for them to share information – or they might be tempted to lie. What are some ways you can be open with your partner?

If your partner has demonstrated a pattern of lying to you, let them know what will happen if the behavior continues. If they continue lying, follow through on the consequence. What are the consequences? What will you do?

In the coming month, use the chart below to write down your partner's lie or dishonest behavior. Note how you felt and what you did in response. Write down how your partner reacted. Lastly, describe the outcome and whether there was a consequence for the behavior.

Partner's behavior	How did you feel?	Your response or reaction	How did your partner react?	Outcome

Did this exercise help you and your partner find productive ways to address lying and dishonest behavior? Explain.

While you cannot control your partner, you can control your own feelings and choices. What are some positive changes you would like to make for yourself?

What are some other ways you can address distrust and dishonesty in your relationship? Be specific.

Reflections on This Exercise

Did this exercise help you identify what to do if your partner is dishonest with you? Why or why not?

Did this exercise change the way you will react to your partner's lying behavior in the future? Explain.

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5= moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
