



INFIDELITY RECOVERY INSTITUTE

Saving the fabric of society, one relationship at a time

The Policy of Radical Honesty

Honesty and Openness is one of the ten most important emotional needs identified in marriage, which means that when it's met, it can trigger the feeling of love. But its counterpart, dishonesty, is one of the five most destructive Love Busters. When spouses are dishonest, they destroy the love they have for each other.

But there is a third reason that honesty is crucial in marriage. Honesty is the only way that you and your spouse will ever come to understand each other. Without honesty, the adjustments that are crucial to the creation of compatibility in your marriage cannot be made. Without honesty, your best efforts to resolve conflicts will be wasted because you will not understand each other well enough to find mutually acceptable solutions.

Most couples do the best they can to make each other happy, at least for a while. But their efforts, however sincere, are often misdirected. They aim at the wrong target. Ignorance, not lack of effort, is often the most important cause of their ultimate downfall.

Couples are not only ignorant of ways to improve their marriages; they are often ignorant of the problems themselves. To avoid conflict, they sometimes deliberately misinform each other as to their feelings, personal history, activities, and plans. This not only leads to a failure to meet an important emotional need, and a withdrawal of love units when the deception is discovered, it also makes marital conflicts impossible to resolve. After all, how can you and your spouse solve a problem if your cards are not on the table?

To help you understand how honest you need to be to have a successful marriage, I have written the Policy of Radical Honesty. I call it "radical" because that's how many see my position on the subject. But I view my policy as simply advocating complete honesty in marriage. In our culture I guess that's a radical idea.



INFIDELITY RECOVERY INSTITUTE

Saving the fabric of society, one relationship at a time

The Policy of Radical Honesty

Reveal to your spouse as much information about yourself as you know; your thoughts, feelings, habits, likes, dislikes, personal history, daily activities, and plans for the future.

To help explain this policy, I have broken it down into four parts:

1. **EMOTIONAL HONESTY:** Reveal your emotional reactions, both positive and negative, to the events of your life, particularly to your spouse's behavior.
2. **HISTORICAL HONESTY:** Reveal information about your personal history, particularly events that demonstrate personal weakness or failure.
3. **CURRENT HONESTY:** Reveal information about the events of your day. Provide your spouse with a calendar of your activities, with special emphasis on those that may affect your spouse.
4. **FUTURE HONESTY:** Reveal your thoughts and plans regarding future activities and objectives.

To some extent this policy seems like motherhood and apple pie. Who would argue that it's not a good idea to be honest? But in my years of experience as a marriage counselor, I have constantly struggled with the belief of many clients that dishonesty can be a good idea under certain conditions. Moreover, pastors and counselors themselves often advise dishonesty when a spouse has committed a particularly thoughtless act, such as infidelity. And many marital therapists warn against complaining, something that some consider one of the seven deadly sins of marriage. So instead of complaining, spouses often stuff their feelings and try to put a good face on a bad situation.

Granted, dishonesty can be a good short-term solution to marital conflict. It will probably get you off the hook for a few days or months or keep the problem on the back burner. But it's a terrible long-term solution. If you expect to live with each other for the next few years and still be in love, dishonesty can get you into a great deal of trouble.



INFIDELITY RECOVERY INSTITUTE

Saving the fabric of society, one relationship at a time

Because there are so many out there who advocate dishonesty in marriage, I will describe the four parts of my Policy of Radical Honesty, and explain to you why I think they are so important in marriage.

Emotional Honesty

Reveal your emotional reactions, both positive and negative, to the events of your life, particularly to your spouse's behavior.

Some people find it difficult to openly express negative reactions. They may fear that their response will be interpreted as criticism. Or they may feel ashamed of their own reactions, telling themselves they should not feel the way they do. They may want unconditional acceptance from their spouses and consider that their negative reactions prove their own inability to be unconditionally accepting. Whatever the reasons, many spouses try to avoid expressing their negative emotional reactions.

While positive reactions are easier to communicate, many couples have not learned to express these feelings, either. This failure not only misses an important opportunity to accurately communicate basic feelings, but it also misses an opportunity to deposit love units. Whenever your spouse has made you feel good, if you express those feelings clearly and enthusiastically, you'll reward your spouse for having made an appropriate adjustment to you. That, in turn, makes your spouse feel good.

