THE LIAR IN YOUR LIFE
The Way to Truthful Relationships

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Think about the last time you were lied to.

It may take you a minute. Most of the time when I ask people about when they were last deceived, they need a few moments before coming up with something. Eventually, they will recollect the story of the mechanic who overcharged for an unnecessary repair, or the date who promised to call the next day and was never heard from again.

Lies that took some kind of emotional or financial toll are the ones that generally spring to mind when we think about the deception we encounter. This makes sense. Events that are painful or dramatic tend to be memorable, and tend also to shape our impressions of the circumstances—like being lied to—that surround them. My guess is that the lie you came up with as the one you most recently encountered involved a blow to either your heart or your wallet.

The reality of deception, though, is very different from what such painful memories lead us to believe. Our relationship to lying is far more intimate than the occasional encounter with a duplicitous mechanic or dishonest lover. Think again, more carefully, about the last time you were lied to. Perhaps you
picked up your dry cleaning, and when you thanked the person handing it to you, he responded, “My pleasure”—although both of you knew there was almost no chance that doing your laundry had given him any pleasure at all. Or maybe you were in line at the grocery store and you struck up a conversation with the woman in line ahead of you. Maybe she told you she’d never had to wait in line so long before. Really?

Or perhaps the last time you checked your e-mail you were offered a share of a Nigerian inheritance, which you could claim for only a few thousand dollars in taxes. Or maybe you watched television or listened to the radio, and heard about this or that product’s miraculous or life-altering virtues. Maybe an infomercial promised you savings, but only provided you “act now.”

The truth is, we are lied to frequently, even in the course of a single day. Most of the lies we don’t notice, or don’t even consider to be deception. Spam e-mail, deceptive advertising, and disingenuous social niceties form almost an omnipresent white noise that we’ve learned to tune out. Regardless of what we choose to accommodate or ignore, though, the fact remains that lies are a typical feature of our everyday experience. That we do disregard so much deception only underlines how common it really is.

Lying is not limited to one aspect of our society, one type of person, or one kind of institution. As we’ll see, lying permeates the way we get to know one another and the way we form relationships. It is a part of how we educate our children and how we elect our leaders. It is essential to our economy, and it is essential to the media.

More strikingly, while lying sometimes occurs as an aberration in these and other arenas, often its manifestations are the rule. We tend to think of lying as something we censure. But just as we smile when the man handing us our dry cleaning lies about the pleasure he took in laundering our clothes, there are lies society accepts, and even encourages. Indeed, deception is so deeply ingrained in the functioning of our society that if we removed it, we might not recognize the society that resulted. We probably wouldn’t be very comfortable living in it, either.

The fact is that much of what we think we know about deception is, simply put, not true. Misconceptions too often mask lying’s prominence in our society and the ambiguities that surround its operation. So the first step to understanding the role of lying in our lives may be to consider the many ways we misunderstand it.

Amanda and the Seven Dwarfs

A former student of mine, whom I’ll call Gary, moved to Santa Fe a few years ago to pursue a career in real estate. (You’ll forgive me for fudging the names and other minor details in this story, and in other personal anecdotes that appear in the book. My only concern is to protect the innocent, as they say on Dragnet. The essentials, of course, are the truth, the whole truth, and so forth.) Gary is a devoted marathoner, and he joined a recreational club of runners in his area. Another member of this club was a young woman named Amanda. She and Gary fell in love.

Amanda told Gary about her troubled upbringing. Her mother had died when she was young, and she was estranged from her father. As a teenager, she had battled cancer. Gary was sympathetic, and impressed at the courage and toughness she showed in overcoming these hardships. After they’d dated for a little under a year, Gary proposed, and Amanda accepted. They bought an apartment together and started to plan their wedding.

In the following weeks, though, Amanda began to complain
of feeling fatigued and lethargic. She showed little enthusiasm for putting together an invitation list or selecting a reception venue. Since this was wholly out of character for the energetic woman he knew, Gary encouraged her to see her doctor—a man Amanda trusted and whom she had been seeing since college. Because she was anxious about her doctor's visit, Gary offered to go with her.

