

Ep #131: Breaking Up with Someone You've Been Cheating On



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With Your Host

Dr. Marie Murphy

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Ep #131: Breaking Up with Someone You've Been Cheating On

Hi everyone, I'm Dr. Marie Murphy. I'm a relationship coach, and I help people who are engaging in anything they think counts as infidelity to deal with their feelings, clarify what they want, and make decisions about what they're going to do. One of my clients told me that I was the Better Call Saul of infidelity, and this person meant it as a compliment and I took it as a compliment, and what that means is I help you address all of the delicate matters related to complex infidelity situations, and help you find solutions to ethical quandaries that you are comfortable with. Some of the stuff I help clients with is abstract and cross-cutting, like how do we deal with feeling uncomfortable feelings that we really do not want to feel? But some of what I help clients do is very concrete and strategic. And today we're going to talk about some strategic stuff. Before we get into that, though, let me say that although listening to a podcast can be GREAT, there is a huge difference between listening to this podcast and working with me one on one. So if you're ready to have me as your coach, and have me help you apply the tools and concepts I talk about on the podcast to the specifics of your own life, the first step is to schedule an introductory coaching session with me through my website, mariemurphyphd.com. I can't wait to meet you.

Recently, I realized that although I've talked about breakups on this podcast, and I've talked about whether or not you have to tell someone you've cheated on them on this podcast, I have not specifically addressed the matter of breaking up with someone you've been cheating on. When I'm working with clients who are breaking up with someone they've been cheating on, they often have a lot of questions about how to ensure the person they're breaking up with does not find out about whatever they've been doing on the side. So today I'm going to talk about how you may be able to break up with your partner without them finding out about your cheating.

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Ep #131: Breaking Up with Someone You've Been Cheating On

But before I go any further, I want to make it really clear right now that it isn't always possible to prevent your partner from finding out about what you've been up to in the infidelity department. Sometimes people ask me for the foolproof way to prevent the discovery of their cheating, and I don't know if such a thing exists. If someone is hell-bent on uncovering all of your secrets, they might be able to. Furthermore, if you've already been a little sloppy, and left a trail of evidence that could be interpreted as signs of cheating, it may be unreasonable to hope that your partner won't start to draw some conclusions. If you initiate a breakup, they may start to see some of your past behaviors in a different light, and they may start to suspect that you've had something going on outside of your relationship with them. And if they're determined enough, they may be able to find confirmation of their suspicions. That doesn't mean that you need to be excessively paranoid. It is totally possible to end a relationship without your cheating ever becoming known about, but it does depend on the specifics of your situation.

Also, there are situations in which it really might benefit you to disclose that you've been cheating, or be honest about what you've been doing, rather than trying to keep this a secret, or lying about your behavior if asked. And I don't mean that it might be better for you in any absolute moral sense. I just mean that you may prefer the consequences of telling the truth to the consequences of not telling the truth, or not telling it in a particular way at a particular time. Sometimes dealing with an unpleasant situation in the short term pays dividends in the long-term.

All of that said, there are some things that are within your control when you're breaking up with someone that may help you prevent your infidelity from becoming known about. And if your goal is to get through your breakup without your infidelity being discovered, your best bet is to focus on the things that are within your power to control.

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Ep #131: Breaking Up with Someone You've Been Cheating On

And one of the main things that is in your power to control is the way you execute the breakup process itself. Thus, my primary recommendation is to prepare for your breakup as effectively as possible. This may sound rather obvious, but many people do not effectively prepare for their breakup, for many reasons. We often fear breakups, because we don't want to disrupt other people's lives, or hurt other people's feelings – and because we don't like the idea of the disruption and discomfort WE may experience during the breakup. Also, many of us have not had much practice breaking up with people. It may not be something we have any idea how to execute. On top of that, we may just want to be DONE with the relationship with the person we're breaking up with. We may not WANT to invest any time and energy into breaking up with them – we just may want the whole thing to be over.

I am totally sympathetic to all of that. But even if you're dreading the prospect of a breakup, I encourage you to consider that it may be worth it to invest in having as good of a breakup as possible, and with that, I encourage you to cultivate willingness to invest some time and energy into the breakup process. I say more about what you may want to be aware of as you're considering breaking up with someone, and what you can do to prepare for a break up in other episodes, namely, episodes numbers 72, 73, and 118, and I highly recommend that you listen to those episodes if you think you're on the brink of a breakup.