If you want to meet each other's emotional needs, and you want to overcome Love Busters, one essential ingredient is an honest expression of your emotional reactions to each other. What makes a marriage successful is your willingness and ability to accommodate each other's feelings. And without the facts about those feelings, an otherwise happy couple can become very unhappy as the events of life change.

The conditions that existed at the time of your marriage were partly responsible for the love you had for each other. Those conditions made it easy for you to meet each other's emotional needs, and tended to ward off Love Busters. They may have made you feel perfect for each other, because you did not have to do much to make each other happy.



INFIDELITY RECOVERY INSTITUTE

Saving the fabric of society, one relationship at a time

But if you are like most couples, those conditions changed right after your marriage and have continued to change right up to the present. If you have not been able to adjust to those changes, you are probably very disillusioned about your compatibility. What had seemed effortless at first may seem impossible for you now.

But adjustment in marriage is not impossible. In fact, it may be quite a bit easier than you think. Because of the way your brain is put together, you have the ability to make remarkable adjustments to each other throughout life, as your environment changes. But in order to be successful, you must do four things:

First, you must realize that these changes will take place, whether you want them to or not. Many of the circumstances surrounding you cannot be controlled and will be changing constantly.

Second, you must stick to your goal of meeting each other's most important emotional needs, and avoiding Love Busters regardless of the change in conditions. A change can be very distracting, and can cause both of you to lose sight of your primary objectives in life. Don't let these changes cause you to lose sight of each other.

Third, you must be totally committed to making all of your decisions jointly and enthusiastically. Changes in circumstances require new decisions, and each must be made with each other's feelings in mind. Otherwise, the changes will leave one of you in the dust. Don't go on in life unless you are both on board.

And finally, in order to make the best decisions, you must be radically honest with each other about your emotional reactions to the changes in your lives. The best decisions take the emotional reactions of both of you into account simultaneously, but without an honest expression of those reactions, you will be missing the target.

While some couples may fail to make a successful adjustment after feelings are honestly explained, failure is almost guaranteed when the need for adjustment is never communicated. Always take each other's complaints seriously. As I mentioned earlier, your emotional reactions are a gauge of whether you are making a good adjustment to each other. If you both feel good, you need no adjustment. If one or both of you feel bad, a change is indicated.



INFIDELITY RECOVERY INSTITUTE

Saving the fabric of society, one relationship at a time

But let me also explain what honesty is not. It is not selfish demands or disrespectful judgments or angry outbursts.

Expressing a feeling is not the same as expressing demands. If you try to tell your spouse what to do, you are not revealing an honest feeling; you are making a demand. If your spouse does something that bothers you, the correct way to express it is simply say that it bothers you. The Policy of Joint Agreement would take over from that point to help you try to resolve the problem.

If you tell your spouse that he or she is wrong about something, you're not being honest, you are being judgmental. While you should be free to express your beliefs and opinions, you should respect your spouse's beliefs and opinions. If you try to "straighten out" your spouse, you are not being honest; you are making a disrespectful judgment. The expression of feeling should not carry judgmental baggage with it.

It goes without saying that angry outbursts are not expressions of honesty, either. When people have them, they often think that they are being honest, but that's their Taker trying to rationalize what is actually cruel and destructive. Whatever it is you have to say when you are angry is not worth saying. Keep that basic principle in mind so that you will keep your mouth shut when you feel angry. When you have recovered from your anger, it's safe to tell your spouse what was bothering you.

Failure to express negative feelings perpetuates the withdrawal of love units. It prevents a resolution to a marital conflict, because the conflict is not expressed. Negative feelings provide evidence that a couple has not yet achieved a successful marital adjustment. More work is needed.

But positive feelings not only offer proof for a successful adjustment, but they also provide a reward to the spouse that has been successful. Don't neglect to tell each other how you feel when you are happy.

Now we're ready to look at the second part of this Policy of Radical Honesty. This part faces the reality that history often repeats itself.



INFIDELITY RECOVERY INSTITUTE

Saving the fabric of society, one relationship at a time

Historical Honesty

Reveal information about your personal history, particularly events that demonstrate personal weakness or failure.

Whenever you and your spouse make a decision together or try to resolve a conflict with the Policy of Joint Agreement, one factor that must never be ignored is your past. That's because mistakes and successes of the past often provide evidence of what's likely to happen in the future.

