

## On the importance of honesty (or the dark side of little white lies)

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Growing up, most of us are taught that honesty is the best policy. However, we quickly come to learn that this “policy” resides more in theory than in practice. On average, people tell 1-2 lies every day. Mostly, these falsehoods could be classified as ‘little white lies’—seemingly inconsequential and morally justified. We lie about how much we like our friends’ outfits and the value of our colleague’s contributions to a project, to name just two of the myriad of situations where we consider the truth to be harmful, unnecessary, and inconvenient.

Honesty may be the best policy, but we often conclude that it’s not the best policy *right now* and opt for the ‘little white lie’ instead. But our beliefs about deception are wrong. Lies don’t help as much as we think, and they cost far more than we imagine.

Every time you decide to lie—even if that lie is intended as a kindness—you feed the cynical side of yourself. Researchers call this ‘[deceiver’s distrust](#)’. The reasoning goes something like this ... ‘If I’m lying, other people are probably lying to me too.’ You start to distrust others, ironically, because *you* are one being dishonest.

For millenia, we have seen honesty as a virtue, something that a good person does and the outcome of an ethical choice. The danger in seeing honesty as a question of ethics is that it has also meant that we can reason into and grow our use of ethically sanctioned deception – the lies we tell in order to avoid harm, spare people’s feelings, and out of the paternalistic sense that the truth is not what anyone needs to hear right now. In fact, research suggests that there are a substantial number of situations for which we think lying is the [ethical thing](#) to do.

To illustrate, many of us spend time with family navigating the tension between honesty and kindness, judiciously choosing our words and silences, steering conversations away from controversial topics, and keeping the extra glass of *in vino veritas* away from *that* relative. For most of us, this means opting to tell a ‘little white lie’ or two. Polite dinner guests praise the dry roast and burnt carrots. Young couples laugh nervously when asked about when they would get married or have a child. Some of us tell bigger lies, about our sexual orientation, political beliefs, or rumblings at work about imminent lay-offs. Lies come easily in these situations, because we see them as the makings of peace and togetherness.

But what if everyone had been honest instead? Your mind probably moves immediately to the potential negatives. An argument. Hurt feelings. What good could come from it? Can you even think of one potential positive outcome?

Decades of research in human cognition has confirmed that people are much more sensitive to [bad consequences](#) than to good. In any situation where the choice to be

honest presents itself, it will be much easier to think of the vast potential negative outcomes of our honesty than to contemplate the benefits. So, we avoid it; opting for the little white lie instead. By not engaging in honesty we don't test reality enough to even know whether our predictions about it are correct. If we dared to be honest more often, perhaps we'd recognize how wrong our predictions really are.

Researchers Taya Cohen and Emma Levine asked people to spend three days focusing on being honest in all their social interactions—sharing their thoughts, feelings, and opinions with others in an open and candid way, even if it was difficult. The people taking part in the study found it to be [more enjoyable](#) than they predicted. Whereas people expected honesty to cause relational harm, they instead were surprised to find it to be socially connecting.

By contrast, research suggests that secrets and lies result in *less* social connection, and a sense of alienation from others. Research by Michael Slepian and colleagues finds that keeping secrets is associated with a sense of [feeling 'alone'](#) with the information. And, our research suggests that people who tell more lies also report feeling more lonely—even when their lies were told for the express purpose of saving relationships. Think this affects only chronic liars? Think again. In a simple experiment, when we randomly assigned people to either lie or tell the truth in a 'get to know you' conversation with a stranger, liars felt less connected to their partners than truth-tellers. It seems the road to loneliness is paved with lies born of good intentions.

Viewed from this perspective, the question of choosing deception or honesty is not one of ethics, but of our wellbeing and the integrity of our social fabric. Each time someone chooses to lie, no matter how small or seemingly inconsequential, a thread unravels. No big reveal that deception has occurred is necessary, no treachery named, no betrayal felt, no punishment to the deceiver doled out - it is the act itself that harms.

