

Ep #130: Implicit Permission to Cheat



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With Your Host

Dr. Marie Murphy

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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. No shame, no blame, no judgments. If you are in the midst of a confounding infidelity situation and you would like my help sorting it out, you can schedule an introductory coaching session with me through my website, mariemurphyphd.com. On the services page of my website you can also find information about the coaching packages I currently offer, as well as my current pricing.

If you have been trying to figure out what you want to do about your infidelity situation for any length of time, and you aren't getting anywhere, now might be a good time to seek out assistance. Sometimes we need HELP to make sense of life's more challenging situations – and sometimes a little help is all that stands between us and moving forward in life in a way that we feel great about. So if you're ready for some relief, get yourself on my calendar and together we will find a way for you to resolve your infidelity situation that you feel great about. I know how easy it is to get stuck in limbo when you don't know what to do about your infidelity situation, and I can help you get out of that limbo.

Okay. Today we're going to talk about implicit permission to cheat. Sometimes, people give their partners implicit permission to cheat. Today we're going to talk about what that can look like, and we're going to talk about how confusing it can be to receive implicit permission to cheat, and what you can do with that confusion – and with the freedom your partner may be giving you.

Here is one example of a situation in which your partner might give you implicit permission to cheat. You and your partner started off as a monogamous couple, but then you started discussing alternate arrangements. And it turned out that although YOU were very

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enthusiastic about the idea of opening your relationship up, your partner really wasn't. But even though your partner decided that THEY didn't want to be non-monogamous, they also could tell that YOU really wanted to be able to have experiences with people other than them. And they love you! They want to be with you, AND they want you to be happy! So they might have said something to you like, "Just do what you want to do, but I don't want to know about it. As long as you keep treating me like I am the best thing that has ever happened to you, just do what you need to do and we won't have a problem."

Here is a second example of a situation in which your partner might give you implicit permission to cheat. You have been having cheating on your partner, and they know about it, and that has strained your relationship with them. Maybe the two of you have even separated or split up. Maybe you're on the brink of divorce. And then all of a sudden your partner, or your almost ex-partner says, "I don't care what you do when you aren't with me, I just want us to be back together again, so as long as you come home to me every night, everything will be okay."

By now you may be questioning the title of this episode, which is "implicit permission to cheat." You may be thinking, "Well, if someone says something along these lines to their partner, aren't they saying that they are allowed to engage in extra-curricular activities, and wouldn't that mean that there isn't any actual cheating involved if the person takes their partner at their word?" Great question.

What sometimes happens when a person is told by their partner something to the effect of, "Do whatever you want, and it's fine with me as long as I don't know about it," is the person questions their partner's sincerity.

Sometimes they don't believe their partner is really okay with them doing whatever they want on the side – rather, they think their partner is just

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trying to keep the relationship together by any means possible.

Sometimes people think their partner's offer is too good to be true. They feel like by taking their partner up on their offer, they would be getting away with something.

And thus, to the person who is being given implicit permission to cheat, it kinda seems like what they would be doing – or perhaps already are doing – does actually count as cheating.

And I think this is due in part – for some people anyway – to the increase in our collective awareness of the option to have a committed relationship that is not monogamous. Or perhaps, to the increased legitimacy of non-monogamous, committed relationships. Yes, I know that not EVERYONE, EVERYWHERE thinks that ethical non-monogamy is a legitimate option, or even AN option. But it's certainly a more visible option than it used to be, for some folks.

And what I've noticed is that people who have done their homework, so to speak, people who have delved into the information that's out there about how to do ethical non-monogamy "well" sometimes have a really hard time believing that they might be able to non-monogamy in a way that deviates from what many experts have said is the right way to do it. More specifically, I've worked with a number of folks who think that if they don't have an explicit agreement with their partner about what exactly they can do with whom and when and where, and if they don't communicate with their primary partner about what they're doing with other people, then something must be wrong, and they must be cheating – or put differently, they must be doing something that they really shouldn't be doing.

And this is so interesting because I think that in general, a lot of voices out there in the ethical non-monogamy world have some pretty great

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things to say about how to “do relationships.” For instance, I have an episode of this podcast with Magenta Brooks about polyamory, and think a lot of what she says is spot-on, and I also have an episode with Susan Wenzel and although the sound quality of that episode turned out terribly, I think Susan has some excellent things to say about how to do open relationships.

But the approaches of many folks in the ethical non-monogamy realm are predicated on the idea that you and your primary partner have an agreement about what you’re going to do with other people that’s a little more specific than “don’t ask, don’t tell.”

Let me be clear that I think that specific agreements can be great, and that I think that a lot of the folks in the ethical non-monogamy world have some GREAT ideas and great suggestions for approaching relationships.

But interestingly, some of what the ethical non-monogamy folks preach leaves some people in a funny place. For instance, if both you and your partner are very much familiar with the ideas of ethical non-monogamy, and you want to do it, but your partner doesn’t, but your partner also says, “I know YOU want this, so YOU can go ahead and do this, but I don’t want to do any form of ethical non-monogamy. I just want you to love me and for us to be together and I want you to do whatever you need to do in order to keep on making US happen.” Is THAT ethical non-monogamy? Some people might say it is, but some might say no, it is not.

