

Anxiously Engaged

Supplemental Lesson

Disclosing Personal Issues

Introduction

Many of us have issues, struggles, and mistakes that are part of our past—these difficulties are part of what has helped shape us into who we are today. Sometimes our difficulties are issues we have overcome and sometimes they are issues with which we are still grappling. When we are in a serious relationship and planning to marry, it is often hard to know what we should and shouldn't disclose to our potential spouse. This lesson strives to help you navigate this topic.

Our Past

Healthy intimate relationships do not start with emotional intimacy; instead, they progress over time. As we are first getting to know each other, we often do activities together and learn facts about each other. As we spend more time together, we get to know each other by talking and sharing our ideas, beliefs, and opinions. Over time as our relationship deepens and we more fully trust each other, we share our goals and our hopes and dreams. As we begin discussing a future together, we also share our concerns, our weaknesses, our fears, our struggles, and past trauma. This sharing increases both the vulnerability and emotional intimacy in our relationship. While it can be frightening to share difficult things with our partner, as we do, we become closer as a couple.

Activity #1:

Discuss the following questions together

1. In general, how comfortable are you sharing things with me from your past?
2. Are there things I could do to make it easier for you to share with me?



The “golden rule” of disclosure

At a BYU-I fireside, Elder Neal Anderson spoke of the importance of “complete honesty [and] unselfish humility” in our relationships. Together please read the following quote from this fireside and then discuss the questions in Activity 2.

*“As you progress in your dating to seriously considering sharing your lives together, you share your most private thoughts, your dreams, and your fears. You share who you are, who you have been, and who you want to become...If you struggle with pornography or have struggled in the past, a person considering you as an eternal companion deserves to know about your challenge and how you have faced it. If you have had difficulty with other addictions, keeping the law of chastity, lying or stealing, humility and honesty urges that you give to the person you love the opportunity to spiritually and prayerfully weigh the choices of going forward...**A thoughtful approach is to ask yourself what you would want to know if you were in the place of your companion, prayerfully preparing to spend your life with someone you love.....**We should remember that no one is perfect. All of us have made mistakes. As the person you love speaks honestly to you, respect the courage that he or she is showing.”* Elder Neil L. Anderson, “Complete honesty, unselfish humility” (emphasis added)¹

Activity #2:

Discuss the following questions together

1. How do you feel about Elder Anderson’s counsel to be transparent about our past and current choices and issues?
2. Are there choices, concerns, or issues from your past that we haven’t had the chance to talk about?
 - a. If so, do you feel ready to talk about them now?
 - b. If not, what can you (and I) do to help you be ready to talk about them?

Transparency as a pattern

The way we communicate our weaknesses and challenges to our partner helps establish a pattern for our future marriage. If we are honest and humble with each other as we are dating or engaged, we are more likely to be honest and humble with each other after we are married. In addition, as we disclose our weaknesses and challenges (past and present) to each other we build trust and connect as a couple. We will feel more secure in the foundation of our relationship if we know that our partner married us knowing our imperfections and our difficult experiences. This is far healthier than believing that our partner wouldn’t have chosen us if he/she knew that we had (for example) smoked weed, struggled with anxiety and depression, had significant financial debt, struggled with pornography, had sex with a past partner, etc. On the other hand, if we try to hide issues from our past, we will be more likely to also be evasive after marriage. This kind of relationship is built on lack of transparency and is more fragile and insecure.



All available information

Marriage is the biggest decision we make in this life and we need all possible information to make the best choice we can. Our past, and the past of someone we are considering marrying, influences our expectations about marriage and, unless we have strong, clear spiritual prompting not to do so, we need to disclose past issues even though it can be incredibly difficult. Furthermore, it isn't up to us to decide how our past issues will or won't affect our partner's feelings about a future with us. To not disclose something because "he wouldn't care about that" or because "I want to protect her" or because "he just wouldn't be able to understand" is not treating our partner as an equal partner. We should disclose our issues and let our partner decide how to proceed.



Elder Anderson taught:

"Something from years in the past might be quickly understood and create no obstacle at all. If the problem or weakness or sin is more recent, it may cause the other to slow down the relationship and allow for more time and more experience in judging whether he or she is ready to move forward. It may require more prayer, discussions with parents or trusted leaders, and more experience with the person you hope to have with you forever."²

Level of disclosure

So how detailed should we be in our disclosures to each other? We should share a general summary of our weaknesses, mistakes, and challenges but not get bogged down in the details. For example, if we have had a sexual relationship with someone in the past, we should disclose a general outline of the relationship but

there is no reason to go into detail about our sexual experiences. To do so would not serve any useful purpose and may only serve to unnecessarily increase hurt and anger for both of us. Talking together about some things, such as abuse we have suffered in our past, can be extra challenging. You may have to figure out what your comfort level is with discussing the abuse you experienced. Some abuse victims actually suffer from PTSD and talking about the experience can make them relive the trauma in their mind. Others feel more comfortable sharing. It is important to at least share that you have experienced abuse. In addition, talking about how you have tried to heal from that abuse would be good to share, as well.



Acceptance and Forgiveness

Hearing our partner share past mistakes and struggles can be difficult too. Sometimes it is hard to understand your partner's choices and past experiences and maybe their experiences are in contrast with your current expectations of them. That said, sharing and understanding each other's past is an opportunity to grow in love, understanding and compassion. As you work to understand your partner better, you may need to summon spiritual strength to offer a forgiving heart. We obviously have agency in how we choose to proceed in our relationship but we are still commanded by our Savior "to forgive one another."³

Being all in

It takes courage to share our past and present mistakes and challenges with someone who is considering sharing their life with us—it makes us vulnerable. This vulnerability is part of being “all in” in marriage.

Jeffrey R. Holland shared the following:

“No serious courtship or engagement or marriage is worth the name if we do not fully invest all that we have in it and in so doing trust ourselves totally to the one we love. You cannot succeed in love if you keep one foot out on the bank for safety’s sake. The very nature of the endeavor requires that you hold on to each other as tightly as you can and jump in the pool together. In that spirit, . . . I want to impress upon you the vulnerability and delicacy of your partner’s future as it is placed in your hands for safekeeping--male and female, it works both ways.”⁴

Activity #3:

Discuss the following questions together

1. Elder Holland counsels that we should “fully invest all that we have” in our marriage. What does it mean to you to be “all in” in marriage?
2. Do you feel that there is anything holding you back from being “all in?”

Activity #4:

If you have new disclosures as a result of this lesson, discuss the following questions together

1. How are you feeling about what I’ve disclosed?
2. How can I best support you in your ongoing journey about what you’ve disclosed?
3. What do we want our boundaries around these issues to be moving for forward?

THE BOTTOM LINE

Even though it can be difficult, it is essential that we disclose our past and current struggles to our potential spouse. Marriage is the biggest decision we make in this life and we need all possible information to make the best decision we can. In addition, this transparency helps establish a pattern of openness and honesty for your future marriage and helps us be “all in.”

Endnotes

- 1 [“Complete honesty, unselfish humility” Neil L. Anderson, 2017](#)
- 2 [“Complete honesty, unselfish humility” Neil L. Anderson, 2017](#)
- 3 [Doctrine and Covenants 64:9](#)
- 4 [“How do I love thee?” Jeffrey R. Holland, 2000](#)