



Search HowStuffWorks and the web

search

Video | RSS | Random

[Home](#) [Adventure](#) [Animals](#) [Auto](#) [Communication](#) [Computer](#) [Electronics](#) [Entertainment](#) [Food](#) [Geography](#) [Health](#) [History](#) [Home & Garden](#) [Money](#) [People](#) [Science](#)
[Anatomy](#) [Biotechnology](#) [Food & Nutrition](#) [Health & Illness](#) [Human Nature](#) [Life Stages](#) [Death & Dying](#) [Medical Encyclopedia](#) [Sex & Reproduction](#) [Skin Care](#)
[Home](#) > [Health](#) > [Human Nature](#) > [Human Behavior](#)

## How Lying Works

by Tom Scheve

Browse the article [How Lying Works](#)

### Introduction to How Lying Works

When you're young, there's one lesson that gets hammered into you more often than others: Tell the truth. Tell the truth, you're told, and everything will be OK. Then why does Mom call her boss claiming to be sick when she's not, and why does Dad say Mom's dress doesn't make her look [fat](#)? The lesson didn't stick for them when they were little, and it didn't stick with you or me, either.

Lying isn't a sign of moral depravity (except when it is). Lying is a sign of cognitive advancement. It requires a fertile and high-functioning [brain](#) to take something as simple as the truth and twist it, palming off the deception on someone else with the earnestness of a choirboy.

The problem with the truth is that it doesn't always serve our purposes, further our careers or keep us out of trouble. When you can take the route made of imagination, best-case scenarios and wish fulfillment, you'd be nuts not to take a deceitful stroll toward your goals, right?

#### Lie Detection

- [Lie Detectors](#)
- [How Con Artists Work](#)
- [Discovery.com: Mythbusters Polygraph Video](#)

Younger children believe that they're always being watched, and that Mom (or some other authority figure) knows all. For this reason, they're initially more inclined to tell the truth. As they get a little older, they begin experimenting with lies: The dog is blue, my shirt is made of copper, the cookie told me so. For the very young, lying is a series of cause-and-effect experiments. When does a lie work? What kind of lie? What is a believable lie? Is the jig ever up, or should I keep lying until the truth is just a vague [memory](#) for all parties?



Rosanne Olson/Photographer's Choice/Getty Images

**A lie keeps growing until it's as plain as the nose on your face, according to Pinocchio's Blue Fairy.**

Around age 2 or 3, children realize that they're not under constant observation by an all-knowing, all-seeing Eye of Truth. A typical 4-year-old stretches the truth once every two hours, while 6-year-olds will tell a whopper every 90 minutes [source: [Bronson](#)]. They're applying their earlier lie studies toward the general goals of all truth-stretchers: gaining advantage, staying out of trouble and "bigging" themselves up in the eyes of others. As children become older, they become more skilled at deception. And they never really stop. Continue reading to learn the truth, or something like it, about lying.

#### How Detecting Lies Works

Lying produces stress, and stress triggers chemical changes in the brain. These changes have visible effects, and can quickly expose an act of deception. Check out this clip for more information on polygraphs and the physical effects of lying. (November, 2008)



[More People Videos](#)  
[More Discovery Videos](#)

#### The Basics of Lies

The ability to lie is a cognitive accomplishment. While we look down on the practice from a [moral](#) and ethical point of view, lying isn't normally done without a pretty good motive. Lies are told for some of the following reasons:

- **To conceal misdeeds and stay out of trouble.** Wrongoings often can't be undone, and it's rare that owning up to a misdeed will result in a positive outcome (at least in the short term). These lies are told to avoid responsibility and repercussions.
- **To preserve reputation.** A recovering drug [addict](#) may lie about time spent in a treatment facility, especially to a potential employer or romantic prospect. A lie like this is told to avoid shame or embarrassment.
- **To avoid hurting someone's feelings.** Children learn early on to be polite, not to point out physical flaws, and to say "thank you" even after they receive something they don't like. These "white lies" are distinguished from other types because they carry no ill will or bad intentions.
- **To increase stature and reputation.** Some lies are told without any obvious external stimulus, such as a demand for an answer to a specific question. This type of lie is often [narcissistic](#) in nature, told to make the liar seem more accomplished, skilled or gifted as a means of gaining favor in the eyes of others.
- **To manipulate.** These lies aren't evasive or defensive, but rather aggressive and malicious in nature. Such lies are told to gain wealth, love, favor or other assets by damaging another's reputation or spreading harmful untruths.
- **To control information.** As opposed to airing a falsehood, **indirect lying** is withholding or concealing important facts. This is often seen as a more acceptable form of lying, since a person doesn't actively construct lies, but only sits tightly on the truth. A missing piece of information can completely alter the understanding of an event, leading American courts to demand not only the truth, but "the whole truth."



