

You Lie to Yourself. No Really, You Do! And It's Costing You...

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Fess Up -- You Lie!

If you are human, and I presume you are given you are reading this, you have red blood cells and white blood cells, and you lie. As a human you need oxygen to survive, and you lie. It is that simple. We humans are all liars, especially to ourselves about ourselves. Before you go on, just notice your reactions – your thoughts, feelings and opinions about that assertion.

We were born with a built-in capacity to lie. Even as babies we lied; can you believe that? Fake crying is one of the earliest forms of deception to emerge, says Dr. Reddy of the University of Portsmouth in the UK. Infants use fake crying to get attention even though nothing is wrong. You can tell, says Dr. Reddy, as they will pause their crying while they wait to hear if their mother is responding before crying again.

Maybe lying is a much more widespread and natural phenomenon than we realize. We now know, with at least one clear example that gorillas lie. Penny Patterson has spent years teaching Koko the gorilla to communicate with sign language at the Gorilla Foundation in Northern California. One day, when no one was around, Koko, who weighs 300 pounds managed to rip a sink out of the wall. When asked who ripped out the sink, Koko signed, "The cat did it." Yep, that sounds like a lie to me.

Maybe lying serves many purposes; Dr. Reddy thinks children use early lying to discover what kinds of lies work. In early childhood we also learn the benefits of lying and the negative consequences of lying too much. Pretty soon we are adept at discerning what lies work and what lies get us into trouble; a skill we hone, as we get older and more experienced.

From our earliest beginnings most of us have been told that we shouldn't lie. Raise the topic in just about any group and you will soon have a consensus that lying is bad and wrong and good people shouldn't do it – even though we all do it. But is it that simple? Well, no!

What's the Purpose of Lying?

Lying does serve a useful purpose. Well, I can give you a laundry list of the benefits I have derived from lying, from looking good to not looking bad, to getting out of embarrassing situations, to .., well.., I suspect you know the list pretty well, too.

In my early twenties, with expedience trumping ethics, I padded my resume, inflating my qualifications and experience in applying for a job for which I was not qualified. I got the job, and, though I did not think about it at the time, a little more validation that under the right circumstances lying pays off. There were two distinct benefits of this lie; it allowed me to keep up with the expenses of my growing family and, even more importantly because I had landed a job I was not qualified for, I began the process of mastering inventing, generating and discovering how to produce results that, before the fact, all the evidence said I was not able/qualified to produce.

Shortly after mastering how to do my new job, I repeated the process, enhancing my skills and experience and making another move up the career ladder each time I got a bigger job, more compensation, and in the bargain further honed my skill in inventing, generating and discovering how to produce results that all the evidence said I was not able/qualified to produce.

This is not a career strategy that I recommend, as many have discovered it can have serious negative consequences, especially with personal information becoming so much more widely available and lie detection getting ever more sophisticated.

We All Lie!

I have shared my experience of lying with clients and not surprisingly, many have shared their version of boosting (lying about) their experience, qualifications and accomplishments. My point: It is simple.

- We all lie.
- And, we lie about the fact that we lie, even to ourselves.
- We are inauthentic, and we are inauthentic about the fact we are inauthentic.
- Except, and here's the kicker, not always!

In a recent Huffington Post article Jinny Ditzler got me thinking about this business of lying when she said, "I lie to myself and I'm sure you do, too." If we all lie, and we lie about the fact that we lie, even to ourselves, how do we build relationships that are real, that we can trust, that we can rely on?

Stop Lying?

If I lie, and lie that I lie, even to myself., then how in heaven's name can I discover what is the truth? Drags up the age-old existential question, "Who am I really?"

And, it is not hard to find lots of advice about how to stop lying., because, well, lies harm us and the people we lie to, or so says neuroscientist Sam Harris in his book, Lying. Yeah, well., thanks for sharing Sam., but if I am lying to myself that I am lying to myself, I am in a bit of a *Catch 22*, wouldn't you say?

Are We Good Lie Detectors?

Can we tell if someone is lying to us? Robert Feldman, who has been studying lying for over thirty years, says in his book, The Liar in Your Life, we can't. We may have suspicions, but it's too easy to make mistakes. He says most people have no better than a coin-flip chance of telling a lie from the truth.

Many of the techniques that researchers have developed require expertise to be useful, and that is not available to most. For example, psychologist Paul Ekman, professor emeritus at U.C. San Francisco, has spent more than half a century studying non-verbal expressions of emotion and deception. More than fifteen thousand people have watched video clips to see if they can discern lying or telling the truth. The topics of the videos ranged from emotional reactions to witnessing amputations, to witnessing theft, listening to political opinions, listening to future plans, and so on. The success rate at identifying honesty has been, as Robert Feldman suggests, no better than a coin-flip.

So What to Do?

If, as researchers suggest, we were not very good at discerning whether other people are telling the truth or lying, *maybe a more fruitful inquiry would be to start closer to home – with ourselves*. Science is discerning more and more evidence that *we can tell when we are lying*. Dishonesty requires the brain to work harder than honesty. Studies even show people take longer to respond when lying.

Start With The Inquiry: Where Am I Lying To Myself About Who I Am Really?

A conversation with self, if you like. A pause for a little introspection – *who am I really?* If we can accept the fact that we lie, then it follows that one of the areas where we more than likely are lying is to ourselves, about ourselves.

Mostly, the lies we tell ourselves about who we are really, start as beliefs we have about ourselves that either we were told by someone whose authority we did not question, or something we told ourselves after some failure or unhappy experience.

For example, I was told early on in my schooling that I was not good at mathematics. Several years of sitting in math classes comprehending virtually nothing validated that assessment for me. Then at fourteen a new math teacher arrived on the scene. To him it was not only incomprehensible that someone could not comprehend mathematics, but also equally incomprehensible that anyone would not love mathematics.

He gave me a book to read, *Mathematician's Delight*, and took me on. He tutored me, and in one year with his support, I caught up with my peers and fell in love with mathematics. That I am hopeless at mathematics was a lie.

How many stories about yourself have you bought into, that are just not true? Who told you that you are not a singer, that you'll never be an athlete, that you are a klutz, will never

amount to anything, are no good at fixing things., and the rest of the litany that you absorbed early on, and seldom, if ever question?

We make up stuff about ourselves (lies). For most of us it is self-limiting stuff that seriously constrains our self-expression, our joy, our relationships, our ability to relate, even our health.

This is a category of lying that keeps us from knowing ourselves, that keeps us from being moved and inspired by ourselves, that keeps us from making our full contribution in the world.

This is a category of lying that is really worth tracking down and stopping.

So do an exercise I am borrowing from Sir Winston Churchill, not directly of course – he called it a Split Page Process. Take a piece of paper, or an electronic document, and divide it into two columns. In one column list all the things you believe to be true about yourself. For those that empower you and give you freedom, joy, self-expression and bounty of all flavors, put a check mark in the opposite column with the note, “Keep believing”.

For those that make you feel *less than*, or that disempower and constrain you, take the view that there is a lie in there somewhere and dig to find what it is. So you may not be able to sing on a concert stage, but family sing-alongs?

Paraphrasing “*There’s a pony in there somewhere*” (if you don’t know this joke, find someone who does to tell it to you), if something on your list disempowers you and drains the joy and satisfaction and self-expression out of you – *there’s a lie in there somewhere*. You’ve just got to keep digging till you find it, and then in the opposite column write what the truth is. And then, live that truth out loud.