

Should I Tell?

Out of town on business, in the hotel bar, I saw a good friend's husband entwined with another woman. If I tell, my friend will be devastated, and she might hate me for it. If I don't, I'm joining her rotten husband in conspiring to deceive her. Should I tell?

—S.B., *New York*

This is the question most often asked of the Ethicist and opinions about it vary enormously. It is difficult to know from your brief glimpse, or your short note, if you witnessed long-term infidelity or anomalous indiscretion. Or what rules—spoken and unspoken—govern your friend's marriage. Some couples demand full disclosure and absolute fidelity; others allow a wider range of behavior.

And while it is clear that the overwhelming majority of married people forbid extramarital romance, not all of them necessarily want to know about it when it occurs. Even those who might say they do often behave in ways that suggest they really do not, going to elaborate lengths to ignore evidence that has long been apparent to their friends. So what do you do?

The utopian solution lies in prior notification, a sort of living will of the heart. The wishes of the patient—that is, the wronged spouse—must be paramount, but you can't wait until she is too ill or too furious at her betrayal to convey them. Ideally, she would register her desire years in advance, on her driver's license, just below the organ-donor form. Check one: I want to know / I want to remain in the dark.

If she hasn't registered that preference, you could try to deduce it by raising the question in an abstract way. But that's not easy to do without arousing her suspicions. And confronting the husband ("If you don't tell her, I will") might let the couple work things out on their own terms, but it might also force a showdown your friend does not want.

The practical solution usually demands that you guess your friend's wishes. Indeed, you must guess whether or not she already knows what her husband is up to. If she doesn't want to know, respect that desire. If she does want to know, you owe it to your friend to tell her. But if you don't know her well enough to be confident of her desire, then you don't know her well enough to intrude, so keep your suspicions to yourself.

Randy Cohen, "Should I Tell?" *The Ethicist*, *New York Times Magazine*, June 13, 1999, p. 26.