



the truth about lying

From big whoppers to little white lies, almost everyone fibs on occasion. Here, experts reveal why.

ASK NEARLY ANY ADULT (or child well versed in *Pinocchio*) and she'll tell you that lying is wrong. But when it comes to avoiding trouble, saving face in front of the boss, or sparing someone's feelings, many people find themselves doing it anyway. In fact, more than 80 percent of women admit to occasionally telling what they consider harmless half-truths, says Susan Shapiro Barash, author of *Little White Lies, Deep Dark Secrets: The Truth About Why Women Lie* (St. Martin's Press, \$15). And 75 percent admit to lying to loved ones about money in particular. The tendency to tell tales is actually "a very

natural human trait," explains David L. Smith, Ph.D., associate professor of philosophy at the University of New England, in Biddeford, Maine. "It lets you manipulate the way you want to be seen by others." To pinpoint how people stretch the truth from time to time and the potential fallout from it, learn the six most common ways that people mislead. On the following pages, *Real Simple* tells it like it really is.

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“Oh what a tangled web we weave, when first we practise to deceive!”

Sir Walter Scott,
“Marmion”

deception points

Most lies aren't meant to be hurtful to others; rather, they're meant to help the one doing the fibbing. These are the six top ways people lie.

1. Lying to save face

What it sounds like: "Gosh, I never got the shower invitation!" "Sorry I'm late, but there was a huge pileup on the freeway."

Why people do it: For self-preservation. While it may be instinctual, people who frequently cover up innocent errors may start to feel as if they have permission to be irresponsible. What's more, it can become grueling for them to keep track of those deceptions. ("Now, why did I tell her I couldn't cochair that event?") Eventually those lies hinder people from having close connections, says Smith. "Of course, there are relationships in which it doesn't matter as much," he says.

How you can avoid it:

- **THINK LONG-TERM.** When you're tempted to be less than truthful, consider your ultimate goal: to have a happy marriage, say, or a solid friendship. Then, when torn between fact and fiction, ask yourself, "Which will put me closer to my goal?" Usually the choice is clear.

- **KEEP IT SIMPLE.** Most of the time, a short apology is all that's needed, and you can omit some details without sacrificing the truth. Something like "Sorry that I didn't call you back sooner" is usually sufficient and effective.

2. Lying to shift blame

What it sounds like: "It's my boss's decision, not mine." "My husband never told me you called."

Why people do it: "To effectively give away power and control," says Smith. "When done habitually, this can diminish a person's ability to deal with life's bigger problems." When someone constantly saddles other people with his responsibilities, others can grow resentful of carrying this burden. Also, eternally passing the buck is downright exhausting. The deceiver keeps fielding requests but is only postponing the inevitable. Eventually the issue will have to be dealt with.



How you can avoid it:

- **DIG DEEP.** In some cases, blame shifting can signal difficulty with accepting responsibility for your actions, says Joseph S. Weiner, chief of consultation psychiatry at North Shore University Hospital, in Manhasset, New York. Maybe you were criticized for making mistakes as a child, for example, and so now you're afraid to own up because of what other people may think of you. Once you realize this is a behavior that can be changed, however, you can start to regain the power you may feel you don't have.

- **FLIP IT AROUND.** Before using a colleague or a loved one as a decoy in a minor deception, think of how the other person would feel in the same scenario. If the deception puts other people in an unfavorable light, it's best to leave them out of it.

3. Lying to avoid confrontation

What it sounds like: "That's a wonderful idea, Mom. I'll make sure to get to the airport three hours before my flight." "You're doing a great job, but we can't afford a housekeeper anymore."

Why people do it: A believable excuse may help someone avoid an uncomfortable talk or keep that person from feeling guilty. But relying on noncon-



frontation too often eventually does relationships—both personal and professional—a disservice. With people to whom one is deeply tied, it's important to remember that "closeness is not always pleasant, and that interpersonal dealings, by their very nature, have highs and lows," says Smith. "When you try to avoid the lows at all cost, it can have an overall deadening effect on these connections." Even if the person on the receiving end of a lie isn't closely tied to the fibber, the one deceiving still has to keep track of—and live by—those lies. What's more, she may have to deal with the consequences of the lie anyway (for example, if the housekeeper finds out someone else was hired in her place).