What I want to emphasize today is that although there are great reasons to put some effort into having as good of a breakup as possible under any circumstances, there are additional reasons why you may want to do this if you have been cheating on your partner and you don't want them to find out. Strategically speaking, giving your partner a “good breakup” is one of the best ways to prevent your cheating from becoming an issue.

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Ep #131: Breaking Up with Someone You've Been Cheating On

Now I'm going to tell you what I mean by a "good breakup," and I'm going to tell you why a "good breakup" can help divert attention from your infidelity, but I'm not going to do it in that order. I'm going to do the second thing I just said first.

If we are going to be strategic, and if we want to successfully cover our tracks, it's important to consider what the experience of the person we're breaking up with may be like. And specifically, it's important for us to be aware that when we break up with someone, the person we're breaking up with may be surprised. Or shocked! This may be particularly likely if we have not said anything to our partner about our dissatisfaction with our relationship, or have not said anything to them about our dissatisfaction with our relationship in a long time. If the breakup is truly coming out of the blue, our partner may be totally stunned if we sit them down and say, "Guess what, this isn't working. I don't want to do this anymore."

HOWEVER, even if we have been talking with our partner A LOT about how unhappy we are in our relationship with them, and even if we've actively been discussing splitting up, it may still come as a surprise to them to hear us say, "It's really over." And that isn't necessarily because we haven't clearly conveyed our position to them, perhaps repeatedly. Even if we have very explicitly said, "I don't know if I want to be in this relationship anymore" many times, our partner may not have actually thought that we would ever really leave them. And thus, it's possible that they might totally be taken off guard by something that we think they should have been able to see coming.

And even if our partner isn't particularly surprised by our announcement that we want to bring our time with them to a conclusion, they may not LIKE the idea of the relationship ending. At all.

Ep #131: Breaking Up with Someone You've Been Cheating On

They may not WANT us to break up with them. And they may feel hurt and rejected and scared and lonely and weird and all sorts of other things.

And their reaction to feeling shocked or stunned or hurt and rejected or scared or lonely or ALL OF THOSE THINGS AND THEN SOME may be to reject the idea of you ending the relationship. And this can take many forms. They might say no, I don't want this relationship to end, we need to figure out a way to stay together. But they might also start to wonder if you've been cheating on them. Some people are pretty sure that the only reason why their partner would want to leave them is because they've found someone else to love. There are lots of reasons why people think this, but I'm not going to delve into them today. For today's purposes, we just want you to be prepared for the possibility that your partner might come to this conclusion when you initiate a breakup with them.

That's WHY it's so important to invest some time and energy into preparing for a "good breakup." If someone suspects you of cheating, you denying it vehemently may not do much to convince your partner that their suspicions are unwarranted. But if you can SHOW your partner – or put differently, convince your partner – that the breakup is about your relationship and only your relationship, you may be in a much better position to throw them off the scent of what you've been up to.

Now, what exactly is a "good breakup"? A "good breakup" can mean many things. I want to make it clear that I am not suggesting that there is ONE definition of what a "good breakup" is or entails, and I am not suggesting that there is a fixed set of rules that have to be followed to ensure that you have a "good breakup." In saying "good breakup,"

Ep #131: Breaking Up with Someone You've Been Cheating On

in using that kind of language, what I want to suggest is that it's possible to have a breakup that isn't awful. It's possible to make the breakup experience better rather than worse. It's possible to get good things out of a difficult experience. I am NOT suggesting that there are any absolute definitions of what a good breakup is – or what a “bad” breakup is.

But with that in mind, today I will talk about four components of what could be considered a “good breakup.”

Number ONE: You are clear on what you want in terms of the future of your relationship with your partner, and you convey this to them clearly and directly – and consistently, if need be. As I talk about in the other episodes I have about breakups, you want to be really clear about wanting to end your relationship if you are going to successfully end your relationship. Especially if you want to break up with someone without them finding out about what you're cheating, you want to make your breakup as efficient as possible. And being unsure of what you want, or unable to consistently communicate what you want, is not going to make for an efficient breakup. Don't drag out the pain and drama for your partner by being unclear or inconsistent about your intentions.