At the doctor’s office, Gary and Amanda described Amanda’s symptoms. Amanda’s doctor said that mononucleosis sounded like a potential explanation, but he would have to examine her. Gary then asked whether a diagnosis of mono was more likely based on Amanda’s history of cancer. As Gary described it to me weeks later, the doctor looked at him blankly and asked, “Cancer?”

Amanda had never had cancer. Nor did she have mono. What she did have, or so it seems, is mythomania, more commonly described as compulsive lying. Amanda wasn’t estranged from her father, and her mother was very much alive. Amanda had hidden her fairly close relationship with her parents from Gary, along with a whole host of other facts about her basically happy and completely healthy background.

The relationship, and the lies, unraveled quickly but not neatly. Gary had to explain to all his friends and family why he was canceling his wedding. He had to buy out Amanda’s share of the apartment, which he eventually sold, at a loss. And he had to start a big part of his life all over again.

I wouldn’t be surprised if you’ve heard stories similar to Gary’s. Perhaps you’ve personally encountered a compulsive liar and experienced the unnerving revelation that everything you know about him or her might be false. Compulsive lying is not a common condition, but the anecdotes that accompany it tend to be remembered.

Now let’s consider another incident of deception, one that is also remarkable but that occurred in a far different context from Gary’s broken engagement to Amanda. In 1994, seven top executives from leading American tobacco companies, among them the CEOs of Philip Morris, Brown & Williamson, and U.S. Tobacco, testified before the House Subcommittee on Health and the Environment. The “seven dwarfs,” as they were later dubbed, had been called as part of the committee’s ongoing efforts to bring attention to the health dangers of cigarettes. All seven of these men were asked whether they believed nicotine to be addictive. And each man answered in turn, under oath, that he did not. The statement “I believe that nicotine is not addictive” was repeated again and again.

What the seven dwarfs did not volunteer was research Big Tobacco itself had done, demonstrating that nicotine, in fact, is addictive. Nor did they mention that their companies had made efforts to enhance the addictive powers of the nicotine in the cigarettes they sold. Three months after their testimony, the Justice Department opened a criminal investigation into whether they had committed perjury with their “nicotine is not addictive” assertion.

The stories of Gary and Amanda, on the one hand, and the seven dwarfs of Big Tobacco, on the other, would seem to have little in common, other than the fact that they both have lying at their core. But taken together, these stories provide a fairly comprehensive picture of how most of us believe deception functions in our society. Those telling the lies in both stories seem generally representative of the kinds of people we typically think of as liars: lying, as practiced by Amanda, was an abnormal behavior, one indicative of mental imbalance. She may be an extreme case, but liars are generally thought of as standing outside the norm for social behavior. They are more
morally lax and more manipulative—or simply more crazy—than an "ordinary" person. The seven dwarfs embody another feature of the lying stereotype. We can see these men in the ruthless liar mold, displaying a willingness to sacrifice the truth in order to make a profit or to escape punishment. They aren't crazy, but they are greedy or guilty enough to be dishonest.

In both of these incidents of deception, too, we can identify innocent victims of the lies. Amanda tricked and emotionally manipulated Gary for her own purposes, whatever they might have been. The Big Tobacco executives perpetrated their fraud against a congressional subcommittee and, more broadly, against the American public in general. In other words, they lied to us.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, in both cases the act of lying was a clear violation of conventional standards for behavior. Amanda's lies violated the bonds of trust she shared with her fiancé, and so Gary broke off their engagement. The tobacco executives broke their oath to tell the truth, and legal action followed. In broad terms, the lies in both cases were wrong, and were censured as such.

