The Liar in Your Life
The Way to Truthful Relationships

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When was the last time you were lied to?

- Who lied to you?
- When did it happen?
- Why did it happen?
My guess: You’re probably wrong

- It probably occurred in the last few hours, if not the last few minutes
- It probably didn’t involve
  - a sleazy salesperson
  - a criminal
  - a politician
- It probably did involve
  - someone you know
  - someone close to you
  - maybe even the person sitting next to you this very moment
The conventional view of lying

- It’s rare in everyday life
- It involves people who are morally or psychologically deficient
Bill Clinton
The truth about lying

- **It is common**
  - “The check is in the mail.”
  - “I'll call you next week.”
  - “I’m sick as a dog and can’t make it into work today.”
  - “My phone was off so I missed your call.”

- **Lying is part of how we educate our children**
  - “Tell Grandma you loved the slippers.”

- **It’s how we maintain good relationships with others**
  - “Did you lose weight?”
  - “Of course that dress looks great on you”

- **We are lied to frequently…and we’re probably lying to others just as much**
Lying is a fact of life—not only human life, but in the animal kingdom as well

- The fearsome *Photuris* female firefly
Lying in human life

- If non-humans lie so effectively, wouldn’t human lying be even more adept?
- How to determine the incidence of lying
  - Diary studies
  - Laboratory experiments
  - “The Liar in Your Life” experiment
    - Unacquainted strangers meet for 10 minutes
    - Later, one participant observes video of themselves
Results

- Most people lied at least once
- For those who lied, mean was 3 lies per 10 minute session
- Some lied as many as 12 times in 10 minutes
What did people lie about?

- Some lied to make their partner feel good about themselves
  - “You’re so right about that.”
- Others lied to make the liar look better
  - TIM: We just signed to a record company, actually.
  - ALLISON: Really?
  - TIM: Yeah, “Epitaph.”
  - ALLISON: Do you sing or...
  - TIM: Yeah, I'm the lead singer.
  - ALLISON: Wow!
Are results generalizable?

- Can these results be generalized outside the lab?
  - College students may be prone to lying
  - Suggests real-world incidence may be different
  - Led to “Liar, Liar in the Real World” study
Why do people lie?
Why we lie: To shield others from unpleasant truths

- We avoid telling others their faults
- We ourselves want to be shielded from unpleasant information
- Consequently, lying becomes a social skill, taught to us by
  - Parents
  - Peers
  - Society
“Good Liars are Made, Not Born” study

- Mock television commercial
- Participants: First graders, seventh graders, and college students
- Results
  - First graders: Unimpressive liars
  - Seventh graders: Talented liars
  - College students: Consummate liars
Other reasons why we lie

- To influence others
- To create and manage impressions
- To provide reassurance and social support
People lie because they can get away with it

- No reliable way of telling when someone is lying
  - Polygraphs are not particularly accurate
    - You can fool them
  - Brain scans, while promising, aren’t reliable
  - Hasn’t stopped an industry from growing up
Truth.Quest!

Fun and fascinating ways to separate fact from fiction.

Each of our "Truth Detectors" is evolved from technological breakthroughs that took a few years, would have taken a century without it. Such devices are an extension of the human brain's innate ability to detect inaccuracies in information that is not made by the human brain and cannot be communicated by the person. Understanding these new devices is a matter of recognition and understanding of the shape — the true shape of things. In our "Truth Detectors," the "true shape of things" is OK. You see things as they are, and in the process, you see the hidden messages in a word. While no one-direction method is obvious enough to catch your eye, these versatile devices are perfect for use in front of a mirror or on any of the many "Truth Detectors." You have a new, exciting way to...
Preliminary Credibility Assessment Screening System

- Issued to US soldiers in Afghanistan
If instruments don’t work, how about our own intuitions?

- People identify lies at only chance levels
  - We overestimate our abilities to detect deception
  - Even people who we assume should be good at detecting lies aren’t
    - Polygraph administrators
    - Judges
    - Psychiatrists
    - Police officers
Why we are poor at identifying liars: We believe that the wrong cues are related to deception

- Across most cultures, people believe averted gaze is associated with lying
  - It isn’t!
- Individual differences abound
The true signs of deception

- Higher voice pitch
- Excessive blinking
- Shrugs
- Dilated pupils
- Decreased eye contact
- Less smiling
- Using more words
  - Here’s the catch: These same cues are also signs of anxiety
Why we are poor at identifying liars: Liars have the advantage

- The *Truth Bias*
  - We assume others are telling us the truth

- The *Willing Accomplice* phenomenon
  - We’re often motivated to accept lies

- We’re *Cognitive Misers*
  - It takes less mental effort to assume others are truthful
Does it matter?

- Maybe it’s OK to lie
  - People do it all the time
  - It greases the wheels of social interaction
  - It’s an effective social strategy
Lying does matter

- Lies place a “smudge” on social interactions
- They lead to an inauthenticity in relationship
- There’s a snowball effect: Lies lead to lies
Solutions

- Refrain from lying altogether
  - The Radical Honesty Movement
  - The problem: It’s not very practical

- Assume that there are some situations where lying is permissible
  - Instances of moral clarity: The “Nazis at the door” situation
  - Less clear: Lying to shield others from unpleasant truths
How do we deal with others’ lies?: The AHA principle

- Active Honesty Assessment (AHA)
  - Lie detection requires constant vigilance
  - Adopt a *falsehood bias*, assuming that everything you’re told could be a lie
  - Overcome your tendency to accept pleasing lies
  - Verify, verify, verify
  - Use your gut
The bottom line: Three principles about honesty

- Accept that there are liars in your life—and that you are one of them

- Remember that all lies have a cost, even if done to protect someone else

- Honesty may not be the perfect, universally applicable policy—but ultimately it is the best policy