While many people feel that embarrassing experiences or serious mistakes of the past should be forgotten, most psychologists recognize that these are often signs of present weakness. For example, if someone has ever had an affair, he may be vulnerable to another one. If someone has ever been chemically dependent, he is vulnerable to drugs or alcohol abuse in the future. By expressing past mistakes openly, your spouse can understand your weaknesses, and together you can avoid conditions that tend to create problems for you.

No area of your life should be kept secret. All questions asked by your spouse should be answered fully and completely with periods of poor adjustment in your past given special attention. Not only should you explain your past to your spouse, but you should also encourage your spouse to gather information from those who knew you before you met your spouse. I have encouraged couples that are considering marriage to meet with several significant people from each other's past. It's often a real eye-opener!

I carry this Policy of Radical Honesty about your past all the way to the disclosure of all premarital and extramarital sexual relations. That's because those experiences are among your most important experiences in life, and your spouse should know anything you regard as important. Past sexual experiences also create a contrast effect in marriage, and it's inevitable that you will compare your spouse sexually with all other past sexual relationships. Knowing your sexual history can make present sexual problems much easier to understand.



INFIDELITY RECOVERY INSTITUTE

Saving the fabric of society, one relationship at a time

I've had clients argue that if they tell their spouses about mistakes made decades earlier, their spouses will be crushed and never trust them again. Why not just leave that little demon alone?

My answer is that it's not a "little demon." If you've had an affair, it's an extremely important part of your personal history, and it says something about your predispositions. If you've had an affair in the past, your spouse shouldn't trust you -- I certainly wouldn't.

But what if you haven't strayed since it happened? What if you've seen a pastor regularly to hold you accountable? Why put your spouse through the agony of a revelation that could ruin your relationship forever?

I'd say you don't give your spouse much credit! Honesty does not drive a spouse insane -- dishonesty does. People in general, and women in particular, want to know exactly what their spouses are thinking and feeling. When you hold something back, your spouse tries to guess what it is. If he or she is right, then you must continually lie to cover your tracks. If he or she is wrong, an incorrect understanding of you and your predispositions develops.

Maybe you don't really want to be known for who you are? That's the saddest position of all. You'd rather keep your secret than experience one of life's greatest joys -- to be loved and accepted in spite of your weaknesses.

Some counselors have argued that the only reason people reveal past infidelity is because of anger. They are deliberately trying to hurt their spouses with that information. Or they might be doing it to relieve their own guilt at the expense of their spouse's feelings.

While it's true that the spouse usually feels hurt, and vengeance or feelings of guilt motivate some, whenever correct information is revealed, an opportunity for understanding and change is presented. That opportunity is more important than unhealthy motives or momentary unhappiness.

Some revelations may need to be made in the presence of a professional counselor to help control the emotional damage. Spouses sometimes have difficulty adjusting to revelations that have been kept secret for years. In many cases, they're not reacting to the revelation as much as the fact that they'd been lied to all that time.



INFIDELITY RECOVERY INSTITUTE

Saving the fabric of society, one relationship at a time

Some spouses with emotional weaknesses may need personal counseling to help them adjust to the reality of their spouses' past. The saints they thought they married turn out to be not so saintly. But the most negative reactions to truth that I've witnessed have never destroyed a person or a marriage. It's dishonesty that destroys intimacy, the feeling of love, and marriages.

When a couple first see me for counseling, I have them complete my Personal History Questionnaire, which systematically reviews many of the significant events of their past. I ask them to share their answers with each other and feel free to ask any questions that would be triggered by them.

I offer you the same opportunity to investigate each other's past. I have posted that questionnaire for you to copy and complete. Simply click the name of the questionnaire in the previous paragraph and be sure to make two copies, one for both of you. Leave nothing out and be willing to pursue any line of inquiry that will help you better understand each other's past.

Current Honesty

Reveal information about the events of your day. Provide your spouse with a calendar of your activities, with special emphasis on those that may affect your spouse.

After six years of marriage, Ed discovered that it was easier to have a sexual relationship with a woman at the office than with his wife, Jennifer. As a result, he found Peggy a welcome solution to his sexual frustration. He spent time alone with her several times a week, and their sexual relationships was as fulfilling as he could have ever imagined.

Ed justified this infidelity by assuming he was doing Jennifer a favor by not imposing his sexual requirements upon her. Whenever Jennifer wanted to make love to him, he happily accommodated her, but she didn't feel a sexual need more than once or twice a month.