In sum, then, both of these stories, while different in their particulars, fit our common conception of how lying works. One story played out in a private arena, the other in public, but in both cases the structure was the same: atypical individuals employed deception to victimize innocent people and were justly condemned for it. Indeed, because such stories are so remarkable and draw so much attention, they almost define the stereotype of deceit. As with the lies touched on earlier, those of the duplicitous mechanic and the dishonest date, when we think about lying, these are the kinds of dramatic events that shape our impressions. They are also consistent with the "big" deceptions found throughout the history of civilization. Indeed,
participants meet, and I asked these unacquainted individuals to spend ten minutes getting to know each other. I didn’t tell the participants, though, that I was conducting a study of lying. Instead, I said I was interested in investigating how people interact when they meet someone new. Something else I didn’t mention was that each pair’s entire conversation would be secretly videotaped. (Ironically, researchers who study deception end up employing a good deal of it in their research.)

After the conversation finished, I revealed the secret surveillance to the participants. I then asked one of each pair to review the video with me. As the participant watched the video, I asked him or her to identify, moment by moment, any instances in which he or she said something that was “inaccurate.” (I purposely didn’t ask participants to report “lies,” wanting to avoid their becoming defensive or embarrassed and, consequently, not admitting to deception. The term “inaccurate” seemed less charged than “lie.”)

There is a difference worth emphasizing between this study and other laboratory studies of deception. Most studies of lying, many of my own included, involve a fairly artificial setup. For example, a participant might be asked to watch a series of short video clips of people describing their upbringing and then identify in which clips participants had been told by the experimenter to lie. That sort of thing doesn’t usually happen in real life. However, we meet new people all the time. Maybe the conversations we have with strangers don’t usually occur in a small room with a two-way mirror, but meeting and getting to know someone else is a fundamental part of social life. Whatever other conditions my study introduced, at its heart it did seem to reproduce a typical, everyday experience. I hoped, then, that the data I gleaned would be particularly relevant to an exploration of deception in ordinary life.

I did, though, introduce one other twist into the basic structure of the experiment. I wanted to know if the frequency of lying might change with the specifics of the conversation. Perhaps some social interactions were more prone to deception than others.

To try to find out, I told some of the participants to attempt to come off as very likable. In other cases, I told one of the participants to convince the other that he or she was very competent. Everyone else I instructed simply to get to know the other person. I reasoned that while assigning goals to certain people did introduce a slightly greater degree of artificiality into the experiment, social situations in which one person is trying to demonstrate his or her charm or poise to another are very common. And again: none of the people in the study knew I was even interested in lies. As far as the pairs of strangers were concerned, deception had no relevance whatsoever to the study.

The conversations between the participants generally unfolded as you might expect: some initial, tentative “How are you?”s and “Where are you from?”s, followed by a more comfortable exchange of personal details and opinions as the chat got rolling. One conversation between a man and a woman I’ll call Tim and Allison was fairly typical. Tim was a college student with a laid-back disposition suggestive of someone at ease with himself. Once he and Allison had gotten a little bit acquainted, he told her about his band.

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!
Another participant, Natasha, also discussed with her partner her musical background, talking about how she entered competitions as a pianist and toured the country with a chamber group. She also managed to weave into the conversation that she’d been a member of her honor society in high school. It was all more or less what you’d expect from two strangers making small talk—one person, directly or just unconsciously, trying to impress another with his or her achievements, or just passing the time by discussing his or her life.

What makes all of the above examples remarkable is that they are all lies. Natasha never toured the country, and never quite managed to be inducted into the honor society. Tim’s band didn’t sign with Epitaph. In fact, there’s no band at all. Tim’s musical expertise is limited to, in his words, “a couple chords.” And these are only a few examples of what I found to be an extraordinary pattern. Participants in my study didn’t just lie occasionally. They lied a lot.

Participants watching themselves on video confessed to lies that were big and small, rooted in the truth and fantastic, predictable and unexpected, relatively defensible and simply baffling. Further, the lying was hardly limited to the participants to whom I had given a directive to appear likable or competent. These people lied with greater frequency, but even those with no specific agenda lied regularly.