One of the primary reasons that others are not honest with us is very simple: they are afraid of our reaction. And they have ample reason to be worried. We have a multitude of ways to shun, reject, threaten, litigate, and punish those that are honest with us – the risk of honesty has never seemed greater. Of course, there are salient examples of celebrities who have been publicly 'canceled'. But there is also evidence that cancel culture is permeating more broadly. Recent studies suggest that family estrangement is on the rise, with over a quarter of US adults reporting that they have no contact with a family member. [Joshua Coleman](#), who studies family estrangement, partly attributes this effect to our changing conceptions of what we expect from any relationship, and our sense that we can simply excise individuals from our lives if they do not meet our needs, if they have wronged us in the past, or if we perceive their presence as detrimental to our mental health. It's not hard to see how in such an atmosphere, even well-meaning honesty will quickly find itself stifled.

Social media therapy-talk both reflects and amplifies this effect. There is a rapid increase in the number of individuals, with unclear credentials, who provide pithy short form advice fuelled by high octane terms like 'toxicity', 'boundaries',

'gaslighting', and 'triggers'. More often than not, this advice aims to justify cutting off people that cause discomfort and pain. They help us articulate defensive reactions to real and perceived slights, including those truths that we don't want to hear. Social media fuels our fears about the potential negative consequences of any candid interaction. The irony of this 'therapeutic' advice is that mental illness is associated with loneliness, and honesty is one way to alleviate the pain of feeling disconnected—if we are willing to share in it.

The good news is that there are steps we can take toward increasing the amount of honesty in our interactions that do not require us to either bludgeon those around us with every 'hot take' to ever cross our minds, or to make fervent demands of transparency from others.

The first step is to engage with others, not to avoid or cut them out. When we enter into conversations with the goal of sharing ourselves—our thoughts, opinions, experiences, and values—we can develop a shared understanding of each other's perspectives. This builds trust, even if we don't agree. Honesty is a tool for connection, not persuasion. Decades of research on persuasion suggests that when people with extreme views try to change each other's minds, it is rarely successful. Rather, people become increasingly entrenched in their original views. A persuasive conversation can often end in failure. But, if your goal is simply to understand each other, success is easier to achieve. You can communicate that you want to share your perspective and understand theirs by being both open and receptive—responding with questions rather than retorts. Because conversations are often reciprocal, this will encourage others to do the same.

The second step is to show others that they *can* be honest with us. That is not to say that we must allow ourselves to be abused and harassed, but that we also need to separate our understanding of 'harassment' and 'abuse' from someone who is speaking plainly. It means consciously moving away from feeling victimized or offended by other people's honesty. We must recognize our contribution to the honesty-risk calculation and what we can do to change it.

Part of this is developing the ability to hear another person's perspective, even if that perspective is about us, even if we think it is incorrect, and even if the wording is insensitive. In the classic book "Thanks for the Feedback" Douglas Scott and Sheila Heen encourage us to consider that we do not have a perfect view, not even of ourselves, and so part of becoming more receptive to honesty is being open to the idea that another person's perspective has *some* informational value. In *Radical Candor*, Kim Scott describes how Sheryl Sandberg's willingness to honestly tell her that she appeared unsure and incompetent during presentations was a major positive turning point for her career.

More broadly we must show others that we can be trusted with honesty, and that being honest will not get them canceled from our lives or public life. It's starting to tell ourselves, yes I *can* handle the truth, and actively showing others that we can be trusted with it. For example, try to solicit an honest opinion from a friend on a topic (it can be a piece of news, a book, your outfit, or for the very brave, their opinion on

some of your life choices), and let them share it with you safely. Even if it feels personal, attempt to receive it only as information about how they see the world.

When it comes to being more honest with others, it will mean actively trying to think of at least one possible positive outcome from being honest in a situation. For example, rather than making up an excuse, what if you chose to reveal to your friend that you are not able to come their party because you are actually tired, sad or feeling socially anxious? How might that change the relationship? How might they choose to support you?

We might not choose to be honest in every situation, but thoughtfully engaging with the potential positive outcomes of honesty enables us to counteract the tendency to immediately think of the worst. It means we can better understand where those missed opportunities for honesty lie, and seize them when they come.

By building trust in our individual conversations, we can change our own sense of trust in others. In our daily interactions, we can create an upward spiral of trust and connection to disrupt the downward trajectory of mistrust and loneliness we have been feeding for decades. Let's resolve to be more honest and be more open to it from others. It might just change everything.