



Courtyard Counseling Center

We're here to help



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Lying Around: Part 1 - Lies

For all known societies and through all of recorded history, people have deplored lies and the people who tell them. Sanctions and punishments for lying, depending on the seriousness, can range from mild shunning to death. It is recorded that in some societies, people have had their tongues cut out for lying. In others, they may be stoned. Examples of lying regularly fill our newspapers and evening news. Did the President lie about weapons of mass destruction? Did O.J. lie about killing his wife? How about Scott Peterson and his girlfriend Amber? What were their motives?

The issue of lying is present in all human relationships. But what exactly is a lie? Webster's dictionary tells us that a lie is "a false statement made with deliberate intent to deceive." Such a definition places no value judgment on lying. Are lies always bad? What about lies that are meant to protect? "Mommy, did Santa Claus bring all of these toys?" "Harry, I just love this new dress. Do you think it makes me look fat?" "Dad, did you and mom do drugs while attending college?"

What about half-lies? Is a lie wrong regardless of the degree? The answer may not be so clear. In this four part series we will explore a few of the types, personalities, environments and reasons for lying. We will examine which types of lies are most destructive and which are, dare I say it, beneficial.

There are bold-faced lies: "I did not have sex with that woman." There are white lies: "Oh no dear, I think your gray hair makes you look distinguished." There are fibs: "I actually eat like a bird." There is concealing: (real estate agent to buyer), "Oh no Mr. Johnson, the dehumidifiers in the basement are not for moisture as much as they are to give the place a fresh scent." There is misleading: "We're on the trail of those weapons of mass destruction." There is exaggerating: "That brook trout I caught had to be at least 21 inches long and weighed 5 lbs." There is flattery: "Why Sara, you don't look a day over fifty." Perhaps more subtle is denial: "Drinking problem? No, I only drink to be social and only in the evenings." More difficult to discern is hypocrisy: "I'm a good Christian in all ways but I can't abide people who live the way they do."

To help us understand just how important lies are to us and how they permeate all human interactions, look at the numerous words we employ for lying. The list includes dishonest, deceit, fabrication, fraudulence, bluffing, corruption, treachery, duplicity, trickery, cheating, disloyalty, betrayal, infidelity, treason, untrustworthy, pretending, double-dealing, two-faced, disingenuous, devious, insincere, and the ubiquitous BS. The list goes on, and if our readers can think of other examples please forward them to me and I'll be sure to get them into a future article. Oh, was that a bit of mendacity?

Nowhere is lying more of an issue than in family life. We work hard to teach our children to not lie. How many of us have told our children, "If you tell me the truth I'll go easier on you. But if you lie to me, look out!" Why do parents in virtually every society stress this so much? We point to popular examples to teach our children these lessons. Stories such as Pinocchio and The Boy Who Cried Wolf are favorites. No doubt if Martha Stewart had simply come clean about her insider trading she would have suffered a relatively small fine. Instead, she lied, went to prison, and has suffered tremendous financial losses. We were more likely to forgive Bill Clinton if he had thrown himself upon the mercy of the public and said, "Yes, I had sexual relations with that woman and I'm sorry for what I did." Richard Nixon, caught in the Watergate scandal was forced to resign the presidency in humiliation.

Why does lying unnerve us so? The simple answer is that at first pass, we have no choice but to believe those we trust. Once that trust is broken we might never completely trust that person again. (The exception is children who are still learning about the world.) When we are lied to we don't know where we stand. How do we judge our next move? We can't possibly verify everything we're told. And if we try, it makes us crazy. We lose perspective on what is real and what is not. It also makes us crazy if we try to believe the person who is lying and convince ourselves that the lie is actually the truth. Being motivated to believe as true something that we know is a lie does terrible things to us psychologically. The more important our relationship with the liar, the more damage the lie does.

Our reaction to a lie is to feel betrayed, angry, hurt and confused. It can even affect our sense of self. "What does his lie mean or say about me?" Lying may be the most consistently unnerving of human interactions, yet it is remarkably common. All of us have lied. We lie to avoid feelings, or to get out of trouble. We lie to get an advantage. We lie to hurt another. We lie to deal with embarrassment. We lie for privacy. We lie to protect the feelings of others. We lie to appear more than we are. We even lie for amusement. Whether we like it or not, lying is endemic to the human condition but somehow our nature stubbornly tells us to not give up on the truth.

Part two: Lies in Marriages and Long-term Committed Relationships

Part three: Why children lie

Part four: Lies by our Governmental Leaders

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