All told, I found that most people lied three times in the course of a ten-minute conversation. Some lied as many as twelve times. Bear in mind, too, that after the fact, participants might have been reluctant to confess to their “inaccuracies.” This would only lead to an underreporting of the incidences of deception, though. In other words, it’s possible that the frequency of lies was even higher than three lies per conversation.

My finding that most people told three lies in a ten-minute “getting to know you” chat attracted national media attention. The CBS Evening News, the BBC, the New York Times, and the Washington Post all covered the story. I was often asked whether my results could be explained by some circumstance unrelated to how people “actually lie” in the real world. Admittedly, it would be easy—and maybe a little comforting—to conclude that the randomly selected participants in my study just happened to be unusually duplicitous. Or one might reason that some factor in my study induced people to lie far more than they normally would. But my later research on conversations between unacquainted strangers has shown, fairly consistently, that they lie to each other about three times every ten minutes, both inside and outside the lab. With apologies to the media outlets that shined a spotlight on my work, the results of this study really weren’t extraordinary. They were typical. The extraordinary thing is how much, it turns out, people lie to each other.

High rates of lying are common even outside conversations between strangers, who are unlikely to encounter each other in the future. We might be able to accept that new acquaintances lie to each other with regularity, but we’d think that people with any sort of established social bond would not. Yet this is not the case. Psychologists such as myself have conducted scores of studies examining interpersonal deception: as it plays out in conversations between strangers, as in my study; in interactions between spouses and lovers; within families; and on the job. Lies occur regularly in all such contexts. The exact frequency is difficult to measure. A study like mine works fine to examine interactions between people who are meeting for the first time, but it’s not as if this setup lends itself to, say, conversations between a husband and wife in bed.

However, diary research studies, in which participants
are asked to record their daily social interactions and indicate which contained lies, show that lying occurs regularly even in the most intimate relationships. Although deception occurs at lower levels between those with a close bond and often involves lies meant to put another person at ease ("Of course you're not putting on weight"), lying is still a routine part of the rapport between spouses, lovers, close friends, and family members. No relationship has been found to be immune to dishonesty.

The weight of evidence is thus compelling and clear: people are lied to with great frequency in their daily lives. While the extent and content of Amanda’s deception of Gary may have been extreme, the fact that she lied regularly is not. Lying in our society is not “abnormal.” The normal people who fill our lives do it all the time, in all sorts of ordinary interpersonal situations.

The question becomes, Why? Why do people feel compelled to make up bands they don’t belong to or honors they never earned? What are the lies that occur so regularly when we talk with someone new—or sometimes even with a person we know well—all about? To put it simply: Why all the lies?

To answer these questions, we’ll need to reconsider some of our fundamental ideas about the motivations behind deception. Stories like those of Amanda duping Gary or the seven dwarfs trying to dupe us tend to make us think about lying in terms of what it does to the person who is fooled. The central issue, though, may be what lying does for the person telling the lies.

“We Have So Much in Common”

In the 2002 film About a Boy, starring Hugh Grant and adapted from a Nick Hornby novel, the thirty-something protagonist, Will, pretends to have a son so he can join a single-parents’ group to meet women. Predictably, the invention of

“Ned” leads to a series of complications and, because it’s a Hugh Grant movie, ends up helping Will find love. The trope is a familiar one in romantic comedies: the hero tells a giant lie—about having a passion for dance or a lucrative career—in order to win the interest of some desirable romantic partner.

We probably don’t spend much time wondering why a tobacco executive would lie to a congressional subcommittee about the dangers of cigarettes. Nor does it baffle us when a mechanic tells us a replacement part costs three times more than it actually does. While we might question the character of the people who tell such lies, the reasons for the lies themselves seem straightforward. Tobacco executives want to evade a truth that would harm their business and perhaps leave them legally culpable; greedy mechanics hope to bilk ignorant customers out of a few dollars more. Profit, the avoidance of punishment: these are the sorts of motivations we often associate with deception.

