

How Honest Are Couples, Really?

A Reader's Digest poll reveals the secrets men and women hide.

BY ROBERT KIENER

An Ottawa wife, tempted to have an affair with a friend, keeps her feelings hidden from her husband. A White Rock, B.C., husband decides to withhold his premarital sexual history from his spouse. A Smiths Falls, Ont., housewife, nervous that her husband will find out what she paid for a new blouse, hides the price tags.

Do these lies, white lies and cover-ups sound familiar to you? If they do, you're not alone.

When it comes to building a strong and healthy relationship, say marriage counsellors, husbands and wives should remember that honesty is the best policy. But as every couple knows, that's easier said than done. With nearly four of every ten marriages ending in divorce, we wondered how honesty was faring in the Canadian marriage. So we polled and talked to over 1,000 husbands and wives from St. John's, Nfld., to Vancouver. We asked them what they hide from each other and what they tell.

This is what we discovered.

Who's More Open, Men or Women?

When it comes to talking about the state of their marriage, wives do most of the talking—no surprises there. When we asked “When problems arise in your marriage, who is more likely to start talking about them?” 75 percent of the wives surveyed said they were, versus just 34 percent of the husbands.

Interestingly, however, only 56 percent of the men think their wives speak first. Why the difference? “Sometimes men may think they've talked about their problems with their wives when they haven't,” explains Vancouver-based marriage educator and therapist Bill Dyck. “It's harder for men to put feelings into words and think in terms of ‘relationship.’”

Once couples do begin talking about their problems, things seem to go smoothly. Eighty percent said they felt they reached a decision that they could both “live with” or “stayed calm and reasonable” when they talked. Eight percent, however, said they “got into a heated argument,” and six percent said they “shut down”

while talking because they got frustrated. Happily, less than one percent indicated that they resorted to violence.

What Can't Couples Talk About?

While women have long complained that their men don't talk enough, our poll shows men are just bursting to talk about matters deeper than sports, politics or money—they just don't know how.

Listen to men on sex: 43 percent of the husbands said they wished they could talk about their sex life with their spouse. Marilyn Boyd, executive director of the University of Winnipeg's Interfaith Marriage and Family Institute, explains: "This doesn't surprise me. Men are not taught to be communicators when they are growing up. It's a skill they have to learn."

But men have lots more than sex on their minds. Surprisingly, 38 percent of our husbands wished they could ask their wife to be more affectionate. "That's a fascinating result," says Dyck. "Men may think, I'm not supposed to need cuddling, because that's the way they were raised. But here they are asking to be touched, to be held. It's hard for many men to admit this."

As for the wives who were polled: 35 percent said they wished they could ask their husband to be more affectionate, and 38 percent said they wished they could talk to their spouse about sex.

Forty-two percent of both husbands and wives wished they could talk openly with their spouse about spiritual matters. "This reinforces the notion that a lot of people today feel an emptiness with regard to spirituality and values and would like to talk to their partner about that," says Sue Johnson, executive director of the Ottawa Couple and Family Institute.

Nearly half of the men and women wished their spouse "would ask me questions about myself."

"This result shows there's a great opportunity for many couples to begin communicating by asking questions," says Robert Glossop, the Ottawa-based Vanier Institute of the Family's executive director of programs. And our poll showed that they have plenty to talk about: 75 percent said they view their spouse as their best friend.

While some things are hard to discuss, others come up all too often. We asked people if there was anything they couldn't budge their spouses on. "Being less messy" is the most nagging topic, with a whopping 46 percent of women (and 26 percent of men) hounding their partners about messiness. The next most nagging topics fall under the statements "Please lose weight" and "Stop criticizing me." Says Ingrid Eisermann, a therapist with Catholic Family Services in Toronto:

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“It’s important to remember that criticizing is not communicating. It’s a mistake many spouses make.”

What Are Our Most-Kept Secrets?

We asked respondents if they have ever kept something secret from their spouse? Yes, said 41 percent of the men and 42 percent of the women.

What’s the most frequently hushed-up issue? How much we paid for something. This sin of omission is committed by 37 percent of the wives and 30 percent of the husbands who have ever kept a secret. “That’s a telling number,” says Glossop. “Money is a major stress point in many marriages.” Adds Boyd, “Money is a metaphor for power, and lying about it suggests it’s also a taboo subject for many couples.” Interestingly, married Canadians from upper-income households are more likely (36 percent) than those in low-income households (26 percent) to keep secret what they paid for something.

One of the saddest survey findings: Of the men who have kept a secret, ten percent have concealed a failure at work. “Men’s egos are tied up in their work,” says Marilyn Belleghem, a Burlington therapist with the Canadian Registry of Marriage and Family Therapists. “When they feel they haven’t met society’s expectations, when they can’t be the hero, their pride is hurt.”

Last but not least, seven percent of the women who admit to keeping secrets from their husband explain that it was “damage to the car” that caused them to lie. (Insert your own joke here.)

Does Your Spouse Know About Your Prior Love Life?

It’s normal to be curious about your partner’s sexual past. How much do couples tell?

Asked if their spouse knows all the details about past loves, a remarkably similar 53 percent of the women and 50 percent of the men said yes. Of the men, another 39 percent said their wife only knows some things, either because she has not pressed for the whole story (27 percent) or because he’s only prepared to share a certain amount (12 percent). (The women’s figures are slightly lower.) Only nine percent of the men and eight percent of the women say their partner knows nothing of their previous passions.