Cormac Hanley/Stone/Getty Images

**Will what he doesn't know hurt him?**

Lies are told -- in some form or fashion -- by just about everybody. Some personality types, however, are more likely to lie than others:

- **Pathological liars** are generally sociopathic, lack a clear sense of right and wrong and show an absence of remorse when harming others. Sociopaths tell some of the best lies, since they don't feel bad about doing so and don't show signs of guilt or worry. Sociopaths lie for self-gain, and their lies veer heavily toward manipulation.
- **Compulsive liars** lie as the first option, even when there's no reason or advantage for doing so. Childhood experiences, such as living in an abusive environment where lying might be necessary for survival or emotional well-being, are often responsible for compulsive lying.
- **Narcissists** lie to gain undeserved glory and esteem in the eyes of others.
- **Borderline personalities** experience wild mood swings and out-of-control behaviors, like drug abuse, gambling or promiscuous sex. This type may tell lies in an effort to deal with the fallout from these behaviors.
- **Histrionic personalities** desperately crave [love](#) and attention and will tell lies that, though not accurate, may reflect the emotional truth of the

situation. "I'm so sick I could die," and "If you leave me, I'll kill myself," are two examples of lies told by this type [source: [Goleman](#)].

Next, we'll learn the signs of lying.

### Signs of Deception

There is no single telltale sign of lying, but rather a constellation of possible signs that may "leak" from the liar during the act. We'll discuss both verbal and nonverbal signs of lying in this section.

First, we'll examine some nonverbal signs of lying. One sign that escapes most people is the flashing of a microexpression. **Microexpressions** are superquick expressions that cross over people's faces against their will and without their awareness. These provide a true look at their honest feelings about a matter. While most people aren't looking for such clues, a good many of us detect them without knowing what just happened. The information we glean -- detecting a millisecond-long look of [anger](#) in the middle of a smile -- is often chalked up to intuition or a "gut feeling." If your "gut" is telling you something isn't quite right with a person, you very well may have detected a microexpression on that person's face that doesn't mesh with what he or she is saying.

Another nonverbal sign of lying is a forced smile, which generally involves only the muscles of the mouth and not the rest of the face. A sign of deception is a smile or other gesture -- such as nodding "yes" during a denial -- that contradicts what is being said. When we normally interact, both speech and body language happen naturally, without specific thought. When we lie, however, not only must we appraise the truth, construct a plausible lie and then verbalize it, we must also decide which body gestures best match the lie, or rather best represent the telling of the truth. All of this thought leads to mis-matching words and body language.

Someone who's lying may feel attacked and get in a defensive position. He or she might turn away from the questioner, cross his or her arms or even move farther away. Liars may noticeably fidget, especially during a pause in the conversation.

There are other nonverbal cues that many people think are surefire signs of lying but aren't, such as increased blinking, scratching the face or nose, or placing a hand over the mouth while speaking. These signs are only good indicators when they represent a change in the person's normal behavior (that is, the behavior immediately preceding the suspected lie). Maybe the guy who's blinking a lot has an eyelash in his eye, and the girl covering her mouth is just self-conscious; however, if the person doesn't blink often during the first three statements and blinks like crazy and scratches his or her neck while giving the fourth statement, then that statement warrants closer examination.

Someone telling a lie will also leak verbal clues that point to dishonesty. Since he or she has to invent an answer, a lie-teller will often spend more time searching for the right word in the course of telling a story. The person might take too long to provide an answer or get words mixed up. To get extra time to think, a liar won't use contractions (opting for "cannot" instead of "can't") and may also repeat questions ("Where was I last night?" or "You want to know what I was doing yesterday?").

Since they have to create an alternate reality apart from the truth, liars have difficulty knowing how much of the new story to tell and will often include unnecessary details.

Next, we'll learn what to do if the glove fits.

### How to Lie

Whether you are complimenting a friend on his unpalatable Thanksgiving dinner or telling the authorities you don't know how the drugs got in your car, all of us at some point tell lies. These lies can range from little white lies meant to lubricate social situations and relationships to hide-saving whoppers that will go down in infamy.

