

Tell the truth, now: Is it okay to lie?

There are Trump-level lying and everyday fibs. But there are always consequences.



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It's become fashionable to say we live in a post-truth world. The Oxford English Dictionary says it means "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping political debate or public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief".

We see this played out on the world stage, with former United States president Donald Trump. The Washington Post's fact-checking team found that by the end of his term, he had accumulated 30,573 untruths – averaging 21 erroneous claims a day.

Of Trump's "pinocchio" – a term based on the fictional children's character whose nose grows longer every time he tells a lie – New Yorker editor David Remnick said: "He lies to avoid. He lies to inflame. He lies to promote and to preen. Sometimes he seems to lie just for the hell of it." And he added with something bordering on wonder: "Trump's capacity for lying inspires equal parts awe and revulsion."

The fallout from Trump's words and actions, including Fox News' multimillion-dollar defamation settlement and other legal battles, continues to be headline-making today, given who he is and the impact on American politics.

But in this post-truth world, what about lying on a personal level? Where is the moral compass set now on lying, even as the social media world around us explodes with fakes, misinformation and lies?

THE LOWDOWN ON LYING

Conventional morality has it that lying is wrong, and that any civilised society can function only on an assumption of honesty. For everyday transactions and dealings to continue, we have to believe that most people are



Former US president Donald Trump, who is running for the White House again in 2024, with supporters during a campaign rally in New Hampshire in April. The Washington Post's fact-checking team found that by the end of his term as president in January 2021, Trump had accumulated 30,573 untruths – averaging 21 erroneous claims a day. PHOTO: NYTIMES

The Deal, observed that his subject was abnormally at odds with the notion of truth. "Lying is second nature to him," Mr Schwartz said. "More than anyone else I have ever met, Trump has the ability to convince himself that whatever he is saying at any given moment is true, or sort of true, or at least ought to be true."

Lying can be consequential to those who have been lied to. There is that feeling of chagrin and anger at being duped and manipulated. A person's usual trust in others might be shaken, making them feel vulnerable, negative and cynical. And they can become punitive. Doctors, for instance, may be predisposed to disregard the reported symptoms of patients who had lied previously, or they might be tempted to retaliate by withholding treatment.

One obvious way to prevent these consequences is to tell the truth all the time – something that the psychotherapist Brad Blanton has recommended in his book *Radical Honesty*, which has given birth to a movement which urges everyone to be completely and uncompromisingly honest in their interactions with each other.

Truth can be a bitter pill. Dr Blanton acknowledges, and telling it can have repercussions, but he argued that complete honesty – not even white lies, no exceptions whatsoever – is worth the consequences because it can, in the long run, reduce stress, deepen connections with others and lessen emotional upheavals.

But just as lying can be damaging to others, unsparing honesty can be mean and brutal. Besides, our version of the truth might not be that objective. Our thoughts of others are coloured by our internalised biases. Lying and truth telling are more nuanced and complicated.

It is a matter of whether telling the truth can help and benefit someone. It is also a matter of whether it would be the right time to do so – withholding an unpalatable truth might be more prudent, until the person is ready. And it would also depend on the nature of the relationship. Relationships, which are fragile and precarious, can be easily damaged by unthinking honesty and unadulterated truth-telling.

Honesty might be the best policy most of the time, but discretion, tempered with kindness and empathy, is also the better part of valour.

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But the truth is, lying is something we all do, though not on that Trumpian epic scale. The clear-eyed realist in us knows we will continue to lie – even to ourselves – and expects others to lie to us. We lie in almost any context. Some lies are minor, others are large; some are harmless, others are grubby.

Lies are told even in the practice of medicine, where there is an ethical obligation to tell patients and families the truth about their illness, prognosis and treatment.

The reality is that in situations where bad news has to be given, doctors often hedge, minimise problems and fail to tell the whole unblemished truth; or resort to overly simplified explanations; or take flight in using obfuscating clinical terms and statistics; or give ungrounded assurance or even fib about the prognosis.

On the surface, the intent is to protect the patient, and might well be from the well-intentioned stance of old-fashioned paternalism. From another and not-so-noble perspective, it could be that the doctors are wanting to avoid difficult and uncomfortable conversations.

Ironically, it is something that doctors themselves might abhor when they become patients. A study among doctors who believe

their professional ethics include the justified lying to patients in the hope of avoiding demoralising them if the prognosis is bad found that they personally would never want to be lied to if they were ill.

Patients also lie to doctors – sometimes for secondary gains (to obtain medication, medical leave or legal compensation); or out of embarrassment or fear of their doctors (lying about taking their medications); or to present themselves in a better light.

They might even lie to themselves. Self-deception becomes problematic when patients deny truths that are perceived to be shameful but nonetheless important to face and admit, such as an abusive relationship or an addiction. In people with substance-use disorder, this denial is a major obstacle to treatment and rehabilitation.

PATHOLOGICAL LYING

There is also a group of people who are called "pathological liars" – a label occasionally foisted on certain politicians. The more recent line-up includes Trump, former British prime minister Boris Johnson, Russian President Vladimir Putin and US House Representative George Santos. But in the field of mental

health, pathological lying is more narrowly defined, though still poorly understood.

The first recorded observation of this phenomenon goes back to 1891. German psychiatrist Anton Delbruck coined the term *pseudologia fantastica* to describe a group of patients with a marked proclivity for self-aggrandisement by telling outlandish lies that cast them as heroes or victims to impress others.

More recently, US psychologists Drew A. Curtis and Christian L. Hart have proposed that "pathological lying" should be recognised as a mental disorder.

In their studies, which found that while most people on the average fib once a day, pathological liars are far more prodigious in their lying and persist even when it ruins their life, wrecks their relationships with others and poses risk to themselves or others. They seem to be driven by a sense of low self-esteem, with an insatiable need for social approval and a desire to create a false facade. When confronted, they would usually admit the lies. That deceptive impulse itself is as much about self-destruction as self-delusion.

WHY IT'S BAD FOR YOU

Lying might be bad for our

health. A study by researchers from the University of Notre Dame followed 110 people over 10 weeks. Half of the participants were asked to refrain from lying over this period, and the other half were not. All underwent weekly lie-detector tests to determine the number of times they had fibbed the previous week.

The researchers found that those who told fewer lies also had fewer mental and physical health complaints. Perhaps it is because it takes more work and ingenuity to lie and to evade detection. And most times, it is stressful – the liar is dogged by the possibility of being exposed and humiliated.

Even if the lying is not detected, one has to contend with the guilt and the debasement caused to our self-dignity. ("In a lie, the spirit practises treason against itself," philosopher Martin Buber once said.) Liars dupe others, but, in a sense, they also deceive themselves by warping their own view of reality, and the more they lie, the more habitual and extensive this distortion becomes.

Over time, the habit of lying loosens their grip on reality, and they lose sight of what they are really doing to others and themselves. Journalist Tony Schwartz, the ghostwriter of Trump's 1987 book, *The Art Of*