Does it matter? “It depends on how this information is used,” explains Nicholas Cooney, a therapist with the University of Calgary Family Therapy Program. “Is it respected and cherished, or can it be used in an argument as an attack or a put-down? Knowledge is power in relationships.” Belleghem adds: “Telling all may



not always be a great idea. If we don't have certain parts of our life that are private, we tend to lose a sense of ourself as an individual."

Outside crushes pop up even in the happiest unions, and 28 percent of the men and 18 percent of the women have kept secret the fact that they felt attracted to another person. Six percent of the men, versus two percent of the women, admitted to having an extramarital affair and not confessing their transgression to their spouse. Also, 16 percent of the men do not broadcast their habit of viewing risqué material on the Internet.

Do Couples Share Their Dreams?

We wondered how many husbands and wives shared their fantasies and aspirations. Nearly one in five (19 percent) told us they cherish a secret dream but do not talk about it with their spouse. "This is a very sad result," says Cooney. "If you are not living your dream, and if you don't feel emotionally safe enough with your partner to tell him or her your dream, what kind of life and relationship do you have?"

Over one in three (38 percent) of the silent dreamers, especially those over 55, yearn to travel with their spouse. One in seven (14 percent) who admit to a secret dream want to travel alone. There were several other secret dreams that loomed large in our survey: starting over in a different career (17 percent); living somewhere else (17 percent); and adopting a child (six percent).

Why don't we talk about these dreams? "Perhaps these couples have the feeling that their spouse will be threatened by their dreams," says Boyd.

What About an Easy Way Out?

We asked people to confess if they ever wished to wake up in the morning and suddenly...just not be married anymore. Fifteen percent (16 percent of the women and 14 percent of the men) said yes.

Most experts we talked to thought this reflected one fact: Marriage is hard work. Says Cooney, "I see it as a wake-up call for husbands and wives, telling them it's time to pay attention to their marriage."



“That confession doesn’t necessarily mean those respondents don’t want to be married anymore,” believes Ingrid Eisermann. “It may simply indicate that these people recognize something in their marriage that they want to change.”

For Glossop, it’s the 85 percent who didn’t admit to waking up and wanting an easy out that is intriguing. “There’s a lot more positive than negative here,” he

explains. “Nevertheless, that 15 percent of married Canadians may be an accurate reflection of the relatively high proportion of marriages that are in distress.”

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So, is it important to be completely honest in your marriage? “Tell everything. Secrets can destroy a marriage,” says a husband happily married for more than half a century. A wife married 11 years says, “A husband and a wife need their own space, and that includes their own secrets.”

Two different marriages. Two different points of view. And where do the experts come down? “It is largely a matter of discretion,” says Cooney. “There’s no need to tell your spouse everything to have a good marriage.” Boyd believes that “honesty is great, but watch out for being totally, ruthlessly honest. If I ask my husband, ‘Honey, does this dress make me look fat?’ I’m not necessarily looking for total honesty. Couples have to distinguish between what is essential and what isn’t.”

Sue Johnson, who has worked with hundreds of couples, thinks that both husbands and wives “need to be emotionally present in the relationship” before they can truly open up to each other. “Each partner has to feel safe and close with the other before real communication can begin.”

Perhaps the first step to achieving that is trying harder to find out what your spouse is really thinking.

Our poll was conducted by Ipsos-Reid via telephone from October 29 to November 10, 2002. The margin of error is 2.7 percent. The respondents were 1,310 married people, age 18 and over, with approximately the same number of male and female respondents.

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How’s the communication in your marriage?

Try our quiz developed for Reader’s Digest by John Gottman, a professor of psychology at the University of Washington and author of “The Relationship Cure.” [Take the quiz now](#)

A SECRET THAT SHOOK THEIR WORLD

After 20 years of marriage, Sally* figured that she knew just about everything there was to know about her husband, Tim*. Originally from New Brunswick, Tim made a living trapping in the northern Alberta wilderness while Sally homeschooled their four children. Life was good, and the family prospered. Five years ago, however, Tim decided to tell his wife a secret that would change their lives.

Tim: When Sally and I got married, we wanted to make a new start. Both of us had been married before, so we agreed that it was best to put our pasts behind us.

Sally: And that's the way we lived until five years ago, when Tim came to me with some startling news.

Tim: I told Sally that almost 40 years ago, when I was 21, I had been engaged to a girl who had given birth to a boy. Our relationship ended, and my son was to be raised by his maternal grandparents. I had never seen or heard from him or his mother since.

I felt it was time to tell Sally and our kids, who were mostly grown up, that the father they looked up to had made some mistakes in his past. Also, for some strange reason, I had an inkling he might show up sooner or later. Sure enough, two years ago, my brother called and told me a young man had called him trying to locate me. It was my son. It turns out he hadn't been raised by his grandparents. Rather, he had been adopted and raised by a couple in New Brunswick.

Last year Rick* and I spent ten days together. He's 38 and is no longer my long-lost son.

Sally: If we had not had such a strong relationship, a secret like this could have weakened it. I can understand why Tim kept it to himself. But I'm glad he told me when he did.

* Not their real names.