More importantly for today’s purposes, if you are really bought into the idea that you and your partner should have a more explicit agreement about what you can and can’t do with other people in order for you to be doing the right thing in your relationship, you may not know what to do if you’re given this kind of a blank check.

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So here's what people SOMETIMES do when their partner tells them, "go out and do whatever you want, just don't let me know about it":

One: ask their partner over and over again if they're really sure that this is okay with them.

Two: ask their partner if they're sure that they don't want to do whatever they want with other people, too.

Three: tell their partner that they really can't feel okay about what they're doing unless they tell them about every intimate exchange they have with someone else.

Four: go to couple's counseling to discuss one or more of the previous three things.

I am totally sympathetic to all of these impulses. If someone tells us, "Hey, I don't want to be non-monogamous, I only want you. But I know you want to have experiences with other people, so go ahead and do that, and I don't mind, as long as I don't know about it," that might seem unbelievably generous. We don't really have a place for this kind of thing in our collective understanding of how committed relationships are supposed to work. In general, we think that couples are supposed to be monogamous. Or, if they aren't monogamous, they're supposed to have a clear, shared understanding of how they do non-monogamy. And we tend to think that if you aren't doing either of those things, if you aren't doing monogamy or an agreed-upon version of non-monogamy, then you're cheating, and that's bad.

So navigating the grey area that gets introduced when your partner says, "I want to be monogamous with you, but you don't have to be monogamous with me as long as I don't know what you're doing" may

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be a little weird.

I'm going to tell you four things I recommend you do to help navigate this kind of grey area.

But before I do, let me be clear about something. I'm assuming, for the purposes of this episode, that you want to stay in your relationship with your primary partner. If you don't, or if you think you might not, then that's a different conversation. These comments are primarily for folks who are as sure as they can currently be that they want to stay in their primary relationship, but also want to have some other adventures on the side. Okay, back to my four recommendations:

One – Ask yourself what you think about your partner's motivations for offering you whatever it is they're offering. Let's go back to the second example scenario I mentioned at the beginning of the episode. You've been cheating on your partner, they know about it and have not been happy about it, and as a result, your relationship has either ended or come close to ending. And now they're saying, "Hey, just come back to me. I don't care what you do, just come back to me." You get to decide what you think about that kind of an offer. Do you think your partner is making this offer because they're genuinely okay with you doing what you want? Or do you think perhaps, that your partner is making this offer – or request – because they're lonely and they don't know how to function without you? Where do you think they might be coming from?

I'm not suggesting that it's possible for you to know your partner's motivations with absolute certainty, and I certainly am not recommending that you assume you know what your partner's motivations are.

But I am suggesting that you take stock of what you THINK is going on with them, and assess your own assessment of what you think is

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happening. Why do you think they're making the offer they're making? And, based on that assessment, are you amenable to what you think their motivation is?

For instance, if you are as sure as you can be that your partner is offering you the opportunity to do whatever you want with whoever you want as long as they come home to you every night because they're desperate to be with you and they don't know how to live without you, the question you have to ask yourself is, do you want to be in a relationship like that? Do you want to be with someone who, as far as you can tell, is desperate to keep you around? Do you want to take advantage of freedom someone you think is giving you out of desperation? You get to decide.

Just for the sake of being absolutely clear, I'm going to say again that the point is not that you can figure out what your partner is thinking with absolute certainty. The point isn't that you can objectively and definitively establish if they're offering you a certain form of freedom out of desperation, or for other reasons. But you still get to assess the situation and make a judgement call about what you are willing to participate in, based on that assessment.

To offer a contrasting example, if you and your partner have a great relationship and you are as sure as you can be that BOTH of you value that relationship and really want it to continue, you may want to consider that your partner really wants you to have what you want. If they're telling you, "Just do what you want to do and as long as we're okay, I'm okay with it," you have to make a call about what you're going to do with a statement like that. Do you believe that they're willingly offering you what they're offering? Or not? Here too, you get to make assessments and judgement calls.

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That brings me to my second, very important suggestion – Get clear on how much you need to hear from your partner before you decide you will take them at their word. Sometimes people are so surprised that their partner is offering them the option to do other things with other people that they don't quite believe their good fortune, so they keep asking their partner over and over again if they're REALLY offering what they're offering. And on the one hand, you may want to make sure that you are really understanding what they are saying, and you're not just imagining things for your own benefit. Fair enough.

But on the other hand, the whole point for your partner may be that they want the whole business to be over and done with. The whole point for your partner may be that they want you to be happy, they want your relationship to continue, and continue to be great, and they don't even want to THINK about what you might be doing outside your relationship, ever. At all. If the two of you have been talking about non-monogamy for any length of time, and they're not interested in it, they may just want the whole non-monogamy thing to go away. But they may not want YOU to go away. So the deal they may have made with themselves is that as long as they get to have you, you can go about your business as long as they don't have to know about it. They may not love this arrangement, but they may like it a lot better than the alternatives they're imagining, so they may just want to make peace with the whole business and then move on with their life.

