

## LIES, DECEPTION, INFIDELITY & JEALOUSY... A Toxic Tangle of Therapy Challenges

***This is a transcript of a live session presented by Ellyn Bader  
in her couples therapy online training program***

**Ellyn:** Today's lesson is about lies, deception, infidelity and jealousy. It's about these complex issues that often are the cause of couples seeking therapy. I'll be teaching for most of the hour, and we'll also be looking at videotape.

I thought it might be fitting to start off this topic with a column from "Dear Abby," since she died yesterday.

A man wrote in to Abby and said:

*Dear Abby, I'm married to a wonderful woman, but something has been bothering me since we've together. I'm not as honest as I should be in our relationship. I don't spend money on drugs, prostitutes or clothes, but rather on plastic models and other hobby-related items. However, I do have a spending problem and I lie to her about where the money goes. How do I stop spending and lying to my wife?*

*Signed, Sick of Lying in Oklahoma*

Abby responds:

*Dear Sick of Lying: You start acting like a man instead of a child with his hand in the cookie jar. You recognize that marriage is a partnership and you have been in a sense stealing from your wife. Then you and she agree on a budget you can responsibly allocate to your hobby and live within your means.*

When I read that I thought, wouldn't it be wonderful if it could be that easy? What if, when people come in and they're complaining to us about their partners, we could in fact just give a simple piece of prescriptive advice like Abby did and wipe our hands, and everybody could go home and be happy? Of course, it's never that easy when lies, theft or deception occur in a marriage or committed partnership.

I love the quote from Oscar Wilde who said:

*The truth is rarely pure and never simple.*

I connect the topic of lies to infidelity, because infidelity is about so much more than sex. In fact, I think the heart of a lot of the infidelity cases that most of us see is much more about lies, deception, betrayal and broken trust, rather than about sex per se.

I also especially like one definition of infidelity that I found in Webster's dictionary:

*The betrayal of trust or loyalty, when there is a reason to expect trust or loyalty.*

In fact in Western cultures, we do expect loyalty. There's an assumption in heterosexual marriage, unless it's been otherwise agreed, that our partners will be monogamous. In fact, married partners have so many interdependencies that they really rely on monogamy for safety and security to support their own functioning and the success of their families. Most committed couples assume monogamy is a given and never discuss their agreements very deeply. Gay couples often have a better history of addressing this directly with each other.

Alongside of that, we have the issue that lies also seem to be inherent in human nature. Everybody lies. On your handouts, I

gave some really common examples of lying all the way from Richard Nixon to Jim Carrey's movie "Liar Liar."

Some of you may have seen the Lance Armstrong interview with Oprah, where he owns up to his lies. There's a particularly interesting moment in it where he talks about the drug cocktail that he was taking. Even as he's describing to Oprah what it was that he actually took, as he is supposedly coming clean, you can watch him still deceiving himself about what he was doing.

Even as young as six months, humans are wired to use deception as a way of getting what they want. Six-month-old babies have been shown to fake cry. They'll cry and then look around for reactions.

When Pete and I were writing our book, *Tell Me No Lies: How to Face the Truth and Build a Loving Marriage*, we surveyed 665 couples. We asked a series of questions about honesty, lies and deception. A short summary of some of the results was:

- One third of the women and about 40% of the men admitted to lying to their partners in the past year. I'm sure the actual numbers were quite a bit higher than that. We were surprised to find men admitting it more than the women.
- An equal number of men and women knew that their partners had lied to them.
- 43 % of the women said that their relationships would actually benefit from more honesty, while 51% of the men said that they wished for and knew that their relationships would indeed benefit from more honesty.

What happens and why, besides being inherent in human nature, do lovers lie to each other? To be effective clinically, it helps to

know the type of lies, the extent of them, and why and how the lies matter.

It's easiest to look at lies in terms of breaking them down a bit into the different stages of marriage. When I say marriage, I'm also referring to committed partnerships and certainly to gay and lesbian relationships, as well as heterosexual relationships.

When partners lie at the beginning, I call them loving lies. Loving lies continue throughout a marriage, but at first partners lie to build or enhance the bond. They lie to promote similarities, to create safety, to create a feeling of connection. Sometimes they lie to build each other up and to increase their feelings of self-esteem.

Sometimes they will lie to avoid or cover up shameful things that they may not want the other person to discover. You're all familiar with the kinds of lies where you might say to your partner, "You're the best cook in the whole world, or you're the very best lover on the planet, or you're prettier than our kid's teacher, or I love your new haircut."