TWO: You provide a reasonably detailed explanation for why you want to end the relationship. This is where we start to get a little strategic. If you want to give your partner a clear message that you are breaking up with them for reasons that only have to do with them, and your relationship with them, it may behoove you to provide a bit more detail about why you want to leave the relationship than you absolutely have to. Technically, you never HAVE to give anyone a particular amount of information about why you don't want to be with them anymore. The essential point, if you're breaking up with someone, is that you want to

Ep #131: Breaking Up with Someone You've Been Cheating On

leave the relationship. Beyond that, you don't HAVE to provide any more information. You don't have to JUSTIFY your decision to leave a relationship. It is also crucial to keep in mind that no matter how much explanation you provide for why you want to leave a relationship, your partner may never be satisfied. They may NEVER like your reasons for wanting to leave. They may never understand. No matter how much insight you give them into what you've been thinking, they may never get it.

BUT, it is also true that sometimes having a certain amount of insight into their partner's reasons for ending the relationship really does help people make sense of what's going on. And for some people, feeling like they have enough insight into why you're breaking up with them means they're less likely to search frantically for possible explanations as to why you're doing this thing to them to them that they don't like and don't understand.

So you may want to go to extra lengths to satisfy your partner's desire to know why you want to end the relationship. You might want to provide a more robust initial explanation for why you want to leave the relationship than you might be inclined to. You might want to answer a few more of their questions about why you want to leave than you'd be inclined to. This doesn't mean you don't draw the line somewhere – of course you do – but you might be strategically generous with your time and explanations for the sake of hopefully getting them to feel satisfied with your explanation of what's happening. You probably want to do your best to give them the message that your breaking up with them is not based on a random whim. You probably want to convey that you have made a well-considered decision that you want to leave your relationship with them.

Ep #131: Breaking Up with Someone You've Been Cheating On

My THIRD recommendation is that you take some time to be present with them as they digest the news you've delivered to them.

By the time you get to the point of being ready to break up with someone, you may be ready to be DONE with the person you're breaking up with. Especially if you have someone, or someoneS on the side, you may SO ready to go and get on with your life. But if you seem like you're in a huge hurry to be done with the person you're breaking up with, they may be pissed off or hurt, or both – and they may start to wonder why you seem to be in such a rush. So even if you really want to say, “We've got to talk, and what I want to tell you is it's over, so bye, gotta go!” or something to that effect, see if you can quell your desire to rush out the door, literally or metaphorically. Again, there's no guarantee that this will satisfy your partner and prevent them from wondering if you might be up to something, but it's good insurance. Remember, the two of you have probably been there for each other emotionally for a long time – and now all of a sudden you're saying that things are changing. It's reasonable for them to need a minute to get used to that idea. And it's kinda reasonable for them to want you to stick around and be there for them as they do so.

One of the crazy things about relationships is that we tend to get into them by mutual agreement, and we tend to do so gradually. We don't go from meeting someone one day to moving in with them the next. Well, sometimes we do. But often, there's a more incremental of testing the waters and escalating commitment by mutual assent. We AGREE to go out to dinner with someone. We AGREE to go home with them. We AGREE to keep seeing them. We agree to move in with them. And so on. With breakups, on the other hand, it can all start to happen all at once, and both people in the relationship don't have to agree that it's happening for it to happen.

[Your Secret Is Safe With Me](#) a podcast by Dr. Marie Murphy

Ep #131: Breaking Up with Someone You've Been Cheating On

And on the one hand, this is just how life goes, and even if it can be tragic, it isn't necessarily a problem that relationships can be ended by one person whenever they want. HOWEVER, if you're trying to make it through your breakup without your partner finding out about your cheating, you may want to be sensitive to how jarring a sudden breakup might be for your partner. They may have been thinking that everything in your relationship was FINE, or better than fine, and then all of a sudden you sit them down and tell them it's over. You may want to strategically attend to their experience of this abrupt transition.

Even if the transition isn't abrupt, even if they could have reasonably seen it coming, it may still be a really big deal to them. And being willing to be there for them as they digest what's happening may soothe them in a way that ends up benefitting you a lot.

