



Polygraph FAQ

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1. IS IT TRUE THAT THE POLYGRAPH ISN'T 100% ACCURATE?

Polygraph is not 100% accurate. There is no diagnostic test that exists that is 100% accurate. When done correctly, specific issue testing in polygraph has an accuracy in the low to mid 90th percentile.

2. CAN THE POLYGRAPH MEASURE INTENTION?

No, intent is a thought process that is not absolute. Polygraph exams test absolutes, such as whether a certain action(s) or behavior(s) has occurred.

3. WHAT MYTHS NEED TO BE DEBUNKED ABOUT THE POLYGRAPH?

Perhaps the biggest one is that they are easy to beat or cheat, it is just simply not true. Other common myths would suggest they are a “coin flip” (50/50) in terms of accuracy or that everybody fails, even when they tell the truth. In therapy-based testing it is a common falsehood that the polygraph examiner is on the “side” or “team” of the therapist/betrayed partner. None of these are accurate, when utilizing a professional and ethical examiner.

4. IF POLYGRAPHS AREN'T USED IN COURTS, WHY SHOULD THEY BE TRUSTED IN THERAPY?

One of the biggest reasons polygraphs are not used in court is due to a lack of standardization and commitment to best practices within the field. There are no licensing requirements or regulations governing polygraph examiners in California. Even within states that have licensing requirements, “old school” or outdated practices are still regularly used, which have a significant negative impact on the field.

5. HOW DOES THE PROCESS WORK?

The polygraph itself consists of three phases; the pre-test interview, the instrument phase, and the post-test interview. This involves a thorough review of the topic/questions to be tested, explanation of how the polygraph works, and the recording of physiological data. Within therapeutic environments, the process should also include communication between the examiner and therapist prior to the test, as well as with the betrayed partner/acting out partner as needed.

6. HOW MUCH DO POLYGRAPHS COST?

Prices will vary, but in Southern California an exam of this nature will generally run between \$500-\$1000.

7. CAN I USE THE POLYGRAPH TO FIND OUT IF MY PARTNER HAS BETRAYED ME AND LIED TO ME ABOUT OTHER ISSUES IN OUR RELATIONSHIP?

In a separate exam. Exams need to remain focused on one topic, incident, or behavior. Multiple facets of the same topic can be explored.

8. SHOULDN'T WE FIND OTHER WAYS TO BUILD TRUST IN THE RELATIONSHIP RATHER THAN RELYING ON A POLYGRAPH? DOESN'T SEEM LIKE A LONG-TERM SOLUTION.

In short, yes. However, building trust doesn't magically occur overnight. The polygraph can initially provide the betrayed partner with some level of confidence/security they are no longer being lied to and forces accountability on the acting out partner. These are not beliefs or behaviors that come easy in the disclosure process. It can be likened to a newly planted tree that requires ropes or support as a sapling, while the roots gain strength and take hold. The ropes, much like the polygraph, will not (and should not) be needed forever if the tree is nourished correctly and grows stronger.

9. WHAT DOES AN INCONCLUSIVE TEST RESULT MEAN?

It means the data obtained lacked purity, stability, or the needed variance to allow for a definitive determination of truth or deception to be made. A thorough post-test interview can frequently discover what occurred and why. It is not indicative of truth or deception and should not be viewed as such.

10. WHAT DO YOU MEAN WHEN YOU SAY THE POLYGRAPH IS “A TOOL”?

Like any tool, it must be used appropriately. It cannot answer every question or provide magical solutions. It should be utilized at the appropriate time within the therapeutic process and should be part of the therapy, not the focus. It has limitations and will only provide the correct outcome when administered correctly.

11. WHAT DOES IT MEAN IF SOMEONE PASSES AND THEN AFTER DISCLOSURE, THEIR PARTNER DISCOVERS A DATE OR SOME OTHER DETAIL WAS WRONG?

Details can be wrong. The actions are what is being tested. It is explained to the subject that details (dates, number of times, exact locations) must be estimated (as accurately as possible), as frequently we are looking at a prolonged period of behaviors. Expecting those to be perfect is unrealistic. What should not be discovered after a passed exam is a different type of action or behavior that was not disclosed. If that occurs, there was an error in the exam.

12. ISN'T IT POSSIBLE FOR THE ADDICT TO FIND WAYS TO CHEAT THE TEST?

Countermeasures exist and are easy to find with a simple Google search. However, they are extremely difficult to successfully implement. The polygraph instrument records physiology, it cannot be tricked. What a subject will attempt to do is manipulate the data being obtained and defeat or beat the examiner. That is why utilizing a well-trained, experienced examiner who is familiar with the therapeutic process is of utmost importance. Do not hesitate to call and vet the examiner. Ask questions and become comfortable with who you are hiring if you have concerns. A lack of willingness to engage in this conversation with a potential client about polygraph would suggest incompetence or arrogance, both of which should be avoided.

13. DO POLYGRAPHS NEED TO BE REPEATED? IF SO, FOR HOW OFTEN AND FOR HOW LONG?

This would be dependent upon the treatment plan agreed upon between the therapist, the partner, and the person in treatment. Frequently “maintenance” exams are utilized, initially at scheduled intervals between 3-6 months and then progressing to an annual check of sobriety. The need for polygraphs tapers off as trust is developed and the offending partner demonstrates a complete and transparent commitment to their treatment program and the relationship.

14. SHOULD YOU DO A POLYGRAPH BEFORE OR AFTER A DISCLOSURE? OR BOTH? WHY?

This is a decision made between therapist and client. For polygraph purposes, there is no difference when the exam occurs. Therapists have divided beliefs on when this should occur, and it is a decision that should be made prior to contacting the polygrapher to schedule an exam.

15. WHAT IMPACT DOES THE TESTED PERSON'S PERCEPTION OF "TRUTH" AND "REALITY" HAVE UPON THE RESULTS? RELATED, IF THE TESTED PERSON BELIEVES THEIR ANSWER DESPITE CONCRETE EVIDENCE TO THE CONTRARY, WILL THEY PASS? CAN A PERSON PASS A POLYGRAPH IF THEY BELIEVE THEIR OWN LIES?

An absolute belief in a lie or the "perceived reality" would likely result in a passed test. However, this is not something that most humans are truly capable of. Frequently, the question regarding whether a sociopath would be a good candidate for polygraph arises. Sociopaths are able to distinguish truth from deception, they just don't have feelings or remorse toward it. That is sufficient to detect deception on a polygraph exam. If there is concrete proof of a lie, then the question does not need to be asked, the answer is already known.

16. IS IT BEST TO DO A SEX ADDICT'S INITIAL POLYGRAPH AFTER A CERTAIN LENGTH OF SOBRIETY?

The initial polygraph should occur when the therapist believes the addict is ready and prepared. This usually requires at least several months of treatment but varies from person to person. Administering the polygraph early in the recovery process, when there are likely still many partial truths being presented or behaviors the addict does not want or see the need to disclose, will result in an increased percentage of failed exams.

17. DO LESS QUESTIONS RESULT IN A MORE ACCURATE TEST RESULT?

Simply put, yes. A single issue/topic, focused exam is the most accurate form of polygraph.

18. IF POLYGRAPHS ARE GOING TO BE REPEATED, IS IT AN ADVANTAGE TO GO TO THE SAME POLYGRAPHER?

Familiarity can create a working dialogue between not only the addict, but between the polygrapher and partner as well. Belief in the examiner chosen can provide a level of confidence and security in the results of the test. Additionally, knowing an addict's past tendencies or issues can help direct an interview and provide information that may have otherwise gone unknown. While it is not a requirement, utilizing the same examiner does have benefits.