

WHY BE HONEST?

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The following excerpt has been adapted from "Why Be Honest?" in Psychology Today.

We all lie. Most do so occasionally. But we still all do. Yet most of us also consider ourselves honest.

In his book, *The (Honest) Truth About Dishonesty*, Dan Ariely offers evidence that we're able to believe we're honest even though we lie or cheat by doing so only in little ways. We're therefore able to tell ourselves we're mostly honest—that is, we're only dishonest in ways that we think don't matter.

Apparently this strategy works: most of us don't suffer serious internal conflict over our honesty. It seems we can have the best of both worlds without too much work: We can lie or cheat in little ways that place us at an advantage, but still get to see ourselves as honest.

But aren't there good reasons to be honest even when we don't think we need to be? Of course. Here are just three:

- Even telling a small lie risks being seen as a liar, which would damage our reputation and reduce the trust others have in us.
- One lie often leads to the need to tell another, bigger lie, which risks even greater negative consequences if discovered.
- We can't predict the consequences of telling even a small lie, and if such consequences turn out to be worse than we thought they would be, our sense of responsibility and guilt could cause us far more distress than we imagine.

Though many may agree these are all important reasons not to lie and could probably come up with other excellent reasons I haven't mentioned, we still all do it. What makes lying so attractive that we all do it, even if in only minor ways, so often? In general, we lie for protection. We protect:

Ourselves. Lying often to avoid suffering painful consequences, shame, embarrassment, or conflict.

Our interests. Probably the second most common reason we lie is to get what we want. We lie to get material goods (like money) and non-material goods (like attention from the telling of tall tales).

Our image. We all want others to think well of us, yet we all do things we ourselves consider less than respectable at times. Rather than admit it, however, and suffer the loss of others' respect, we often cover it up. Or, having failed to act courageously and honestly, we lie to appear more courageous and honest than we are.

Our resources. We often lie to avoid expending energy or time doing something we really don't want to do (going out with a friend we find boring, attending a party we know we won't enjoy, etc.) but don't feel comfortable admitting.

Others. When asked if we like a haircut, shoes, writing, or performance, we often lie to protect our friends' and family's feelings. In their book, *Nurtureshock*, Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman present evidence that children lie to their parents far more often than parents realize because they think telling

their parents what they want to hear will make them happier than telling them they failed to live up to their parents' expectations in some way. According to the research, forcefully confronting any suspected lying only makes children work harder at lying better.

Further, when faced with a situation in which a lie seems quick and helpful, the thinking we perform often suggests that lying—despite the possible risk—is almost always a safe choice. That is, most of the time we really do find ourselves getting away with it. So we continue to think of lying as a useful tool.

What's more, some—perhaps even most—might argue that sometimes it's better to lie than to tell the truth. And while I'm not certain whether I agree, I can say—and I'm confident most would agree—the only times this might possibly be true are those in which we lie as an attempt to prevent harm. From telling our spouse that she looks good when we think she doesn't to telling the Nazis at our doorstep that no Jews live in our house when we're hiding an entire family of them in our attic, lying out of kindness is perhaps the only reason we would accept—even hope—for a lie, meaning the only reason we would consider lying right and good.

I might argue in most circumstances, it's still better to tell the truth. It may, in fact, be better to lie to the Nazis at your door, but how often do they show up? And when it comes to the kind of situations most of us must deal with during our daily lives, is it better to tell your spouse she looks good when she doesn't? Or is it better to make a habit of being tactfully honest so she can trust you more than anyone else to tell her the truth when she really wants and needs to hear it?

I would argue that whatever benefit we might get from lying to protect someone else, that usually honesty is a better policy. If your spouse really does get upset for hearing that she doesn't look good in that dress, doesn't that suggest an underlying problem that should be examined, one in fact that you're avoiding by telling that lie?

Finally, there's a wonderful benefit to telling the truth in as many ways as we can. This turns out to be the only reason I find that gives me pause when I'm tempted not to tell the truth: *a dedication to honesty motivates us to try to become all the good things lying helps us pretend we already are.*

Whenever we come up against one of the reasons I mentioned above for lying (apart from trying to prevent harm), it reveals a character defect we can then change. Living with the idea of avoiding any action that we'd ever feel the need to cover up leads to a remarkably stress-reduced life. This, then, is the reason that motivates me the most not to lie.

Imagine developing a reputation for polite but complete honesty upon which others know they can always depend. What a valuable resource you'd become! People who say they want to hear the truth but are more interested in being praised will quickly learn either not to ask you for your views or that the value of hearing the truth, no matter how painful, is greater than keeping their feelings protected because it gives them the ability to reflect and self-improve. Others often see our character flaws far more accurately than we do. If we're truly interested in improving ourselves or our work, what we need from them isn't flattery; it's the truth.

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