All those things are bonding, teasing and playful, and those kinds of lies, in fact, do not really do any damage. Ironically, the longer the initial stage lasts and the more harmless these little loving lies are, often the stronger bond the couple develops.

Then as the relationship moves forward, you get to what I call the dark side of the honeymoon. The dark side of the honeymoon is actually excessive conflict avoidance. In excessive conflict avoidance, what you get are partners who begin to agree about a lot of things that they don't really agree with.

They start to tiptoe around each other. They finesse topics. They're afraid that the truth will lead to a fight, or they might hide a lot of relevant details. There's some interesting research in this area, which shows that as people become closer to friends, family

members or lovers, and intimacy increases, people become more confident that they will be able to detect deception.

However, the studies have also shown that the ability to detect deception actually declines, as you get closer to somebody. Many studies show that lovers have a very difficult time actually telling when their partners are lying to them. One particular researcher said for strangers to detect deception in each other is difficult, but lovers in their primary relationships take this to a new low.

It's counterintuitive. It's not what we think. At the same time, problems are going to intensify when partners become more conflict avoidant and when they don't reckon with their differences. I call this the deep pit that so many couples fall into.

When they don't reckon with their differences, you get an enormous amount of self-deception. You get a lot of passive-aggressive lies, and you get what I call, the great big felony lies. We'll talk more about those in a little bit.

The passive-aggressive lies generally fall in the category of partners agreeing to do tasks that they actually have no intention of doing. That becomes very corrosive over time. We'll hear partners say to each other "I never know when I can count on you, or I never know if you're telling the truth, or I never know whether or not you're going to be reliable."

You'll also get enormous amounts of self-deception. Lies to the self can be extremely insidious. This can become a central part of some of the work that it takes after infidelity, in particular. Sometimes, I think of this almost as a process of self-brainwashing, where people will at times revise their history.

They might tell themselves, "I never really loved my partner anyway." They'll say things like, "If it's only sex that I'm having with somebody else, then it's not really infidelity; or it doesn't

matter at all if I don't get caught." They also often convince themselves that they don't want to hurt the other person's feelings; therefore it's better to lie than to tell the truth.

Recently, I heard one of the more extreme self-deceptions from a client that I was seeing. An affair had been revealed and it turned out that he'd been lying to his wife for two years quite pervasively. Because he didn't want to get into the work of dealing with it, he still believed that an active ongoing affair should not be any of his wife's business at all.

I want to talk a little bit about jealousy. Jealousy often is one of the things that sets the stage for an enormous amount of deception and hiding. When one partner is jealous of the other or jealous of the other person's friendships or relationships, that jealousy can be the way that a couple lays the groundwork for what is going to become a relationship with infidelity in it.

When my daughter was 11 years old, she was in a class where everybody had to pick an emotion, and then without looking it up in a dictionary, they were supposed to write their own definition of it.

My daughter wrote about jealousy:

*When someone else gets something you want, you act angry or as if you want to get back at them. Sometimes it can be solved; sometimes it can't. When you're jealous, you usually aren't capable of other good feelings. You spend your time and energy being angry, trying to get back at, or trying to forget about what happened. Now that's jealousy.*

When I read what she wrote, I thought, out of the mouth of an 11-year-old, she had some pretty profound ideas in there, particularly her comment that when you're jealous, you usually aren't capable of other good feelings. In other words, she

described how jealousy begins to take over and become pervasive in a relationship.

When a couple is unable to count on the reliability of what's being said to each other and the jealousy begins to expand, it takes over in a way that's extremely difficult for a lot of couples. When a couple comes in and brings up jealousy as a problem, at first you never know where it comes from, how deep it goes, whether it's primarily intrapsychic or interpersonal or both, and how much of it is based in past trauma.

Today, I've put up a clinical video for you to view. It's a couple who came to my husband and me for a one-time consultation. We're going to watch some sections of this video and discuss them.

This is a couple where the presenting issue is that the man wants to have an ongoing friendship with his ex-wife. This new relationship has been going on for a couple of years. It was very strong at the beginning, but is being destroyed by her jealousy of his desire to have a friendship with his ex-wife.

He's not interested in anything sexual and he's not at all interested in going back to his ex-wife, but he does want to maintain a friendly connection with her.

(Note: The video is not included in this sample lesson. Below you will find the essential part of the couples' session in transcript and descriptive form, using the pseudonyms Arthur and Barbara. Video summaries are in italics.)