So if you want constant reassurance from them that it really is okay with them that you get to go out and do whatever else it is you do, and you ASK them for this constant reassurance, you may not be doing anyone a favor. You may never get the reassurance you want, for two reasons. One, seeking reassurance is always a bottomless pit. No one can ever completely reassure us of anything, even if they wanted to. But the other reason is that your partner may not WANT to endlessly reassure you that it's really okay if you go have some fun outside of the

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relationship. They may want to have a short and sweet conversation, and then be done with the matter. Forever.

So how do you know if whatever your partner has said to you truly counts as implicit permission to cheat? Or not-cheat, as the case may be? How do you know if you actually have an agreement in place? Ultimately, you have to decide. You have to make that judgment call.

I will tell you that some people interpret the vaguest of statements as implicit permission to do whatever they want. And other people can hear their partner say, "Go do what you want to do as long as I don't know anything about it" twenty times and still wonder if their partner is really saying what they think they're saying.

So what I want to emphasize is that there's an interesting balance to be struck here. On the one hand, communication is great. And, sometimes people just don't want to talk about something anymore. Or ever! So even though your impulse to seek assurance from your partner that they really are giving you permission to do whatever it is they're giving you implicit permission to do may be driven by a desire to make sure the two of you are on the same page, at some point, you may cross the line into pestering them.

At some point, you are the only one who can decide if what you've been given counts as implicit permission to "cheat" or not. That's "cheat" in quotation marks. Because if you get to this point, is what you're doing cheating?

Now some of you who are listening to this may be freaking out, because you may be thinking, "Anyone who thinks their partner is giving them permission to do whatever they want on the side is imagining things, and being greedy, and assuming too much," or something along those lines. And I will tell you that although some people may well assume too

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much in this department, that's a different issue than what I'm talking about today. What I'm talking about today is allowing your partner to give you the message that they're DONE talking about non-monogamy. I'm talking about allowing yourself to receive the message that your partner has decided to be cool with you being non-monogamous, even if they don't want this for themselves, and allowing yourself to receive the message that they may not want to turn this matter into an endless conversation.

In the self-improvement, relationship-improvement world there's a lot of emphasis on communication, and how to communicate well with your partner and all of that, and although I am CERTAINLY in favor of communication, I also think there are important questions to be considered about how to NOT talk about things. Some people have the idea that it's fundamentally better to talk about EVERYTHING and to the greatest degree of detail possible, but not everyone wants to do that. And there's so much more I could say about that, but I won't say any of that right now.

Instead, I'll give you my third recommendation – If you get to the point where you decide that you have indeed been given implicit permission to “cheat,” decide what your boundaries are going to be. How are you going to utilize the grey area in a way you feel good about? Your partner may not have given you any rules, other than, don't let me know what you're up to. This means that you're the only one making the rules. And for some people, this seems more terrifying than liberating.

So what's going to work for you? You have to decide. How are you going to have your fun without getting totally swept out to sea? Or, to be a little more specific, how are you going to find someone to have great sex with without becoming totally obsessed with them? How are you going to have emotionally intimate encounters with other people without falling head over heels in love? Yes, you may only be able to figure

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some of this stuff out as you go. But I highly recommend that you give these matters at least SOME thought before you jump into the deep end of the pool.

Closely related to the last point, suggestion number four is, consider how you're going to maintain your love and desire for your primary partner if your side projects become a little too compelling. How are you going to maintain your focus on your primary partner and your relationship with them? Assuming that's your objective, you may need to be INTENTIONAL about accomplishing this. Yes, it may be relatively easy at times to be fully present when you're home and forget about everything you're doing when you aren't there. But there may be times when that is NOT easy. What are you going to do then? The good news is, you have the power to choose what you focus on, no matter what. But the bad news – or the potentially bad news – is that it may take some EFFORT to utilize that power! You may think that you love your primary partner so much that nothing could ever distract you from them, and that's a beautiful sentiment. But it is possible that your extracurricular activities could become more distracting than you anticipate. And I encourage you to be prepared for that, and prepared to make the effort to deal with those distractions if your goal is to fulfill your primary partner's request to keep on treating them like they're the best thing that ever happened to you.

All right, people! That is it for today! If you think you might have been given implicit permission to cheat, or not-cheat, and you want my help figuring out how to navigate this interesting terrain, let's talk! You can schedule an introductory coaching session with me through my website, mariemurphyphd.com. I offer confidential, compassionate coaching via Zoom, so we can work together no matter where you're located. And of course, I am here for all of your other infidelity-related questions and concerns, too, so if you'd like my help sorting through any other aspect

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of your infidelity situation, book yourself a session with me, and we'll get to work. I can't wait to meet you.

Thank you all so much for listening! Have a great week. Bye for now.