

LIVING

Edited by Susan Schwartz
susan.schwartz@scmp.com

Confronting the truth can be hard, but it could save you a lot of grief

Suspect relations

Have you ever ignored your reaction to a person who acted strangely? Did you know, without knowing exactly why, that this person was either dishonest or mentally unhealthy?

We've all tried to overlook weird behaviour in other people. After all, if we're too judgmental, we'll probably have very few people to count on.

However, by being honest with ourselves about other people, we can help protect our boundaries. Defining the truth can help us steer around their weaknesses or even their dangerous characteristics.

I'd suspected all along that my husband was living some kind of lie but I kept denying the truth

Rebecca, whose husband turned out to be gay

Ignoring the truth about others can end up costing us time, money, and dignity. For example, John, a sales rep, says a company he called on was taking advantage of him. "They kept inviting me back to try to close a sale," says John. "But something felt odd."

John spent several thousand dollars in plane fares and other expenses to present his software products to company representatives. In the end, he was right about the odd feeling. "They never intended to buy anything from me. I finally found out the real goal was to vote down my products

to forestall having to change over to a new computer system right away.

"I was being used by a manipulative supervisor so he could tell his boss he was busy perusing new software. But he was using my time and money to do it."

Christy, a high school student, got a gut feeling something was wrong about her boyfriend after his behaviour changed towards her. "After ignoring me for four months, this boy was calling me morning, noon, and night," Christy says. "He had a key to my car and he was using it to hide drugs for his friends."

She found a stash in her car and called the police to investigate. If she'd hesitated too long, it might have destroyed her life.

Confronting the truth about what's going on can be difficult. All of us like to feel close to others, so judging them too harshly can be personally painful.

Consider Rebecca. She recently learned that her husband is gay. In a sting operation in a park, police found Rebecca's husband and other men engaging in improper behaviour. "I'd suspected all along that my husband was living some kind of lie but I kept denying the truth. What really hurt was that I knew my husband had intense sexual problems that went beyond homosexuality. The pornography he pulled up on our computer would astound you."

Rebecca says her husband's friends had warned her about marrying him. They begged her to cancel the wedding but she went ahead.

So if you suspect someone in your life has dark secrets or isn't good for you, ask yourself the following questions:

- Would I recommend this person to my friends? For example, if a real estate agent or an accountant seems

odd to you, would you tell your friends to do business with them?

- What type of friends does this person attract? If your daughter's boyfriend only runs with high-school dropouts, you can see the type of values this boy is endorsing.
- Does this person seem interested in my well-being? If the person in question never asks you if you're tired, hungry, or in need of something, chances are, this person is very self-centred.

Although no one has friends who never show signs of stress or frustration, we all have to observe others to learn if their behaviour is abnormal. How others think, react, and solve problems tells us a lot about them.

None of us can afford to allow a person who isn't thinking clearly or acting appropriately to have a negative impact on our lives. Pay attention to someone's odd choices or behaviour. If you're facing this kind of influence, it's time to wake up. Time spent on bad relationships is time you can never recover.

Slowly steering away from people who aren't good for you is the best answer. Having less contact with them allows you to focus on more positive things. But if you do have to break away from someone suddenly – such as refusing to marry someone or dropping a business deal – you can feel a lot of guilt. Don't let this stop you doing what's best for you.

Having the right people in your circle means you must stay close to those people who truly are good for you. All of us run our lives on the strengths of those in our inner circle.

By weeding out relationships that are dangerous or unhealthy, you leave time to create your life in the best possible way.

Judi Light Hopson, Emma Hopson and Ted Hagen (McClatchy-Tribune)



Illustration: Wilson Tsang

Signposts: Do parents make the grade?

Emphasis on childhood education dominates parenting in affluent societies, and perhaps nowhere more so than in Hong Kong. But do poor grades necessarily equate with intellectual capability or contribution? Not if you measure success according to the likes of Albert Einstein, Helen Keller and Thomas Edison, who all rose from early mediocrity to achievement.

About a year ago, a client's co-operative, bright young daughter simply didn't want to learn to read. This went on for months.

It was only when her parents went back to their old loving habit of reading her favourite bedtime stories to her, and occasionally

mentioning the fringe benefits of freedom and independence that readers enjoy, her interest and reading ability blossomed.

Parents should consider the following questions:

- What's in it for me for my child to perform according to others' expectations?
- What would it say about me if he brought home average grades?
- How would I handle it if she failed a subject, or even an entire grade?
- What did my parents do well in the handling of my education? What actions might have been more helpful if they had known better?
- Have I learned more from my successes or failed attempts?

Sometimes, parents' efforts to improve on their childhood experiences can mean a repeat of the very same experiences for their offspring. Although a commitment to giving your children a strong formal education is a noble endeavour, attaching yourself to the outcome can be damaging for everyone involved.