*Arthur says it's a deal breaker. If Barbara can't handle the friendship that he wants to have with his ex-wife, then this relationship is over. And she doesn't see that happening anytime soon at all. They're at a stalemate here and in a destructive struggle because of the relationship that he wants to have.*

In the next section, we used a little bit of a modified Initiator-inquirer process, which some of you have learned from me in conferences or in this training program, and for others this will be new to you. You will be learning it soon.

We used this process to start a more effective dialogue between them.

*As the discussion unfolds, Arthur describes his guilt about the divorce and his certainty about not wanting to be with his ex. But he would like a friendship with his ex-wife, who is living in an apartment that he rents to her.*

*He says he's completely fed up with Barbara's jealousy. He's done everything he knows to reassure her. He doesn't want to talk about it anymore. He feels like he's done the things that she's asked him to do, and it's still not making any difference in reducing her jealousy.*

*She says, "I'm not ever going to feel secure. I can't feel secure until you stop taking care of another woman."*

*There is a lot of tension in the room. They've reached an impasse.*

They're reporting on the jealousy and how it's playing out between them out of the room, and she's certainly describing the insecurity that she's experiencing. I'd love to hear from one or two of you what you might do at this point if you were their therapist and the conflict was intensifying in front of you.

Is there anybody who would like to share your thoughts or comments?

**Participant:** I would probably ask her to think of how can she source her own security in this relationship and just to wonder about that question.

**Ellyn:** So you might help her to open up her mind to thinking about how she might support herself and source more of her own security.

**Participant:** Yes, and maybe ask her to think whether it's her pattern or whether it's what repeats in her life that she's not sourcing her own security.

**Another participant:** I'd like to ask him to go back into inquiry with her and ask her the same question again to really understand where her insecurity is coming from.

**Ellyn:** So you would continue to open up the dialogue more and keep them focused on her jealousy.

**Another participant:** She's saying that she needs to be heard, and I don't think that she feels heard.

**Ellyn:** That would be another route to take to see what he's taking in or what he has heard from what she's said so far. You can see that there are many options.

Asking her to focus on being able to better resource her own security and wondering about that in her own life is an individual intrapsychic focus. Some of the other responses were interpersonal and involved facilitating better inquiry or better listening.

I want us to go back to the tape now and watch from where we left off. What you're going to see is the way that I chose to intervene at that point. Keep in mind that this is the only time that I'm going to see this couple, so I am challenging and confronting a bit of what I'm hearing. Let's watch that now.

**Barbara:** *Of course I'm going to feel insecure.*

**Ellyn:** *Can I challenge that? I think you are trying to manage the wrong problem. You try desperately to manage his behavior instead of really understanding deeply the little girl inside you who is so scared.*

*That little girl is popping her head out, which is great, to show Arthur and to show me what the issues are. I would hate to see you ruin a good thing with Arthur when dealing better with that scared part inside you would be so much more effective than managing the outside world.*

**Barbara:** *How would I do that?*

**Ellyn:** *Taking a step at a time. You are doing an important step today because you are letting that little girl pop out and show herself.*

*She's the little girl who took care of her siblings, the one that had three kids to take care of, the one who had to be strong, and inside there is a little girl crying out to be nurtured and held. She gets so scared and afraid that someone else might come in and take her place. Your siblings did come in and take away some of that from you when you were little (her siblings were born when she was only 13 months old).*

*I wonder what are you feeling now as I talk to you like this?*

**Barbara:** *I feel deeply touched by what you are saying.*

What transpired in this section was my saying to her, "I think that you're trying to manage the wrong problem." It's common in couples to try very hard to manage the other person's behavior,

rather than dealing with what is being triggered inside of themselves.

Early issues are being triggered inside of her. She had twin siblings who were born when she was 13 months old, and later on as she was growing up, she did a lot of the caretaking of all of her younger siblings. Then when she got a divorce, she also had three kids to take care of.

She's had repeated experiences of other people coming in and taking away from her the nurturance and the connection that she so desires. That's showing up vividly and beginning to destroy the relationship with her partner.

I want to take a minute to see if anybody has a comment on what you just saw. Then I'm going to go into some teaching, and then we'll come back to finishing up the video.

**Participant:** I think one of her issues that are being reactivated is the invalidated, unheard and misunderstood part of her. He may have put the issue to rest and resolved it, but she is not yet being heard. I think this is the place where he really needs to hear her pain and let her feel like he's taking it seriously. He can move towards her and comfort that pain rather than dismissing it.

**Ellyn:** So you're talking to the interpersonal level. She definitely wants that; however, that is not going to be sufficient to resolve this issue between them.