FOUR: You may want to extra-emphasize what you've appreciated about your relationship. A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down, after all. And you can do this in conjunction with making it clear why you're leaving it. Sometimes people are afraid that if they tell their partner what they love about them or have valued about their relationship with them, their partner will use that against them and say, "Well these are all the reasons why we can't break up." But even if your partner DOES say something like that, you can be absolutely clear for them and for you that appreciating what you've shared does not mean you have to stay in the relationship forever.

Here's the strategic reason for extra-emphasizing what you've appreciated with your partner. You don't want them to get the idea that you haven't cared about them at all, and you're just throwing them away. You don't want them to be outraged by what seems like your callousness. Being really clear about what you have appreciated about

Ep #131: Breaking Up with Someone You've Been Cheating On

them and enjoyed with them can help you avoid giving the impression that you're an insensitive jerk who deserves to have a little pain inflicted on them in return.

Now, having given you these recommendations, I want to make three things abundantly clear. The first is that the things I've just talked about are not inherently nefarious things to do. And even if you do these things partially because you want to try to prevent your partner from suspecting you might be cheating – and thus, perhaps scrutinizing your behavior in ways you don't want them to – you can also do all of these things sincerely. Strategy and sincerity are not mutually exclusive! And to that point, sometimes not wanting our partner to find out about our cheating ends up being a great motivator to break up with someone a lot more thoughtfully than we might have otherwise. And that can be really beneficial for everyone involved.

The second thing I want to make absolutely clear is that no matter what you do, no matter how you execute your breakup, you don't have total control over your partner's response. No matter what you do, they could get the idea in their head that you've been cheating and decide to have you followed, or have your devices bugged, or whatever. By offering the suggestions that I'm offering, I'm helping you think about how you can take responsibility for what you have the power to control, and be a little bit strategic. But you do not have ultimate control over how your partner responds to any of this.

And that brings me to my third point which is, if you think your safety is in danger, all of the recommendations I'm making today may not matter one bit, or at least, not very much. If you are concerned about your safety, go find resources that can help you protect yourself.

Ep #131: Breaking Up with Someone You've Been Cheating On

Okay. I've emphasized the breakup process itself to this point because it really can have a big impact on whether or not your partner suspects you of cheating, and it's a factor that's within your control that so many people don't attend to. But other things matter too.

In addition to preparing for your breakup and executing your breakup in a way that keeps the focus on the relationship with your partner and why you want to end it, here are three other things to keep in mind if you are breaking up with someone you have been cheating on.

ONE: You want to keep your energy in check. If you are thinking about your affair partner all the time, and feeling all kinds of crazy feelings about them, the person you're breaking up with may see this. If you are so excited about being free to pursue a relationship with your affair partner, or so excited to have the freedom to do whatever you want outside of the context of the relationship you've been committed to, your partner may sense this. It's okay to be excited about the new possibilities you're creating for yourself, but you do want to manage this excitement. You don't have to wear it on your sleeve. At least not around your soon-to-be-ex.

Now, some people tell me that their partner never notices ANYTHING they do, so there's absolutely no danger of them sensing a difference in their energy and then suspecting they've been cheating. And to that I say, you might be right. It could be true that your partner is totally checked out of your relationship or totally clueless or totally oblivious to what's going on with you. But it is also possible that they are aware of more than you might think. Even if they have generally been as checked out or oblivious as you think they have been, if the disturbance in the force field is significant enough, they might notice it. So, better safe than sorry. Just play it cool.

Ep #131: Breaking Up with Someone You've Been Cheating On

TWO: Keep a low profile – or perhaps, keep ON keeping a low profile. Many of you are already experts at this, but it's still worth mentioning that you want to cover your tracks as well as you can. Sometimes, when people initiate a breakup with their primary partner, they start to get a little less careful about hiding their other activities. If you want to make it all the way through the breakup without your soon-to-be-ex finding out about what you're doing, you need to stay disciplined with your discretion. This can be annoying if your breakup process lasts longer than you would like! And it's okay to be annoyed, but you don't want to blow your own cover in the 25th mile of the marathon. Stay disciplined about keeping your infidelity activities discreet.

THREE: Prepare for what you will do if your partner DOES ask you if you've been cheating.

