



Making and breaking a promise

Is it ever okay to break a promise?

By Leah Curtin, RN, ScD(h), FAAN

IS IT EVER OKAY to break a promise? Generally speaking, no. A promise changes reality by introducing an ingredient that wouldn't exist except for the promise. For example, when I say to you "I will keep your confidence," that introduces confidentiality into our conversation and changes matters in such a way that it's possible for you to tell me something that you wouldn't otherwise disclose. Or when I promise, "I, Leah, take you to be my wedded spouse..." and you do the same, we're changing the nature of our relationship from that of two single people to that of a committed couple. In short, making or breaking a promise is important because it changes "what is" into something else.

In the case of professionals (a word derived from the Middle English "profes," which means "having professed one's vows"), we formally and legally promise to act in the best interests of the patient (client), to keep his or her confidences, and to maintain our own competence to help with his or her issues (or to refer him or her elsewhere as needed). This, however, isn't the type of promise we're addressing here; rather, we're addressing the more mundane promises we make every day to patients or families.

First, let's be clear, breaking promises due to being lazy, fearful, or flaky is a personality flaw, and it has consequences. However, if the harm caused by breaking a promise would be less than the harm caused by keeping it, we're morally obligated to break the promise.

Circumstances change. Life alters our paths, and sometimes we're left with no other choice but to realign our promises to match the current reality. In those situations, it's not a lack of integrity to break a promise. Instead, integrity is measured by what you say and do when you have no choice left and must break a promise.

To break a promise honorably, do the following:

- Look for a way to honor the original intent of the promise even though you're unable to follow through on the original plan.
- Acknowledge that you're breaking a promise. This isn't something you can mask or hide, so don't wait too long to tell the other person. He or she will know that you held out.
- Explain why you're breaking the promise, but don't blame others (people, institutions, or law). Ultimately, you're the one who made the promise, so you're responsible.
- Understand that the person to whom you made the promise will be disappointed, hurt, or angry. You can't expect him or her to simply accept this and move forward.

Promises

The principle to which we're committed when we judge it wrong to break a promise isn't to never break promises. The principle we're implicitly committed to is a good deal more complicated than that.

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