Here's how you do it.

- **Stay calm.** The person you're lying to will be closely monitoring your speech and behavior. The act of lying may quicken your [heartbeat](#) or increase your blood pressure. Behave as if you have nothing to hide. Beware of your own [anger](#) at being put on the spot -- this might create microexpressions of contempt or rage.
- **Keep it simple.** Lying takes great imagination and effort. While we're conjuring up alternate scenarios and realities, our minds fill in all the extra details that come in handy. Liars tend to tell far too many irrelevant details, and they do this to further "prove" the lie is the truth. More often than not, this extra information stands out because it has little or nothing to do with the question. Keeping the lie simple makes it easier to keep the "facts" straight. Adding extra details will only trip you up when the questioning focuses on the details, because these extra bits of information may not add up to a coherent and plausible lie.
- **Remain steady.** It's important that you keep an evenness to your mannerisms and mood before, during and after the lie. If you're feeling nervous before your lie, keep acting nervous. If you're relaxed before someone hits you with an unexpected question, stay relaxed. It's the shift in tone and body language that will clue someone in to your fabricating ways. Once the questioning is over, don't suddenly relax or appear relieved. If you were agitated while lying, stay agitated after the lying is finished. A person standing watch in a guard tower looks for motion or a change in the environment, and so too does a person looking for a lie. Give him or her as little as possible to work with.
- **Make the listener like you.** You're trying to tell a lie, and the listener wants to hear the truth. You must make him or her believe your lie is the truth. Think of it this way: We're less likely to suspect those we feel close to, partly because it would be too disruptive to the relationship to believe there is deception.

Also, we're offended by lies because they are signs of disrespect. So when we lie, we must give the listener no reason to doubt our worth or our perception



Titus/The Image Bank/Getty Images

**Most nonverbal clues that someone's lying won't be this obvious.**



DreamPictures/Stone/Getty Images

**Being surly is not going to help your case.**

of their worth. Think: We're both adults. We both like each other. You have a question? Here's the answer, and let's move on. Don't grovel for the listener's approval or try to be too ingratiating. That's what liars do. Don't include statements like, "Are you mad at me?" Why would the person be mad at you unless you're being deceitful? He or she wants the truth, but running a close second is the need to believe that you wouldn't lie.

Now that you know how to lie, the next section will teach the rest of us how to catch you in the act.

### How to Tell If Someone is Lying

If you were accused of murder, you'd be under enormous pressure to lie if you were guilty. The stakes are high, and that kind of pressure can lead to physical cues that will give you away. A person serving a life sentence for murder, however, would feel virtually no pressure when lying about the murder because he or she is already in prison -- there won't be any further consequences for lying. In this case, it's the verbal details, and not body language, that will likely be his or her undoing.

Here's how you separate the liars from the truth-tellers:

- **Establish the baseline.** Liars may look you directly in the [eye](#), and truth-tellers may be fidgety and seem evasive, so don't look for one trait or the other. First, establish the person's behaviors, mood and mannerisms for that particular point in time, before the questioning begins. Is the person relaxed or nervous? Angry? Distracted? Notice how much eye contact and blinking is going on. Does the person touch his or her hands or face when speaking?
- **Look for deviations from the baseline.** The key to detecting lies is to look for deviations from an established pattern of behavior. If a person normally makes no eye contact and blinks like crazy but stares straight through you when answering a particular question, there's your red flag. Look for slight pauses before answers -- this is the amount of time it takes their [brain](#) to fabricate data. The liar may act offended at being questioned at all but suddenly quite affable when the lie is being told, or vice versa.
- **Listen.** Sometimes, there will be no body language or visual cues that accompany a lie. You have to rely on the verbal information you receive. Do the facts add up? Is the person telling you lots of information that is unrelated to the question? If someone provides lots of details, ask more questions. These details might be their undoing. After getting into the nitty-gritty of the details, bounce the questioning back to the overall time frame or arc of the story. Now, refocus on a small detail. Does the story still fit together? Is the person having to create new details to explain why other details aren't fitting well into the arc of the story?
- **Pause.** For most people, lying -- and the circumstance that necessitates the telling of a lie -- is stressful. If you're questioning somebody, pause between one of his or her answers and your next question. Pauses are slightly uncomfortable for most people in a social interaction, and much more so for a person who is trying to pass off a lie. This pause may seem like a torturous eternity to a liar. Look for fidgeting, defensive posturing and microexpressions.
- **Change the subject.** The best news a liar can receive is that the lie is over. When the person believes the topic of conversation has changed, he or she may be visibly relieved. A nervous person may loosen up; an agitated person may smile. This tactic also allows you to continue studying for deviations from the baseline or to look for a return to the baseline.