If your partner asks you if you have been up to anything that might count as infidelity and you DO have plausible deniability and you plan on lying, you need to be ready to lie. That might sound completely obvious, but some people REALLY want to keep their infidelity a secret, but they also HATE lying. And sometimes when people tell me this, they say, "Okay, so what's the workaround?" And my answer is that there really isn't a workaround. You basically have three options: you can change your thinking about lying. Or you can keep your current thoughts about lying, and lie, and deal with doing something you don't like. Or you can decide that you prefer to be honest, even though that will have certain ramifications. You get to choose.

But if you are as sure as you can be that your partner really couldn't find out about what you've been up to, and you're comfortable with sticking to your story, then I recommend doing what we've already talked about, namely...

[Your Secret Is Safe With Me](#) a podcast by Dr. Marie Murphy

Ep #131: Breaking Up with Someone You've Been Cheating On

Be explicit and direct about what you want – and consistent in your messaging

Be clear about why the relationship isn't working for you and why you want to leave the relationship, offering “the right amount” of detail

Express appreciation for your partner, and show consideration for their feelings

And then, stay the course. If you want the breakup to “work,” so to speak, you have to stick with the process for as long as it takes. Some breakups can be executed pretty quickly. Some can't – or at least some components of them take more time than others.

This is where the possibility that it just might be better for you, in the long run, to simply tell the truth comes in. If your partner is suspicious and determined to talk about their suspicions, and if you really can't plausibly deny what they're asking you about, you might prefer to just come clean. Especially if you're going to have an ongoing relationship with your soon-to-be-ex, it may be really inconvenient and unpleasant to have to insist that your lies are true, even when your soon-to-be-ex doesn't believe you. Sometimes the discomfort that comes with telling the truth is lesser and shorter than the discomfort that comes with keeping your secret by continuing to lie and deceive – or at least, attempt to deceive.

That is not to say that you don't have the option of lying and denying everything, even if you DON'T have plausible deniability. You DO have that option. It is your prerogative to lie and deny whatever you want to. And moreover, there are so many very human reasons why we lie, and it's worth respecting these reasons. So the point I'm making here is not about morality. It's not that lying is an absolute bad, and telling the truth, or some truths, is an absolute good. That's not my point at all. My point

Ep #131: Breaking Up with Someone You've Been Cheating On

is that there are times when lying simply may have more drawbacks than benefits for you, and it can be really helpful to thoroughly assess those benefits and drawbacks before you commit to a particular course of denial or truth-telling.

The final thing that I want to say is that although breakups can be major life events, and in my opinion, they're worth taking seriously and executing as well as we can, we don't have to OVER-emphasize the significance of breakups. Yes, they may be tough. But they don't have to be devastating. They may be difficult, but they don't have to be impossible. We all have the capacity to survive a breakup – whether we initiated it or not – and come out okay. Yes, I know that some people actually don't ever move beyond a breakup they've experienced. That is true. But we all have the CAPACITY to keep going, and keep moving forward in life. It's important to remember that you can get through your breakup, and the person you're breaking up with can too.

If you are on the brink of breaking up with someone you've been cheating on and you want help navigating the specific features of your unique situation, I can help you do that. If you are ready to work with me you can schedule an introductory coaching session through my website, mariemurphyphd.com, and you can also learn about the coaching packages I currently offer through the services page of my website. And of course, I can help you deal with any aspect of your infidelity situation in a way that's truly right for you – the assistance I offer is not limited to helping you approach a breakup.

All right everyone, that's all for today! Thank you all so much for listening. Before I say goodbye, I have a favor to ask of you. If you enjoy listening to this podcast, if you have found it helpful, I would love it if you would head on over to iTunes and give this show a five star rating

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Ep #131: Breaking Up with Someone You've Been Cheating On

and leave a review that says exactly why you find this podcast helpful.

I get many lovely emails from listeners telling me how much they have appreciated this podcast, and I deeply appreciate getting those messages. But I would also appreciate it if you would make your appreciation public in the form of a rating and a review. You can do this anonymously, and it really helps other people who need to hear what I have to say find this podcast. So please consider sharing the love by rating and reviewing the show on iTunes. Thank you so very much.

And with that, I wish you all a good week! Bye for now.