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Truth and nothing but the truth? Why lies are part of our culture

By Eve Glucksman
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Ours is a culture that values honesty. Yet if the truth be told, according to a University of Virginia study, each of us tells an average of two untruths a day, if white lies and false excuses are included.

These everyday lies are not the whoppers that result in grand-jury testimony or headlines about Elvis' secret lover. The most common fibs are told to avoid hurting someone's feelings, such as telling a friend she looks fine in a dress when she doesn't. In work situations, lying is generally linked to stepping up the success ladder, for example, misrepresenting yourself on a resume or concealing a mistake. Excuse-making also is popular for explaining your lateness to the 9 a.m. meeting, why you parked in a no-parking zone or why the phone bill hasn't been paid yet.

Indeed, lying is practically inevitable, experts say. We do it for social or financial gain, or to escape punishment, protect relationships, advance careers, preserve self-esteem, manipulate others or simply to make them feel good. Typically, deceit, lies and concealment are the weapons of the weak and powerless, says Howard Field, a psychiatrist and professor at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital.

Children may first engage in a form of lying better known as fantasy, Field says. "Children tell tales of the way they'd like to be. If they're not able to acquire good self-esteem as they grow older, they will continue to lie in social intercourse.

"Children also tell you things they wish had occurred. When kids say they didn't do something, what they mean is, 'I wish I didn't do that.'"

As adults, we may come to believe that certain types of dishonesty are accepted, or even expected.

People tend to be more comfortable about dishonesty when the victim is an institution, for instance, experts say. Lying about a few dollars around tax-return time is a deceit many can write off, much as they take home paper clips from the office or towels from the hotel. Here, the victim is a large, faceless entity that supposedly can absorb the loss.

In the white-lies category, etiquette expert Letitia Baldrige rules that it's OK to offer "a partial lie" in such cases as excusing yourself from a boring

Coping

party conversation. Another justifiable lie might be that of a teacher or parent who praises an insecure student for work that is merely average. The falsehood is not meant to deceive, but rather to build confidence.

"When to lie and when not to lie is a skill people have to learn as they grow up," says Andrea Weiss, assistant professor of psychology at Drexel University. "We start out as children being honest and learn that it can be hurtful. As adults, it becomes an art to be honest without being hurtful."

Being dishonest in an intimate relationship with a spouse or friend, though, is not a good idea, Weiss adds. "When you lie, you're not granting the other person the respect that he or she can change or grow from your feedback. By lying, you're suggesting they're helpless to change."

But quite often we don't want truthful answers to our questions, Field says. "I don't think people have to say out loud every thought they have, which was the vogue in the 1960s," says Field, who doesn't condemn what he calls "social lies," or stretching the truth with tact to protect someone's feelings. "Telling it like it is can sometimes be carried too far. Truth can be nasty and used like a weapon."

As a rule, authorities say, we seem to forgive the false excuse more than the outright lie, too. Perhaps this is because excuse-makers are deceiving themselves more than anyone else. In offering an excuse, we essentially acknowledge that we made a mistake and that we'll try not to let it happen again.

Charles R. Snyder, a psychologist at the University of Kansas, believes that making excuses in moderation is a healthy way to cope with daily imperfections. Excuses make us feel better about ourselves and help us project a better image to others, he maintains. He even says researchers have found that if someone makes a mistake and doesn't offer an excuse, other people will make up excuses for that person.

Joanne Sciulla, who teaches business ethics and organizational behavior at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, says misrepresentations on resumes and during job interviews (by both the candidate and the

interviewer) are the most prevalent deceptions in the work place.

"Thousands of people say they went to Harvard Business School but never did," she says. "Answers during an interview which may give false impressions, like, 'I'm crazy about the food industry' or, 'Sure, I'd love to work in Des Moines,' are misrepresentations, too."

Then there's the egotistical lie — the purely self-aggrandizing untruth, Sciulla says. She recounts an office phone conversation in which the caller was told, "I can't talk to you, I have 10 people in the room." In truth, there was only one other.

Other lies at the office grease the wheels of social interaction or serve the function of diplomacy. But the work-place-honesty issue that's angering many workers now, says Sciulla, is having to take a urine test because employers don't accept their disclaimers about drug use.

What do you do if you know or suspect that someone has lied to you? While many people lie about as well as Pinocchio, others are very fluent at it and can even look you in the eye while they fib without another thought, warns Field. "We usually get angry, anxious, hurt and humiliated when we're lied to. This is a healthy response," he says. If applicable, go back to the deceiver and seek recompense, he suggests.

Clearing the record

An article in the Feb. 14 Family/Fashion section on all-terrain vehicles incorrectly said the Phillie Phanatic rides a three-wheel ATV. He rides a four-wheel all-terrain vehicle.

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