

# How Much Should I Tell My Spouse? - Secrets or Transparency in Your Marriage

## Facts and Fallacies of Intimacy: Part 3

By Dr. Kevin Downing

### **FALLACY:**

If I let my mate know everything I've done and everything I think, it will always lead to rejection.

### **FACT:**

In most cases your spouse already has a very good idea of who you are and your history. You aren't as good an actor or actress as you think. There are some exceptions to this very tricky issue of - to share or not to share in marriage. *"It is to a man's honor to avoid strife, but every fool is quick to quarrel."* Proverbs 20:3. Some things are better left unsaid. My wife – at critical points in our marriage! *"A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver."* Proverbs 25:11 *"Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective."* James 5:16

### **The Toughest Transparency a Marriage Will Face**

Sometimes when we look at the extremes subtle issues have more clarity. With that in mind let's go to the far end of the continuum.

Without a doubt the toughest times of transparency in marriage come when there has been an extra-marital affair. I hope that you have never had to experience such a thing. Unfortunately, we see more and more couples coming to counseling who have experienced an affair. And it's not just men who have done the cheating – it's the wives too.

There are some that argue that if an offended spouse does not know about his or her mate's affair that it should not be disclosed to them. The idea is, "What they don't know won't hurt them." I find that what the spouse doesn't know already is hurting them. And in the vast amount of cases there is great suspicion that an affair is occurring.

Nevertheless when an affair comes to light the question surfaces – "How much of the details do I share with my mate?" The best answer I have found to this question in my opinion is, "Share enough so that there

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are no surprises if third party information comes up at a later time. Too much detail only creates painful mental videos for the offended spouse to replay and suffer with.”

Step nine from the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous says, “Make direct amends to such people whenever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.” I think this is very wise. In marriage, not making amends is also damaging. No one likes to be blindsided with a transgression – especially an ongoing secret life a mate has kept from their spouse. What would examples of these be? They would be things like running up financial debt, eating disorders, pornography, alcohol, drug abuse and more.

### **Sharing Every Detail Does Not Produce the Greatest Intimacy**

I counseled a man one time who claimed that his wife demanded that he share with her every night for one full hour what was going on with him so they could be close. And he had to do all of the talking!

So I ask him, “Did you do that?” He claims he did. I don’t think I would have that much to share – at least that anybody, including my wife would want to hear. This sounded more like an angry, frustrated wife who was punishing her husband.

### **Choose Your Battles Wisely**

You see the quote I have from my wife Debbie above – “Some things are better left unsaid.” We have found that at certain times of stress there is only so much our marriage can process at a given time.

So Debbie says – “better left unsaid” let some things go – especially at night when you are both tired and exhausted.

### **So What Are The Most Important Things To Share With Your Mate?**

We were made for closeness in marriage and that includes our feelings. You cannot have emotional intimacy without sharing your feelings. But, which feelings should you share? As a rule of thumb, share feelings that last a long time – (as in days, weeks or years). These are important to share with your mate. Typically married people don’t feel known when these feelings are withheld and our mate is never made aware of them. And they feel on the outside if they don’t know about these feelings.

Your history is important to share with your mate. To really know someone is to know about their history. Have you ever heard a spouse exclaim – “You never told me that!” Traumas of war and other hurts left underground can shut down your feelings making you an emotionally unavailable person.

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You may say – “Wow, Kevin I don’t know if I could share what I’m thinking about right now and I don’t know if my mate could handle this stuff.” If this is true of you – then reach out and get some professional help – that’s why we are here!

Feelings that are intense but short lived are best held from sharing. Why? - Because you put it behind you. Remember – we typically deeply regret what we say at the height of our anger.

### **What to Share with God**

Everything! He is well equipped to handle it all.

### **What to Share with Others**

It’s often been said that – “confession is good for the soul but bad for your reputation.” Another famous saying is – “we are only as sick as our secrets.” As people of the light I think it’s an important spiritual discipline to practice confession. I heard one man say, “My Men’s group is so close we could all blackmail each other!” Now that is a lot of confession and sharing. This type of sharing needs to be with trusted confidential people.

It is the catalyst for the power we see in the recovery groups’ movement – as well as many of the great revivals of church history. A spouse can be part of this depth of sharing but not always. If your mate is struggling with an addiction we often say it’s not a good idea to be their “Addiction Cop.” Let your mate work out the details of temptations and daily struggles with someone who is equipped to take such a role in their life.

### **Boundaries**

This topic of sharing comes back to the issue of boundaries. Remember - the best boundaries are like the semi-membranes of the body. Your kidneys are a good example. They let certain things through and filter impurities out by blocking them.

Your marriage is best when important feelings and concerns get through and reach your mate. Your marriage is protected when you block other feelings that are fleeting, toxic or not of great priority.

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