Alfred Gescheidt/Riser/Getty Images  
Now you know how to spot a double-dealer.

In the next section, we'll take a look at some famous lies.

### History Lies

How long have humans been lying? (Don't ask us, we'll probably lie.) There have been so many massive lies throughout history that it's impossible to keep up with them all. Here are a few whoppers of notoriety:

- **Wartime propaganda.** A common lie weaved throughout history is the lie that precedes an unprovoked act of aggression. The [Nazis](#) made use of this tactic before the German invasion of Poland. A series of mock attacks on various German border stations set the stage for a "defensive" swarming into Polish territory.

In August 1964, there were two reported incidents of North Vietnamese naval attacks against United States ships in the Gulf of Tonkin, off the coast of [Vietnam](#). The second attack, which reportedly occurred two days after the first attack, never happened. The initial reports were the result of bad weather and faulty sonar and radar readings. Even though there were near-immediate doubts about the event, the supposed attacks were used as justification for the Lyndon B. Johnson administration to initiate military strikes against North Vietnamese forces.

Both the United States and the Soviet Union disseminated propaganda during the [Cold War](#). A good deal of it was meant to influence public perception about the strengths and intentions of each country. Both nations tried to convince the other's populace that they were living in a corrupt society, while simultaneously convincing its own citizens that the other nation was on the verge of attack. Each nation inflated the military might of the other in order to keep their citizens preoccupied with fear, and also to justify increased arms and defense expenditures.

- **Sex scandals.**

Former U.S. President John F. Kennedy covered up his extramarital affairs, and plenty of other politicians have done the same. U.S. Sen. Strom Thurmond, a devout segregationist for much of his political career, fathered a child when he was 22 with an African-American woman who worked for his family. In 1998, then-President Bill Clinton announced to the world, "I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky," referring to White House intern Monica Lewinsky, with whom he had sexual relations.

- **Lies in the media.** Reporter Jayson Blair's tenure at the New York Times goes down in infamy. In 2003, the 27-year-old admitted he fabricated dozens of stories, made up quotes and filed reports from cities around the nation when he was actually still in New York.

- **Spies' lies.** In 1986, CIA analyst Aldrich Ames had just started betraying his country by selling classified information to the Soviets when he learned he was scheduled to take a routine [lie detector](#) test. Nervous, Ames contacted his Soviet handlers for advice, figuring (rightly so) that if anyone knew how to beat an American lie detector test, it would be the Soviets. The answer the Soviets gave Ames seemed alarmingly simple, but Ames knew his value to the Soviets was so high that they wouldn't give him a flippant response.



Diana Walker/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images

**Bill Clinton, pictured here with wife Hillary Clinton, emphatically denied an affair with Monica Lewinsky.**

What did they tell him? "Get a good night's sleep, and rest, and go into the test rested and relaxed. Be nice to the polygraph examiner, develop a rapport, and be cooperative and try to maintain your calm" [source: [Weiner](#)]. He did, and he passed.

For more HowStuffWorks articles on lying, from how fMRI works to the history behind propaganda, take a look at the links on the next page.

#### Lots More Information

#### Related HowStuffWorks Articles

- [Can an MRI machine also act as a lie detector?](#)
- [How fMRI Works](#)
- [How Propaganda Works](#)
- [How Lie Detectors Work](#)
- [How Police Interrogation Works](#)
- [How Crying Works](#)
- [How Hypnosis Works](#)
- [How Fear Works](#)
- [How Your Brain Works](#)
- [How Women Work](#)
- [How Men Work](#)
- [Can you die of boredom?](#)

#### More Great Links

- [Truthaboutdeception.com](#)
- [Antipolygraph.org](#)
- [Talwar Research Team](#)

