The Washington Post

The Truth About Lying

Advertisement

Our Lives Are Filled With Untruths. But Why Do We Lie, And How Can We Tell When Others Are Full of It?

By Dan Zak
Washington Post Staff Writer
Sunday, November 25, 2007

We are liars and lie catchers, and the sport runs from the banal to the breathtaking, from personal to public. Right now, someone somewhere is lying about "having plans tonight." Meanwhile, someone else is discovering that his or her spouse has methodically concealed an affair. And take a look at the news of the past couple of weeks: Barry Bonds was charged with perjury. City employees were accused of fabricating companies to siphon taxpayer money. Lies are all around us.

Sometimes, of course, dishonesty is the best policy. Lying, for all the bad it might cause, is an indispensable part of keeping our day-to-day lives running smoothly.

"Everybody lies -- every day; every hour; awake; asleep; in his dreams; in his joy; in his mourning," Mark Twain wrote in his 1882 essay "On the Decay of the Art of Lying."

Much of the time we don't even know it. Lying is a necessary, near-involuntary practice that keeps the fabric of society from unraveling. Example:

"How are you?" a co-worker asks.

"Fine, thanks," you say, when in truth you're not fine. Life is a hellish morass, and this person is getting in the way of your dutiful self-pity. But to respond in such a dour manner would turn a passing pleasantry into an awkward, socially debilitating episode.

Take your average 10-minute conversation between two acquaintances. In that span, the average person will lie two to three times. That's not cynicism. That's science. And it's ingrained in us at a young age, when we're whipsawed between "honesty is the best policy" and "no matter what, tell Aunt Barbara you like her gift."

"We're always telling children you should tell the truth, and yet we're also giving them the message that it's absolutely fine to lie," says Robert Feldman, associate dean at the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences at the University of Massachusetts. "At a very early age we're getting these conflicting messages about honesty, and for some people it makes them more prepared to be deceptive later in life."

And here we are, all grown up and peddling lies big and small: exaggerating our r sum s, misleading our lovers, fibbing to spare people pain, lying to ourselves to preserve our sanity. All those fit into the seven reasons we lie, as delineated by the psychologist Paul Ekman: We lie to avoid punishment, to get a reward, to protect others, to escape an awkward social situation, to enhance our egos, to control information and to fulfill our job descriptions (think spies).

So many reasons to lie. So many *ways* to lie. How do we cut through the thick crust of deception and drill our way to the hot, molten core of truth?

It's easy. With training and practice.

When it comes to teaching the art of detecting deception, Ekman is the man. His 1985 book "Telling Lies" is a benchmark work on the topic, and he has tested the lie-detection ability of more than 12,000 people and found that the average person will correctly identify a lie 54 percent of the time, hardly a desirable success rate. But that person will do considerably better if taught to detect micro-expressions, which are suppressed (or repressed) emotions that briefly flash across someone's face. The truth is often tucked discreetly under a quilt of cheerful lies.

"Don't trust your impressions," Ekman says of trying to detect concealed emotions. "They'll probably be wrong based on stereotype. Judging by demeanor is very difficult to do." One of the easiest ways to see beyond impressions is to learn to catch micro-expressions, which betray emotions, he says. "If you see a sign of fear on someone's face -- particularly if it's concealed -- then you'll go up and ask a few questions." Inquiring may lead to a caught lie and eventually the truth.

("If [a man] keeps his tongue still, his hands, his feet, his eyes, his attitude, will convey deception -- and purposely," Twain

wrote in his essay.)

Earlier this month, about 20 Washingtonians paid $55 to learn about lying. They hunkered down in a basement classroom on Massachusetts Avenue for a two-part class called "The Truth About Lying: Detecting Deception." One person was there because she suspected her boyfriend was cheating on her. Another wanted to learn how to match wits with friends who are interrogators for the Defense Department. Another recently discovered that his wife of 20 years is a compulsive liar, and he wants to arm himself with detective skills for future social interactions.

The class, which is offered occasionally through Professionals in the City, is taught by the Lyin' Tamer.

Rawr.

This is Janine Driver, a former stand-up comedian and federal law enforcement investigator who blended those two life experiences to make herself into a body language guru. She frequently pops up on "Rachael Ray" and the "Today" show to demonstrate her ability to "read" people.

"The number one thing is to norm them, calibrate them," Driver explains. "What is their normal behavior, and when do they deviate from that? I'm so manic and I talk with my hands, so if all of a sudden you ask me about my marriage and I change my behavior -- now I have my hands in my pockets, my tone of voice goes down -- it doesn't mean I'm lying, but it's a point of interest."

Of all the body language classes she teaches, Driver says, the one on detecting deception is the least attended. People don't seem to want to know the truth, she says.

Getting away with lies seems less easy to do these days. There are e-mail trails and cellphone videos and rabid cable news networks with a nose for hypocrisy and double talk. There are video montages on YouTube of Cabinet-level officials blatantly contradicting themselves.

Still, this doesn't mean a golden age of truth telling is at hand.

"The same phenomenon that's making our words stick around can be used by people to lie even more," says Feldman, of U-Mass. "You can go into a chat room and be anyone you want and make up a whole identity for yourself."

So the way we observe, catch and perpetrate lies has changed over the past 50 years, but the consequences of being caught have not. Choosing to lie is often a serious gamble with integrity.

"A big cost of lying is people won't be able to trust you again," says Ekman, the psychologist. Everyone knows what it takes to lie, but "nobody knows the ability it takes to reestablish trust. You can't work with someone, let alone live with someone, if you don't trust them."

View all comments that have been posted about this article.

Sponsored Links

Mortgage Rates Hit 3.25%
If you owe less than $729k you probably qualify for Obamas Refi Program
www.SeeRefinanceRates.com

2010 Credit Scores
Click to View Your 2010 Credit Scores Now! All 3 Scores FREE !
freescore.com

Project Management Expert
Enhance your expertise with needed industry credentials. Free info.
VillanovaU.com/PMP

Buy a link here

© 2007 The Washington Post Company