

Your Personal Coach

By

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

My best friend and I are going to the same college together. I love her to death but she has cheated her way through high school. I don't cheat and I've told her to stop but she says everyone does it and she had to do it to get into a good school. The university we will be attending requires that all students to sign a very strict honor code that includes reporting other students we see cheating. I've seen my friend copy from other students' tests in our high school classes, but I've never said anything to anyone. We're majoring in the same subject and I already know that we've got three classes together in the fall. I don't want to lose my friend but I don't want to see her cheating and have to decide what to do. Any advice?

-- Angela

Dear Angela,

It is clear that this is a real conflict for you. Your letter suggests that you have more integrity than lots of your fellow students. Unfortunately, you're in the ethical minority as far as cheating goes.

A recent study by Rutgers' Management Education Center found that 75% of high school students admitted to serious cheating on tests and exams. More than half have plagiarized work they've found on the Internet.

Most distressing was that more than fifty percent of students said they don't think copying questions and answers is even cheating. I wonder what they call it?

Like your friend, high school students who cheat say they do so to get into a good college or to get ahead in life.

Everyone is, of course, responsible for his or her own behavior. But I have to admit that, unfortunately, adult role models of good moral conduct and integrity are in short supply. As a culture, we seem to value success more than integrity, and easy gains as opposed to hard work.

We don't seem to agree with the ancient Greek Sophocles, who said: "Rather fail with honor than succeed by fraud."

Here are a few words that might spark your thinking about our adult ethical failures: Watergate, Iran-Contra, Monica Lewinsky, and Enron.

When young people hear about athletes who take bribes to throw a game, elected officials who lie to save their skins, advisors who mislead investors, priests who abuse children, and corporate executives who flat-out steal, it might not seem like any big deal by comparison to "bend the rules" when taking a history exam.

Still, there's no excuse for cheating. Cheating is an assault on the integrity of the entire academic community. Besides that, it's wrong and it's bad karma.

From a practical rather than moral point of view -- and even if your friend declines any concern for integrity and character -- I wonder if she would like to be treated by a doctor who cheated her way through medical school? On a flight over the Atlantic Ocean, how would she feel hearing this announcement: "Good afternoon, ladies and

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony

6/6/02

gentlemen. This is your pilot speaking. I cheated through flight school, but I think I can do this. Relax and enjoy your flight!”

Here’s what I would do if I were you. Sit down with your friend and assertively tell her about your concerns. Remind her that you’ve talked with her about cheating in the past, but now you’ll both be in an academic situation where you will be required to sign an honor code. Make it clear that you will not hesitate to report her if you see her cheating.

Tell her that you value your friendship, but that you really have no choice because when you sign that honor code document, you will both have agreed to uphold a high standard of ethics and integrity.

She may take that agreement lightly, but let her know that you do not.

And then, Angela, you will have to live up to your word. A big part of the transition into adulthood – one that you are undergoing now as you prepare to leave your parent’s home for a new life as a college student – means to live up to your adult responsibilities, and to forge the values and ethics you will live by. It’s not always easy, believe me, but it is important.

It’s interesting to me that your friend tells you that she had to cheat to get into a good school. You didn’t cheat, and yet, you got into that very same fine school. I wonder how your friend rationalizes that? Hard work, perhaps?

Good luck in college. Remember that honorable people can change the world. They’re the only ones who ever have.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com, call 473-4004, or direct questions to the Outer Banks Sentinel, P.O. Box 546, Nags Head, NC 27949

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D. is a personal coach, motivational speaker, clinical psychologist and author of “After the Darkest Hour” and other nonfiction books. She lives in Manteo. To learn more about personal coaching, visit her website at www.fullpotentialliving.com. (©2002 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.)