

What to Do If You Find Yourself Lying Too Much

Objective

To help you identify the reasons that you frequently tell lies and to identify alternatives to this self-defeating behavior.

You Should Know

Almost everyone lies at some time. You might tell a “white lie” so that it doesn’t hurt someone’s feelings. Or you might tell a lie about being sick because you need a break from your work. However, some people seem to lie all of the time, often because they are keeping secrets. They lie compulsively and impulsively without seeing the negative consequences that their lying has on others. In many ways, the person they lie to most of all is themselves.

This behavior has been called *mythomania*. Some experts distinguish between “pathological lying,” which typically has a deliberate motive—getting away with something, gaining attention or admiration, or manipulating someone. “Compulsive” lying typically has no ulterior motive. The lying behavior is experienced as out of the person’s control and might even be damaging to their reputations. People who lie compulsively sometimes have trouble admitting the truth. If you are assessing whether you might have a problem with chronic lying, it is important to rule out any medical or other psychiatric problems, such as bipolar disorder, impulse-control disorders, personality disorders, delusions, psychosis, or substance abuse.

Your history and your environment can also be a big part of compulsive lying. Lies might be seen as a protective coping mechanism for dealing with past abuse, traumatic experiences, or ongoing low self-esteem. People might lie to feel more accepted or valued in their intimate relationships, friendships, job situations, or community groups. The lying can then become habitual and it can become hard to own up to the truth. Sometimes people experience stress in trying to keep track of their stories, and, if discovered, they might lose their position or relationships, or even get into legal trouble. So the stakes can be high.

What to Do

In this worksheet, you will begin to identify the situations and possible reasons for your problem with lying; then you will learn some options for changing your habitual lying behaviors. Be sure not to judge yourself or get stuck in feeling ashamed or guilty. The fact that you are interested in examining this part of your life is a good step forward toward living a healthier, more authentic life.

On the lines below, write down up to ten lies that you are aware of that you have told in the past three to six months. The lies can relate to just about anything; they can be little fibs (how much you weigh or how well you did on a test) to bigger, more significant lies (income

disclosure, job experience, implicating another person to get them in trouble). Don't censor yourself; just do the best you can.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

What patterns, if any, do you notice about the lies that you have told? That is, do the lies tend to be to make yourself look better, to gain an advantage, to harm someone else, or something else? Write your reflections as honestly as you can.

What are the positive gains of your lying behaviors?

Imagine that you are someone who feels very comfortable telling the truth. What do you imagine that would be like? How do you think it would affect your feelings about yourself? Your relationships with others? Your performance or achievements in school or on the job? Be honest.

Here are some tips to consider if you are trying to gain control over your pattern of lying:

- Find someone nonjudgmental whom you can confide in and ask if they will help you be accountable. This can be a therapist, clergy person, friend, counselor, or someone from a peer-support group. Set up a plan to regularly share your thoughts and experiences regarding your lying.
- Keep a journal reflecting on your lying patterns. Make note of the positive gains and negative consequences as you go along.
- Find positive activities and people to occupy your time—practice being honest and open with them, even if it feels awkward or uncomfortable at first. You might feel relief as you become more comfortable.
- Apologize and/or ask forgiveness from those to whom you’ve lied and hurt. Tell them that you are working hard to learn a different way of being and interacting.

- Make goals for yourself that may lead to higher self-esteem, such as changing jobs, making new friends, trying a new skill, taking a class, volunteering to help others, and so on.

Reflections on This Exercise

1. What was the hardest part of about doing this exercise? The easiest?

2. What are the major *internal* challenges you face as you work to change your lying behavior (e.g., thoughts, fears, worries, regrets, shame, etc.)?

3. What are the major *external* challenges you face as you work to change your lying behavior (e.g., disappointing others, being regarded differently/less positively, legal trouble, etc.)?

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What could you do differently to make progress in this area?