**Participant:** But I think it's what she needs.

**Ellyn:** She desperately wants that, but she's like many people who believe if they would just get that, it would take care of the problem. One of the things that we'll be looking at a lot this year is how you intermix the interpersonal with the intrapsychic. She can address and get help with the part of her that is frightened and

insecure, and understand that it is being triggered from long ago in her past, as well.

**Participant:** I wanted to comment on what I saw. I saw that she started crying. She was really touched by your comment. She just went into her childhood memories. I saw that she was searching when she asked you, “How can I do it, or how will I do it?” She’s looking for a concrete tool, what she can do in her everyday life to shift it when this feeling comes.

I saw on his face that he was starting to get a new perspective on this whole issue that is going on between them. I felt like he was relaxed and he was looking down. Then when he looked at her he was more into her story of her whole life in the perspective of their whole life.

**Ellyn:** You’re totally correct. He absolutely softened for the rest of the session in terms of getting a different perspective. Part of that different perspective comes from him not feeling nagged or demanded upon, but also he was hearing it from a different place than he’s been able to hear it from.

Because we’re running short on time, I’m going to move on. I suggest that you all watch the rest of the video without me. I’ll give you a quick summary of what happened.

The video moves ahead at this point to a later part in the session, when Pete and I were helping them to develop a foundation of more openness and more honesty, and to understand that one of the contributions that he makes to the jealousy is his evasive answers to her very gutsy, honest questions.

At times, she’ll ask him, “Are you thinking of her, or do you miss her?” In fact, he does miss her a bit, and he’s not completely 100% through. He did have a strong attachment to his ex-wife, and the fact that he can’t say to her, “Yes, I do miss her,” is also

getting in the way of their ability to build a stronger and more secure foundation.

He hedges and he doesn't answer her with a full truth. When he doesn't answer her with the full truth, she picks up on that intuitively and that also contributes to her insecurity. At the end of this, she's encouraging him to be more honest with her. She says to him, "I'd much rather prevent than to cure." In other words, I'd much rather hear the honesty than have to repair lies and deception that have gone on.

Pete has a lovely line in there, which I sometimes use with couples. He says, "The truth can hurt, but it is the lies that leave scars." That is certainly the case in so many couples that we see. Often they have lied and sometimes they have lied in terms of what I call felony lies.

**Felony lies** are the lies that really significantly abuse the history that the two people had with each other. It might be lying about having unprotected sex with multiple partners or with prostitutes and endangering the partner's health.

Huge felony lies are those that have to do with challenging the other person's sanity. The more that they ask if there's someone else or if they are seeing someone, not only do they say no, but they say, "You're crazy" or "how could you be so crazy?" Repeatedly, over a period of time, they challenge the other person and tell them that they're nuts or insane.

There's also a group of lies that fall into the category of exposing kids to the partner in the affair, and helping the kids develop a relationship with the new person before the spouse even knows about it. There are things like the Arnold Schwarzenegger situation where somebody has a child with someone else and doesn't tell the partner.

When we're asked by our clients to work on lies and betrayal I think it is crucial to identify the types of lies you are seeing. Knowing how to assess the lies distinguishes you from being just a technician or a behaviorist and elevates you to being an artist and a very skilled therapist who can help locate accountability in each partner.

It means pushing the developmental edge for each partner. Doing that will take skill and incisiveness at the beginning of treatment with an infidelity couple, because one or both of them are deceiving themselves that the problem was caused by the other person.

One of the ways that I think about it is creating a culture of courage and candor. How do we create that culture, and how do we help the couple create a culture where they can tolerate and handle a level of honesty that they haven't been able to handle in their relationship before?

You'll be learning a lot more this year about courage, and about the process of developing emotional muscle. We will focus on what it really takes for partners to have the guts to tell the truth. Ideally, a couple develops that emotional muscle before they have to deal with the really unpleasant hard stuff.

Also, we will focus on what it takes for partners to hear the truth. Hearing the truth non-defensively means they must do some significant self-assessment and honestly acknowledge areas of weakness, areas of vulnerability, and areas where maybe they have not been the best partner to someone else.

In our book, *Tell Me No Lies*, my husband and I coined the term "**lie invitee**." The lie invitee is the partner behind the scenes who over time really encourages and orchestrates deception. They're the partners who are unwilling or unable to listen to the truth.

Most partners like this are completely unaware that they're invoking lies, and some don't have the level of self-development to stop it. When somebody hears a truth from their partner, they may go into a martyr position, or they may begin to blame or they may give the other the cold shoulder. All of those behaviors initiate deceptive patterns.

