

Lies deadlier than the truth

By Ruth Ostrow

I HAVE had a feisty response to the column I wrote a couple of weeks ago about being authentic with friends. I was bombarded with mail from people who wanted to discuss the necessity of honesty in all instances. Or otherwise put: When is it okay to lie?

As one reader argued in response to the point I made about driving around the block to get rid of unwanted guests: "What really is the harm of telling a lie to a friend to save their feelings? White lies can often be a compassionate solution."

Another said: "It is best to use this criteria: Only tell people what is best for them, not best for you. If it serves them, then be honest. If it doesn't, then leave it out. It is pointless to hurt someone just to soothe your own conscience." While I take the point, the letter made me laugh, as it reminded me of a list someone once sent me entitled Most Frequent Lies Told, or some such thing.

There were the black lies, which are out-and-out untruths told to protect one's own behind and are usually concerned with fidelity. Included were gems such as: "I'll call you"; "I've never felt this way about anyone"; "My spouse and I lead separate lives"; "I've only slept with maybe 10 lovers my entire life"; "You're the only one I have sexual fantasies about"; "Relax, she/he is just a friend"; "Come on in and we'll just cuddle for a few minutes"; "Oh, that mark on my neck! A cat bit me"; and "No, I'm not having an affair".

The white lies - told allegedly to protect someone else's behind - included: "Of course I'm not bored with you"; "Of course I'm listening to what you're saying"; "I love that dress on you"; "I think that your career is as important as mine"; "No you don't have bad breath"; and "You don't look fat at all".

Then there were examples of grey lies, which is where someone simply omits to tell you something they deem unnecessary to the situation or which may cause pain - usually to themselves. Which is what my second reader thought acceptable behaviour. He argues that you don't tell people anything that will cause them unnecessary stress, such as the interchange: "We must have coffee some time!" "Sorry, I can't.. I don't like you enough."

Although I agree with him that tact is a kind and intelligent policy, once you start being unauthentic you can justify any fib. Take this true scenario. I once went out with a man who used to vacuum the bed every time we had sex. He claimed to be allergic to hair. In fact, I discovered later that he was a little bit married.

When I confronted him on what I'd found out, he was unfazed, claiming that he hadn't actually lied to me. He had simply failed to tell me something that he considered hurtful at the time. And anyway, he was allergic to cat hair. In my reader's eyes, this little grey lie could possibly be a courageous and thoughtful act.

Or take this scenario. A man is late home from work. His wife confronts him, asking if he's having an affair with someone in his office. "No," he says, passionately. He is not having an affair with someone in his office.

He omits to tell her he's having an affair with someone from someone else's office.

It's surprising how many men I talked to thought this was a grey lie. "Well, he was being factual," sniffed one male friend, alerting me to the fact that some men place great significance on the semantics of a fib.

It also alerted me to the fact that lying is always a very grey area anyway because the people we mostly lie to are ourselves. According to psychologists, most of us spend our lives denying our true feelings. "I'm okay" is the commonest lie any of us tell.

What I was trying to say in my original column was exactly this. Self-deception is the worst of all offences. And all lies to other people, including unauthentic friendships, ultimately stem from it.

Once we're clear on where we stand with ourselves regarding friends, lovers and the various issues that come up, then we have the clarity to judge what to say to them.

And as far as what to say, although I agree that it's cruel to hurt people, it is also arrogant to harness the truth and try to judge what another person can handle or cope with.

I still maintain honesty is the best policy. After all, some of life's greatest lessons come as home truths delivered tactlessly by our closest friends.

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