I've been cheating — Tell my partner? [1]

Alice,

I've been with my boyfriend for nearly four years and, while we may have our occasional disagreements, our relationship is great — my boyfriend is sweet, understanding and caring. I am also very attracted to him. Our sex life is wonderful and he is attentive to my every need, both physically and emotionally. However, despite the fact that I am very happy in this relationship, I have cheated on him a few times. I've never slept with anyone else, but I have gone out on dates with other guys and even made out with a few. It's not like I don't love my boyfriend, I just like the thrill of being with a new guy. He is my first boyfriend, and I'm worried that I'll never be able to be in a fully committed relationship, even when I'm married. How can I stop cheating on my wonderful boyfriend? Also, should I tell my unknowing boyfriend that I have cheated on him? I think you're great, Alice, and I would really appreciate your advice.

Thanks!

Answer

Dear Reader,

Your cheatin' heart: What to do? People may cheat for a range of reasons, whether it's one time or repeatedly. Some individuals use techniques to help them stay faithful in the future, while others negotiate relationships that may not be monogamous. The impact of a partner learning about cheating that has occurred also varies from relationship to relationship. Ultimately, whether or not you tell him is up to you. Speaking with a mental health professional individually or as a couple may be beneficial in helping you decide how to move forward.
You may find it comforting to know that you’re not alone when it comes to infidelity in a relationship; in fact, it’s quite common. One study shows that two to four percent of married individuals disclosed having sex with someone other than their partner within the past year, and cheating may occur in 20 to 25 percent of marriages throughout their entire course. Of course, infidelity also occurs in non-married partnerships. Research indicates that individuals in non-married relationships may have higher rates of infidelity than those who are married. Interestingly, cheating also may vary seasonally, with the biggest increase occurring during the summer.

No matter the reason or the season, when it comes to telling your boyfriend about your infidelity, there are a number of scenarios that could play out. It may be helpful to keep in mind that if you choose to not tell him, it’s possible he may learn about your cheating by way of a third party or some other source. Here are some additional considerations:

- **If you decide not to tell him:** This may result in sparing his feelings, and, by not telling him, you may avoid having to experience the pain of him finding out. Sometimes, if a person chooses to keep infidelity secret, the cheating may have no impact on the relationship. Other times, however, keeping mum about the infidelity may contribute to decreased feelings of closeness between partners. It’s also key to note that, if you choose to not tell him, it’s possible he’ll find out some other way. This may be more traumatic and shocking than finding out from you personally. This may negatively impact the relationship, as well as each partner’s well-being.

- **If you decide to tell him:** Many people find relief in being honest and no longer having to keep their cheating secret, despite the pain and embarrassment involved in telling their partner. In the best cases, disclosing infidelity to a partner may allow a couple to have beneficial conversations that help address whatever motivated the cheating and to solidify future commitment to each other. Unfortunately, a positive outcome is in no way guaranteed. It may to be best to prepare for the partner to react negatively, and for the chance that the relationship may end once the secret’s out.

You may find it helpful to consider seeking support from a mental health professional individually as you decide what you’d like to disclose to your partner. If you do decide to share this info with your partner, it may also be useful for you to seek out couples counseling. A mental health professional can help you and your partner collaborate to build a shared understanding of why the infidelity occurred, as well as make future decisions on your relationship. They may also be able to provide a space for you both to actively listen to each other, develop stronger communication strategies, consider forgiveness, and re-build trust, if that’s of interest to you both.
In order to stop cheating in your relationships (be it in this relationship or a future relationship), it may be helpful to try to understand the root causes of why you feel compelled to cheat in the first place. You mentioned your worry that perhaps cheating indicates that you may never feel able to fully commit to one partner even if you feel truly happy with them and that this is your first relationship. Your cheating could reflect a desire to explore your options — to not “settle down” before you’ve had a chance to see what’s out there. A need that goes unfulfilled in a relationship is also sometimes implicated in the desire to cheat, though you mention that you feel your boyfriend does indeed meet many of your needs.

For some, the desire to be with more than one person never goes away. People handle these feelings in different ways. Some choose not to act on them, either working through or tolerating such desires without acting on them. Some use techniques when they feel tempted, such as reaching out to a trusted friend for social support or focusing on the long-term consequences of cheating. Others opt for an agreement with their partner that some activity outside of the primary relationship is permissible (lots of trust and communication is key for this to work). For more information on relationships with these types of arrangements, check out Should we have an open relationship? [2]

Whatever you choose to do (either telling your boyfriend or not), exploring why you’ve cheated may help relieve some of the stress you’re feeling about your future ability to commit. Taking time to reflect on your options and relationship will likely help you come to a decision that meets the needs for you and your partner.

Alice!
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