



Reading between the Lies*

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Is Lying Ever Justifiable

By Paul Ekman, Ph.D

The terrorist who lies to get on board an airplane believes his lie is justifiable. He doesn't share values with those to whom he lies in fact he despises them. The undercover vice squad officer, drug enforcement agent, or counter-intelligence agent, are living lies. They believe their lies are righteous, as does our government. Spies who are foreign nationals pretending to be members of the country in which they are living, are another example. As is the citizen who spies against his own country in the service of a foreign power. Such a spy will be more respected by those who employ her if she was motivated by admiration for her foreign employer's form of government, not by a desire to earn money, pursue romance, or revenge a grievance against her home employer.

A group, organization, or government *authorized* each of these very serious lies. The liar and the authorizing agent believe lying is justified, necessary to do the job, although the employer may not always respect the liar for doing so. Typically, the liar does not feel guilty about telling an authorized lie. The liar disrespects the target. Guilt arises only when lying to a respected target.

Many lies are *opportunistic*, not authorized by anyone. The target of the lie often trusts the liar, not expecting to be misled. Sometimes, as when a police officer interrogates a suspect, it is much less certain whether the truth will be told, even though the instructions are to be truthful. Opportunistic lies are the ones where justification becomes a question. Certainly honesty is usually the best policy, but the truth can sometimes be used cruelly.

Suppose a husband is feeling a bit insecure one night and asks his wife "was there any man at the party you thought was more attractive than me". If there was should she tell him? What would be the benefit? She could try to wiggle out of it: "You are the most attractive man to me?" But what if that is not the case, what if the other man was far more attractive? Is she does not intend to pursue him, what purpose is served by telling her husband the truth?

When I had to wait three days to learn the outcome of a biopsy for cancer, I did not tell my wife, not wanting to worry her before I knew if there was something to worry about. When she noticed I seemed out of sorts and asked me if I was upset about something, I lied, denying I was worried. Later, when I told her about the biopsy, which fortunately was negative, she cautioned me to never again leave her out like that, but she wasn't angry that I had lied to her.

A friend told me that when she was out of town anything she did was OK. I asked her if her husband had agreed? She assumed he did, was certain he wouldn't want to know or interfere with her independence. She was operating on the belief 'what you don't know won't hurt you'. People should be very careful before following this maxim. Believing the target wants to be misled can be a self-indulging delusion. It gives the liar authorization without revealing his or her intention. In open marriages there was explicit agreement to accept infidelity, although the ground rules varied as to whether it would be concealed or had to be revealed.

* Send in your questions about lying; we will try to answer one question in each subsequent newsletter



Dr. Ekman is the scientific adviser to a dramatic television series on FoxTV- largely based on his research. Read his blog at http://fox.com/blogs/lietome/?src=carousel_on_lietome

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Believing your partner really doesn't want to know is a dangerous path if it is not explicitly agreed to. A further hazard by going down this path is that lying can become what the lawyers call a slippery slope. The more one lies, the more matters one lies about, the greater the likelihood that you will lie about other things until there are few areas of honesty left in your life.

Liars who believe they are engaging in an altruistic lie may not realize how often they also benefit. A senior vice president of a national insurance company explained that telling the truth can be unnecessarily cruel when the ego of another person is involved. "Sometimes, it's hard to say to a guy. "No, you'll never be chairman"". The guy's feelings are spared, but so are the feelings of the vice president. It might be 'hard' to deal with the guy's disappointment, let alone the possibility of protest, especially if the guy might hold the vice president responsible for the negative evaluation. The lie spares both of them. One could argue that the guy is harmed by the lie, deprived of information that, though unpleasant, might lead him to improve his performance, or seek employment elsewhere.

Nevertheless there are altruistic lies. The rescuers who don't tell the injured eleven-year-old boy that his parents died in the airplane crash because he is too weak to deal with that shock, obtain no benefits.

But in the previous examples – the lying spouse, the lying employer – the liars thought their motives were altruistic. Watch out whenever the lie you are considering provides benefits to you. Is there any other guideline, to help us think through when a lie is justified?

I think there is. It is simple but demands a lot of self-honesty. Put yourself in the shoes of the target and ask yourself how would the target feel if he or she was to discover the lie. Would the target understand that your motive was kindness not exploitation (concealing the worry about the biopsy), or would the target feel betrayed, that advantage had been taken? Would you lose the target's trust? It is a simple guideline but a hard one to apply, because of the potential trap that you will underestimate how hurt and angry the target might feel so you can lie in good conscience. My advice: talk to a trusted friend and check it out. Err on the side of caution. Once trust is betrayed it may be difficult to re-establish. It is next to impossible to work with, live with, or love someone you don't trust.

READER'S QUESTION:

"What is the meaning of maintaining eye contact?"

It can have many different meaning depending on the context: it can assert dominance, initiate a flirtation, or be a sign that someone is lying, who mistakenly believes that only liars look away when they talk.

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