Ed didn't want to share information about his daily activities with Jennifer, since honesty would have ruined any hope of continuing this very satisfying solution. Moreover, the



INFIDELITY RECOVERY INSTITUTE

Saving the fabric of society, one relationship at a time

announcement of this relationship would have upset her. He still loved her very much and would not have wanted to put her through the grief of such a disclosure. So to preserve a temporary solution to his problem and to keep Jennifer from experiencing intense emotional pain, he felt that dishonesty was justified.

In good marriages, couples become so interdependent that sharing a daily schedule is essential to their coordination of activities. But in weak marriages, couples are reluctant to provide their schedules, because they are often engaged in an assortment of Love Busters. They may know that their spouses would object to their activities, so they tell themselves, What they don't know won't hurt them. They have what I call a "secret second life."

But there are many who really have nothing to hide; yet they feel the need for privacy. They are offended when their spouse asks where they've been or what they've done. They feel that their spouse should trust them, and not assume the worst.

I'm dead-set against privacy in marriage, because it creates an unnecessary barrier to problem solving. When you and your spouse married, two became one. That means that prior to marriage, you had no one but yourself to consider when you made choices, and now you have each other to consider. There should be no part of your life that is off limits to your spouse, because literally everything that either of you do will ultimately affect each other. Privacy breeds incompatibility because it represents a part of your life that is off limits to accommodation.

Even when activities are innocent, it's extremely important for your spouse to understand what you do with your time. Be easy to check up on and find in an emergency. Give each other your daily schedules so you can communicate about how you spend your time. Since almost every thing you do will affect your spouse, it is important to explain what it is you do.

If Jennifer and Ed had established a habit of exchanging daily information early in their marriage, his affair would have been almost impossible to arrange. And if they had negotiated with the Policy of Joint Agreement, his sexual problem would have been addressed and resolved.



INFIDELITY RECOVERY INSTITUTE

Saving the fabric of society, one relationship at a time

Honesty is a terrific way to protect your spouse from potentially damaging activities. By knowing that you'll be telling your spouse what you've been up to, you're far less likely to get either of you into trouble.

Future Honesty

Reveal your thoughts and plans regarding future activities and objectives.

After having made such a big issue of revealing past indiscretions, you can imagine how I feel about revealing future plans. They're much easier to discuss with your spouse, yet many couples make plans independently of each other.

Some couples don't explain their plans because they don't want to change them, even if their spouses express negative reactions. They feel that explaining a future plan may prepare the evening for war, and their spouses will successfully scuttle the plan.

Some don't explain their future plans because they don't think their spouses would be interested. There's nothing upsetting about the plan, so there'd be no point in revealing it.

But even if your plans are innocent, when you fail to tell your spouse your future plans, you're being dishonest. You don't really know what your spouse's reaction will be, and by failing to give advance notice, you may create a problem for the future. Besides, if you and your spouse are partners in life, your plans are important to both of you, whether your spouse feels that way or not.

You may feel your plans are best for both you and your spouse. Once your spouse sees the plan succeed, he or she will be grateful that you went ahead with it. Or, you may feel that if you wait for your spouse's approval, you will never accomplish anything. Perhaps your spouse is so conservative that if you wait for his or her approval, you think you'll miss every opportunity that comes your way.

Regardless of how you feel about revealing your plans, failure to do so will leave your spouse in the dark. While no love units are withdrawn at the time you're deceitful, they're almost sure to be withdrawn when your spouse realizes you've held back information. It



INFIDELITY RECOVERY INSTITUTE

Saving the fabric of society, one relationship at a time

also sets up the loss of more love units if your plans fails to take your spouse's feelings into account.

How many hours of waking time to you have at your disposal? Do you schedule any or all of that time? Do you and your spouse share your weekly schedules with each other before you commit yourselves to that time?

Since your schedule each week is part of your future plans, every hour you schedule should be discussed with your spouse before you firm them up. I suggest that every Sunday afternoon at 3:30, you and your spouse set aside one-half hour to go over your schedules for the coming week. That way you will not only know what each of you is doing that week, but you will have an opportunity to change any part of the schedule.

Of course, it would make sense for you to discuss your schedule on a daily basis, so that each new item could be reviewed as it comes along. But the reason that I suggest a final review on Sunday afternoon, is to get you into the habit of giving each other a chance to veto anything in either of your schedules that does not have your enthusiastic agreement. Get used to the idea that you simply cannot do something that your spouse does not like. And give your spouse an opportunity to react to whatever it is you are planning to do.