Yet greed, evasion of punishment, or some degree of insanity are not adequate explanations for much of the lying that occurs in daily life. Unacquainted strangers usually have nothing material to gain or any consequences to avoid through deception. Nor is there profit involved in many of the other interpersonal interactions that make up a typical day, and which researchers have found to be riddled with lies. Conditions like mythomania are very rare; mental problems can account for only a small portion of lies.

Ironically, the fiction of movies like About a Boy may provide more of a clue for the motivations behind the bulk of the deception we encounter than real-life incidents like the tobacco hearing. In the movies, deceptive behavior is exaggerated and played
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for laughs. Yet using deception to win affection may be so common in the movies because it is so common in reality, too.

To see what does motivate much interpersonal deception, let’s examine more closely the lies told during my experiment. As I mentioned, I gave some of the participants particular goals for how to present themselves: some of them were instructed to come off as likable, others as competent. And while participants with no particular goal lied frequently, tellingly, those who had a self-presentation agenda lied more. Tellingly, also, the kinds of lies participants told varied based on their goals.

Let’s first consider the participants instructed to impress their partner with their likability. These people tended to tell lies about their feelings. They distorted their true opinions and emotions, often in order to mirror those expressed by their partners. If their partner expressed a preference for Chinese food, for instance, they would claim to like Chinese food, too, even if they hated it. This kind of mirroring behavior is exactly the kind we see enacted for comedic effect in so many movies.

In fact, psychologists have found the mirroring of opinions, even at the cost of the truth, to be a very common strategy for ingratiating oneself with others. The reasoning behind such behavior is rather straightforward. Most people shy away from conflict and disagreement. They build relationships with others based on fundamental things they have in common. In order to form a relationship with another person, then, one would want to avoid the areas of dissonance and emphasize the commonalities.

Imagine yourself on a first date. If you find your date charming and attractive, it would be an obvious tactic to try to at least gloss over your disgust for her preferred political party and to maybe feign more interest than you actually have in her discussion of West African folk music. What bears emphasis here is not only that such behavior is common, as psychological research has shown, but also that mirroring of opinion to avoid disagreement and demonstrate similarity is widely considered to be normal. If you later tell a friend that you liked your date but spent your dinner with her arguing over politics and expressing disinterest in her hobbies, he might give you credit for honesty, but he would also think you were a complete social moron. Deception is such a common technique for ingratiating that its lack strikes us as aberrant.

Now let’s look at the participants in my study I told to try to appear competent. The lies of this group reveal another powerful motivation for interpersonal deception, one more directly psychological than social. Participants instructed to come off as competent tended to lie about their biographies. They invented achievements and plans that would enhance the way they were perceived. They spoke of academic honor societies they didn’t belong to and of career ambitions they had no intention of fulfilling. In other words, in order to impress their partners as competent, they made up stories about being competent.

I want to emphasize again that I didn’t encourage any of the participants to lie. Indeed, when I spoke with participants with self-presentation goals after their conversations, they reported that they hadn’t felt encouraged to be deceptive. Deception was a strategy they selected on their own to achieve their goal. But why would so many people lie to appear competent or likable? Why not “just be yourself”?

We can answer these questions if we consider what “just being yourself” means. Often, when someone gives us this advice, the implication is that “just being yourself” is the simplest approach to any social situation. In fact, “just being yourself,” if we examine it closely, turns out to be a fairly complicated process, involving a complex balancing of a range of factors.
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To begin with, when we interact with another person, there is always a larger social context that shapes the encounter. If we see a friend at a party, for example, we will speak with him differently than we would if we visited him in his cubicle at his office. The different standards for behavior in the different settings have to be taken into account in the “self” we present to our friend. This self is further shaped by the content of the encounter, emotional or otherwise. If a friend has just lost his cat, we wouldn’t be much a friend if we didn’t express sympathy; if a friend announces her engagement, we wouldn’t be much of a friend if we didn’t express joy. Such social standards for how we ought to act are weighed against expressions of our “true” feelings.