How you can avoid it:

■ **CONSIDER THE OPTIONS.** Before you tell a fib, it helps to make a list of all the ways you could handle the situation—from delivering a total fairy tale to telling the stark truth. If, after thinking it through, you still decide a fabrication is the best choice, "it may signal that you don't value having an honest relationship, and that in itself is worth pondering more," says Marlene Chism, a relationship expert in Springfield, Missouri, and the author of *Success Is a Given* (ICARE Publishing, \$15). On the

a liar's tale

To truly see how often—and why—she bends the truth, *Real Simple* asked writer Catherine Newman to keep track of every falsehood, even the tiniest ones, that she told in a single day.

6:50 A.M. The kids' babysitter had told them a story about how once there were copperheads in her living room. When five-year-old Birdy wakes up and asks, "There are no dangerous snakes near where we live, right?" I say, "Right."

8:25 A.M. The barista bungles my latte order. I smile and say, "Oh, I don't mind."

11 A.M. "I'm sorry this piece is late," I write an editor. "I'm stuck with no child care." This is true only if "stuck with no child care" means "figuring out the online request system of the local library so I can join the wait list for Barack Obama's memoir while waiting for a source to call back."

12:15 P.M. The oral surgeon, who is investigating a lump that was found on my gums, asks if I drink alcohol. "Yes." "Every day?" "No, not every day." "How often would you say you drink alcohol?" he asks, and I say, "Um, actually, more or less every day." Is it a coincidence that he then switches his terminology from the gentle "polyp" to the fiercer "indeterminate growth requiring biopsy"?

12:16 P.M. I call my husband on his cell phone, and when he picks up, I blurt out, "I'm dying of gum cancer."

1:25 P.M. As I'm climbing into her car, my friend Lydia says, "Brace yourself for the smell. It's like Parmesan cheese that got barfed up by pond scum." I tell her, "Oh, don't worry. It smells better than my car does," even though my car smells only like Parmesan.

2:05 P.M. At school pickup, another mom invites us to the playground—the one with the rusty slides—and I say, "I'd love to, but we have plans." Plans to sit on the couch and read the new Williams-Sonoma catalog while not getting tetanus.

2:10 P.M. When a little friend with a runny nose wants to take a drink out of my five-year-old daughter's water bottle, I tell her, "Oh, maybe you shouldn't. If my daughter is sick, I wouldn't want you to catch it."

3:15 P.M. My eight-year-old son asks what that fruity smell is. I say, "Throat lozenge," instead of the more technically accurate "wild cherry Life Saver."

4:05 P.M. "Not a good time to talk," I tell a telemarketer. "We're eating dinner." At four o'clock?

5:15 P.M. Over the phone, I tell my dad about how I tried to deceive the oral surgeon about my debauched drinking habit while I was there for my appointment. He is more worried about the growth the doctor found. "So what do they think it is?" he frets, and I say coolly, "Oh, just a harmless polyp." (Note: In the end, this didn't turn out to be a lie. The lump was benign.)

8:35 P.M. Both of my kids can't fall asleep, and they climb up into my big bed. "Which one of us do you love more?" they want to know, draping their soft arms and legs all over me and grinning up at me with pink cheeks and gappy smiles. It's at that moment that I finally realize that maybe I lie so that people will like me, because I'm a drama queen, to avoid hurting other people's feelings, and so I can reassure everyone, evade judgment, and get out of doing things that I just don't want to do. But I cross my heart and hope to die when I say, "I love you both more than the sun and the stars and the infinite universe." And this is the absolute, honest truth.



other hand, maybe there is an option that will allow you to tell the truth but that will still provide your desired outcome.

■ **PAIR IT WITH THE POSITIVE.** Look for the bright, true spot buried within the lie. Saying to your mother, “Your ideas are always appreciated—I called that tutor you recommended last week!—but this time I just don’t agree,” makes the truth easier to swallow for both of you.

4. Lying to get one’s way

What it sounds like: “I won’t be at work today. I caught that bug that’s going around.” “Officer, my speedometer must be broken.”

Why people do it: For personal gain. But when a lie like this is uncovered, the recipient is unlikely to be charitable. And the more hurtful the lie is to the person on the receiving end, the less it’s likely to be forgiven. “When getting what a person wants

drives his every word and action, he will not earn people's trust or love," says Weiner.