This is part of our assessment at the beginning of treatment. Identifying the "lie invitee" pattern means skillful confrontation will be necessary. It means describing to a couple what it is they've been doing that has created this chronic pattern of deception that is so insidious and corrosive to their bond.

I hope that most of you saw the video that I sent out on the six types of confrontation. If not, you can see it at [CouplesInstitute.com/confrontation](http://CouplesInstitute.com/confrontation). On that video, I talk about six main types of confrontation that you can use that go all the way from a very soft confrontation or an empathic one, up to the hard and tough confrontations that are designed to create anxiety or discomfort. But they're still done so skillfully that the person isn't going to get angry and quit therapy with you.

You will circumscribe their issues in a way that holds up a mirror to identify their role in the deceptive/stifling pattern. At the end of the handout slides I've attached, there's a slide about a particular infidelity case of mine. This couple was in crisis after the wife discovered a gift that her husband had bought for another woman.

In the very first session, he said:

*She was mad. I said I'd break it off, but after a few weeks, I thought, "This is silly. I want a divorce, so why does it make any difference what I do? So I was starting to lie more and more. She was suspicious and I just kept adding one lie on top of the other."*

When I first hear something like this, I really want to know what type of lies went on in this system. I want a better window into what I'm working with in terms of the person who has been lying. You can have lies of omission and you can have lies of commission.

- You can have a lot of lies that come out of somebody being conflict avoidant and evasive, or you can have very deliberate lies.
- You can have the person who's lying and deceiving him or her self, or lying purposefully designed to deceive the other.
- You can have lies that are meant to protect and maintain the attachment, and lies that are definitely abusive to the attachment.

I often ask, "I'd like to know about the lies that you believed were no big deal and also about which were the worst lies to you."

He tells me that he was first going to prostitutes and he convinced himself that he wasn't betraying the marriage, because he didn't have any emotional connection with the prostitutes. He talked himself out of believing it was a betrayal and that he really wasn't going outside the marriage.

I know this is a guy who's able to deceive himself pretty easily, but then he also told me that he said things to his wife like "You're making stuff up and you're a crazy person." That's one of the felony lies, so I wanted to know how long it had gone on, because that gives me more of a window into him.

It turned out that it was spread out over a year. Because he traveled a lot, there was a long period of time where he was telling her that she was crazy, while she was trying to figure out what was going on.

Often the process of confrontation involves first confronting the lower level lie. It might be conflict avoidance or the self-deception in the lie. However, confronting the destructiveness of the felony lies is crucial.

When I'm working with someone who has repetitively told such significant felony lies, as in this case, I want this partner to leave the first session with a sense of anxiety. I want them to feel some anxiety about whether they are serious about therapy. I don't want to just spin my wheels working with somebody. I want to know if they're serious and are going to do the work.

I built towards the last confrontation throughout our two-hour session. I ended that session by saying to the husband, "If you come back, I'm going to be asking you to come clean in a way that you've never been honest before. Really lay the facts on the table."

To the wife who was also a lie invitee, I said, "If you come, it means I will be confronting you. I'll be asking you to stop jumping in and really listen. I'll be asking you to say things differently than you've said them in the past."

Then I said that I wouldn't schedule another appointment with them at that point. I challenged each of them to go away and think hard about whether or not they wanted to come back.

I said, "I want each of you separately to make an independent decision about whether you want to go ahead with what I'm talking about. There will be excruciating moments ahead, and it will be very different from how you've related to each other in the past. So I would like each of you separately to decide and separately to call me and let me know."

I left each of them sitting with significant tension and the need to do some self-examination to decide whether or not they wanted to

participate in therapy. I'm not recommending that as an ending for lots of cases, because it's not necessary for lots of cases.

The hardest couples to work with are those where you have somebody who's an extensive lie invitee paired with somebody who's done a lot of felony lying. It's going to be hard work disentangling all that and resolving what's gone on in a relationship like that.

I thought I'd end teaching in a minute, and I'll open it up for comments and questions. I wanted to end with a very short poem that my mother found for me when I was writing our book. She had actually put this in a book of poetry that she was collecting when she was young. In a much more eloquent way, it said a lot of what I've been saying today.

The poem goes like this:

*Your way of saying things is strange.  
Your fluent phrases twist and change.  
As wind bewildered waters do,  
And half is false and half is true.  
But how shall I find out what you mean,  
With true and false to choose between.  
Or how remember to be wise,  
Hating your truth and loving your lies?*

I appreciate your joining me on the call today. Our next lesson will be "Recognizing Developmental Progress: Using the Inches and Openings Effectively."