Finally, working in conjunction with our sensitivity to context is an almost constant interest in projecting a positive image of ourselves. No matter where we are or who we are talking to, we generally want to show our better qualities. Which of these qualities we express is again influenced by the nature of the interaction we are involved in. For example, our excellent sense of humor isn’t much use at funerals, but our caring, sensitive nature is. On the other hand, our sense of humor might be precisely what we want to show on a first date, or to a prospective client.

“Just being yourself,” it turns out, takes effort. Indeed, psychologists have long discussed it as something that takes creative effort. Our expression of who we are involves choices that reflect social and interpersonal context, our mood, our personality, our need to maintain our self-image, and on and on. The fact that we are able to perform this process with little conscious effort every day and in nearly every conversation speaks to our vast intelligence as social beings.

Still, if we consider self-presentation as a creative process, we can see how it can easily slide into deception. Again, every interaction involves decisions about which attributes to emphasize and to minimize, which impulses to follow and which to ignore. At some point, we may not be choosing among our actual traits and our sincere reactions. We may simply fabricate the traits and reactions the social situation calls for, or that we think it calls for. In other words, we might lie.

In addition to this, there is another complexity to “just being yourself.” We aren’t always confident in ourselves. Insecurities are part of human nature. All of us, at times, question our own good qualities—whether we are really smart enough, attractive enough, capable enough. Lying can allow us to navigate social situations in which we don’t feel we quite measure up. Like the participants in my study who attempted to appear competent by making up stories of their competence, if we fear we don’t embody the qualities a particular situation calls for, we can substitute a fiction that does.

Think back to Amanda and the lies she told Gary about her deceased parent and her battle with cancer. It’s probably not a worthwhile exercise to try to draw thirdhand conclusions about why she did what she did. But if we assume that there was at least some element of wanting to win sympathy and admiration, of attempting to present herself in a way that was more appealing to Gary than she believed the facts allowed for, we can identify elements of conventional social behavior in her mythomania.

The key difference, of course, is that Amanda manipulated Gary practically all the way to the altar. Common interpersonal deception is usually far less menacing. Without a doubt, every lie, by definition, involves deceit and implicit manipulation—but that does not mean that every lie is employed in the service of deception and manipulation. When Tim told Allison about
his nonexistent band and his nonexistent record contract, he did so without any larger agenda of fooling her into doing this or thinking that. For all he knew, he would never see Allison again. Tim’s lies seemed to involve Allison only secondarily. His primary goal seemed to be fostering his own persona or addressing his own insecurities when meeting a new person. To put it simply, Tim’s lies were about Tim.

We now see how another aspect of the conventional conception of lying is debunked by reality. Stories like that of Amanda and of the seven dwarfs of Big Tobacco make us think of lying as a tool used to victimize or exploit ordinary people. More commonly, though, ordinary people use lying to quell their own insecurities, to build a friendship, or to avoid a disagreement.

Sometimes, too, lying can be used within a conversation to benefit the conversation itself. There are times in any interaction when a strict adherence to the truth would only interrupt its natural flow, probably needlessly. When a friend wants to tell you about the great time he had in Montauk over the weekend, and asks you, “You know where Montauk is, right?,” it borders on the pointless, not to mention the tedious, to stop his story and find out exactly where the town might be. The conversation goes much more smoothly if you nod, and say, “Oh, sure, Montauk.” I call such deception “lies of social convenience.”

These lies grease the wheels of social discourse. They are not about fooling someone or achieving illicit gain. They are a tactic to make communication easier, or sometimes even possible.