How you can avoid it:

■ **STOP JUSTIFYING.** Maybe you think you deserved that day off. Or you figured it was late and there was no one on the road when you were speeding. While both rationalizations may be true, "that doesn't make the lie any more acceptable in the end," says Smith. If you have to convince yourself the lie is OK, chances are it's not.

■ **THINK OF THE ALTERNATIVE.** Consider if honesty could still bring about a positive result. Example: "I know I don't have any vacation left, but I'd be willing to come in Saturday or stay late every day next week if I could have Friday off." Or admit to the police officer that you lost your concentration going down the hill and apologize. That may result in a warning instead of a ticket. You never really know until you try.

5. Lying to be nice

What it sounds like: "That dress looks fantastic on you." "This is the best meat loaf I've ever tasted."

Why people do it: In some cases, the little white lie is altruistic, says Smith, but when used excessively, it can make interactions with people less authentic. At its worst, others may feel that a person isn't being genuine or trustworthy.

How you can avoid it:

■ **WALK IN THE OTHER PERSON'S SHOES.** People often underestimate the information that others can tolerate and even benefit from, particularly when the words are said out of friendship, says Weiner. For example, you would generally want someone to mention it if you had a piece of spinach stuck in your teeth, if your blouse had a stain, or if your pot roast could use a pinch of salt.

■ **TONE IT DOWN.** If you feel that a certain amount of truth stretching is a vital social lubricant, the

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Research has found that men and women lie with equal frequency but for different reasons. A woman is more prone to telling lies that will protect someone else, while a man is more likely to lie to protect or better himself or his image, says Bella DePaulo, Ph.D., a visiting professor of psychology who studies lying at the University of California,

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Santa Barbara. It's mostly when women are with other women that the white-lie count climbs, she says. "Great haircut." "Your home is beautiful." Sound familiar? "It's not that women don't value honesty," says DePaulo, but honesty can clash with other values, like kindness and tact, that women find more important in the moment.

best thing to do is to avoid gushing. "That's a great color on you" is a lot more plausible than "That's the most stunning sweater I have ever seen in my entire life."

■ **TRACK IT.** Keeping a tally of the tales you tell for a day or a week (see *A Liar's Tale*, page 132) can help you distinguish between the instances where being truthful matters and where it doesn't. Maybe you didn't need to tell the supermarket checkout gal that you loved her (hideous) earrings. But it made you feel better to say it, plus you got a pleasant reaction from her. Most experts say there's no huge harm in that.

6. Lying to make oneself feel better

What it sounds like: "Eating my kids' French fries doesn't count." "I'll charge this stuff now because I'm going to pay off the credit-card bill as soon as I get my bonus." "I never watch television."

Why people do it: To reassure themselves. But when people start to believe their self-deceptions, it can snowball, which is especially dangerous. A clean-your-plate habit can lead to an extra 10 pounds. One shopping spree can trigger can't-pay-the-mortgage debt. And while denying hours spent in front of the TV isn't a crime, it might cause a person to wonder where all her time is going—or get busted humming the *Law & Order* theme song.

How you can avoid it:

■ **PLAN HONESTY AHEAD.** Because self-deception can become almost automatic, "stopping isn't simply a matter of just saying in the moment, 'Hey, should I lie to myself right now?'" says Smith. Instead, pledging to face reality in the situations where you're most likely to deceive yourself is a smarter tactic.

■ **KEEP YOUR GOALS IN SIGHT.** Whatever you want to accomplish, from sticking to a healthy diet to

keeping your bank account in the black to cutting down on those television marathons, lying about what's really going on puts you one step further from that objective. Instead, it's a good idea to visualize, in full detail, what it will look, feel, sound, smell, or taste like when you attain your goal. "Painting a detailed picture in your mind will help you maintain your motivation, even in the face of temptation to sabotage yourself with deception," says Weiner.

■ **HELP OTHERS BE ACCOUNTABLE.** When people who tend to deceive themselves spend too much time with frequent fibbers or even others who tolerate that type of mendacity, their destructive habits won't be challenged or corrected. In the most serious situations, where lying is causing someone serious damage, it helps to be a particularly truth-conscious friend and lend support as well as a gentle, watchful eye.