Success stories of exceptions to the education rule abound in the media. Nowadays, employers consider not only scholastic achievement, but also assess cognitive ability, work preference and behavioural profiles when hiring, so be clear with your children about the real-world benefits of excelling in the classroom. How will external measures of success translate into an inner-sense of fulfilment?

When you're disappointed in your child's school performance, try these tips to help him or her envision a bright future.

- Is there a problem? Your child might be enjoying the negative attention coming from their low test scores. Does your kid get more one-on-one time with you as a result? Is his irreverence admired by his peers? What appears to you a problem may feel perfectly comfortable to your child. Help them realise what benefits can also come from changing his approach to a constructive one.

- Hand over responsibility. Declare

to your child that they are now responsible for completing and turning in homework. You'll still be there for help and support, but make it clear to her and her teachers that you won't be reminding, cajoling, or otherwise backseat driving the process any longer. This may result in a short period of flailing and floundering, and you must be willing to resist the urge to rescue, at least for a bit.

- Look out for labels. How might your child see herself? Does she have a designated role – a born mathematician, unimaginative, a class clown, musically gifted, non-athletic, and so on. The longer these characteristics are reinforced, the more intrinsic and fixed they will seem. Children tend to deliver on the expectations of those around them.
- Focus on what's already right. Resist the temptation to magnify a problem by turning the entire family's attention to it. Instead, build on their strengths to brainstorm solutions around the problem area.
- Stay curious. Does your child see you as an enthusiastic learner, or someone who is too exhausted by their work to feel passionate about anything else? Encourage your child to share their knowledge with you.

Michelle Gabbe runs Guided Energy and is a member of the Hong Kong International Coaching Community (info@coachinghk.org)

Ask Sharon

Edited by Susan Schwartz
susan.schwartz@scmp.com

I'm married in my 40s with a child. After years of soul searching I've realised that I'm gay. I'm frightened how this will affect my family. How do I tell my wife, whom I love dearly?

Realising you're gay and deciding to come out is a big step. It will involve changes for the whole family. You believe that coming to grips with your sexual orientation is new information. However, your wife might have sensed that you were not fully present in your marriage. People who carry a "secret" and live a life that doesn't reflect the entirety of who they are, communicate this in many ways. Some people struggle with depression or irritability, others become anxious or obsessive. Sexual relations can be compromised, communication can be stilted and unfaithfulness can be an issue. I believe your gayness has already affected your family.

Being gay is not a choice; it's who you are, just like your eye colour. If you were to choose to stay "in the closet" you would compromise yourself and affect your family as well. So share your truth and help your wife understand the process that has brought you to this point. It's possible to be loving and transparent to your wife and child, and true to yourself.

When one partner chooses to come out, the couple need to work through their emotions. They need to come up with ways to continue to

respect and honour each other. Loving and caring doesn't go out of the window with honesty about sexual orientation. Just as you've taken a long time to work through your issues, so those around you also need time to adjust to your news and cope with its implications. Your child needs to understand that your love as a father remains unchanging. Your coming out may be painful at first for the marriage but, ultimately, it gives both of you the opportunity to find partners who can fulfil your needs.

Your loving relationship with your wife can continue and deepen as an enduring friendship, just as you both share the task of raising your child in a healthy way.

My wife of many years has just walked out and she says she's gone for good. I didn't even notice she was unhappy. I thought she loved me and I still love her. She said I bore her and take her for granted. She's gone off with a recently divorced neighbour whom she says understands her. I know he wasn't good to his ex-wife and won't be much better for my wife. I've been a good husband. What went wrong?

It's hard to deal with rejection and abandonment by someone you love. As this has just happened, it's normal for denial to be one of your initial responses. When a partner walks out, it's painful and shocking to the person who's left behind.

However, the move is rarely unplanned.

Typical of many marriages, needs, dreams, annoyances and frustrations stop being discussed as time goes by. Appreciation and gratitude for the other is taken for granted and not expressed. This sort of moratorium on deeper communication evolves as partners become stuck in the monotony and responsibilities of daily living. Spouses get frustrated, bored or depressed. Relationships wither when not replenished with appreciation and affection. Sometimes, one partner is unhappy enough to begin looking elsewhere for tenderness and understanding.

Whether or not you feel your wife's new partner is right for her may be your opinion, but it's not your decision. Ultimately, you can't change anyone but yourself. Enhancing the communication between you and your wife is important, whether or not you reconcile or end this marriage. You need to learn how to convey gratitude and emotionally affirming communication with a partner. Good marriages can't be taken for granted. It takes work to keep a relationship strong.

Sharon Glick is a licensed clinical social worker in private practice. She is listed with the Community Advice Bureau. Send questions via susan.schwartz@scmp.com