As we will discuss more fully in future chapters, psychologists have found an association between socially successful people and skill at deception. In other words, popular people, for whatever reason, tend to be good liars. While it is easy to exaggerate the meaning of this finding (we can’t say, for instance, that popular people are popular because they are good liars), it can be argued that an ability to lie is a valuable social skill. Consider whether you would really want to form a relationship with someone who pointed out every area of disagreement or could not convince you of his feigned interest in your hobbies. In many ways, deception is not so different from tact; indeed, one could make a case that sometimes they are actually one and the same.

Regardless of the terminology we apply to interpersonal deception, it’s important to recognize that it is both a common and an accepted feature of ordinary conversation. Strict honesty is often directly opposed to what we consider to be standard social behavior. Lying, as strange as it sounds, is more normal.

But if lying is more frequently used to keep a conversation moving than to cheat or manipulate, this raises an important question: Does lying matter as much as we think? Perhaps, since there are no obvious victims to much deception, its frequency in our culture should not be so alarming. Maybe lying, outside of the kind practiced by Amanda or the seven dwarfs of Big Tobacco, doesn’t really matter so much.

This line of thinking may be comforting, but unfortunately it is also misleading. While many lies don’t cost us money or happiness, they do cost us something. The idea that some don’t is surprisingly common, though. Many of us like to think that there are lies that are so insignificant, they aren’t even really lies at all.

The Myth of the Little White Lie

We have seen how deception is pervasive in daily life, but not deception as we commonly think of it. A coworker may claim to like the Yankees in order to steer clear of an argument about the Red Sox. The woman in line ahead of us at Star-
buck may feign a familiarity with our company to avoid the inconvenience of saying that she's never heard of it.

When I tell people that ten-minute conversations often include three lies, and sometimes more, they are usually shocked. But when I explain the function of these lies, the shock gives way to a kind of ambivalence. “But those are just little white lies,” I’ve been told more than once about some of the more common forms of interpersonal deception.

This is what I call the Myth of the Little White Lie. According to this myth, “little white lies” are not the same thing as “real” lies. “Little white lies,” like a lie of social convenience or the “My pleasure” we hear on receiving our dry cleaning, are so negligible—or so the myth says—that they shouldn’t even be grouped with lies like those of the seven dwarfs. “Real” lies are bad: they cost money or cause pain. “Real” lies are morally wrong. “Little white lies,” by (somewhat circular) definition, don’t hurt anyone.

Unfortunately, the Myth of the Little White Lie is basically a fairy tale. Although “little white lies” may be less egregious than “real” lies, they still—like all deception—involve some degree of victimization. If a lie succeeds, someone is always fooled. And, crucially, even if the target of the lie doesn’t know this, the liar does.

Bella DePaulo, a researcher at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and her students have found repeated and consistent evidence that lying—even “white” lying—takes a toll on the teller of the lie. Lying can cause a “twinge of distress,” in DePaulo’s words, making liars feel a little worse than they did before they told a lie. Further, this coloring of mood can last even after the conversation has returned to more honest territory. The sum effect of this is what DePaulo calls an emotional “smudge” on the interaction. Conversations involving lies are

The common lies in everyday life may not hurt us in an easily measurable way, then. But they have the effect of making everyday life that much less friendly. This is the cost of living in a society so prone to deceit in so many of its aspects: our life is often smudged. The accumulation of these many smudges can erode our trust in one another, it can make us cynical about our media and government, it can make us generally less attentive to the world around us. Whatever our particular response to the lies in our lives, the fact is that we have one. All lies have an impact. It’s probably fair to say that some have a greater impact than others, but given their volume, not even the smallest lie can be wholly ignored.

Furthermore, when people find out they are being lied to, the effect is immediate and almost always negative. In a study I conducted in which participants learned that they’d been lied to during a conversation they’d just held with another person, these participants immediately formed a negative impression of the individual who had lied to them. Their conversational partner was seen as untrustworthy, unlikable, and generally more devious. But here’s the most insidious consequence: those who were duped typically began to increase the level of their lies in a subsequent conversation with the person who lied to them. In short, lies—even the tiny white lies of everyday conversation—beget more lies.