#### Sources

- Barry, Dan; Barstow, David; Glater, Jonathan D.; Liptak, Adam; Steinberg, Jacques. "Times Reporter Who Resigned Leaves Long Trail of Deception." The New York Times. May 11, 2003. <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/11/national/11PAPE.html?pagewanted=1&ei=5007&enedf511319c259463&ex=1367985600&partner=USERLAND>
- Bronson, Po. "Learning to Lie." New York. Feb. 10, 2008. <http://nymag.com/news/features/43893/>
- Goleman, Daniel. "Lies Can Point to Mental Disorders or Signal Normal Growth." The New York Times. May 17, 1988 <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?sec=health&res=940DEEDC133EF934A25756C0A96E948260>
- Koerner, Brendan I. "Lie Detector Roulette." Mother Jones. Nov./Dec. 2002. [http://www.motherjones.com/news/feature/2002/11/ma\\_148\\_01.html](http://www.motherjones.com/news/feature/2002/11/ma_148_01.html)
- Myers, David G. "The Power and Perils of Intuition." Psychology Today. November/December 2002. <http://psychologytoday.com/articles/pto-20021209-000001.html>
- National Security Archive. "Tonkin Gulf Intelligence 'Skewed' According to Official History and Intercepts." Dec. 1, 2005. <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB132/press20051201.htm>

- Price, Michael. "Liar, liar, neurons fire." Monitor on Psychology. Volume 39, No. 1 January 2008.  
<http://www.apa.org/monitor/jan08/liar.html>
- Stein, Jeff. "Lie Detectors Lie (Tell the C.I.A.)." The New York Times. Feb. 19, 1995. <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=990CE7D9173FF93AA25751C0A963958260>
- Talwar, Victoria; Lee, Kang. "Development of lying to conceal a transgression: Children's control of expressive behaviour during verbal deception." International Journal of Behavioral Development. 2002, 26 (5), 436-444.  
[http://www.talwarresearch.com/files/talwar\\_lee\\_3.pdf](http://www.talwarresearch.com/files/talwar_lee_3.pdf)
- Talwar, Victoria; Lee, Kang. "Emergence of White-Lie Telling in Children Between 3 and 7 Years of Age." Merrill-Palmer Quarterly, April 2002, Vol. 48, No. 2, pp. 160-181.  
[http://www.talwarresearch.com/files/talwar\\_lee\\_4.pdf](http://www.talwarresearch.com/files/talwar_lee_4.pdf)
- University at Buffalo. "Lying is Exposed By Micro-expressions We Can't Control." ScienceDaily. May 5, 2006. (Dec. 1, 2008)  
<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2006/05/060505161952.htm>
- Weiner, Tim; Johnston, David; Lewis, Neil A. "Betrayal: The Story of Aldrich Ames, an American Spy." Random House. June 6, 1995. ISBN# 067944050X; 978-0679440505.
- Westlake, Jennifer. "Victoria Talwar." McGill Reporter. Dec. 9, 2004.  
<http://www.mcgill.ca/reporter/37/07/newprofs/talwar/>
- Winerman, Lea. "What We Know Without Knowing How." American Psychological Association. March 2005.  
<http://www.apa.org/monitor/mar05/knowning.html>

[Home](#) | [Adventure](#) | [Animals](#) | [Auto](#) | [Communication](#) | [Computer](#) | [Electronics](#) | [Entertainment](#) | [Food](#) | [Geography](#) | [Health](#) | [History](#) | [Home & Garden](#) | [Money](#) | [People](#) | [Science](#)

[Company Info](#) | [Advertise With Us](#) | [Newsletter](#) | [Careers](#) | [Privacy](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Help](#) | [Visitor Agreement](#) | [RSS](#) | [HSW Tools](#)  
[HowStuffWorks](#) | [HSW Brazil](#) | [HSW China 博闻网](#)  
© 1998-2010 HowStuffWorks, Inc.

[Video Center](#) | [Maps](#) | [Consumer Guide Auto](#) | [Consumer Guide Products](#) | [Make HSW your homepage](#)

[Discovery Communications, LLC](#) | [Discovery Channel](#) | [TLC](#) | [TLC Home](#) | [Animal Planet](#) | [Discovery Health](#) | [Science Channel](#) | [Planet Green](#) | [Discovery Kids](#)  
[Petfinder](#) | [TreeHugger](#) | [Military Channel](#) | [Investigation Discovery](#) | [HD Theater](#) | [FitTV](#) | [Turbo](#) | [Discovery Education](#)

ATTENTION! We recently updated our privacy policy. The changes are effective as of Thursday, October 30, 2008.  
To see the new policy, click [\[here\]](#). Questions? See the policy for the contact information.