

## How “White Lies” Cause More Harm than Good

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**Abstract:** Are white lies harmful? Through anecdotes, psychological research, and ethical evaluations, the pros and cons are uncovered.

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Can positive outcomes result from dishonesty? When considering this question, we often think about the many “white lies” that we have told to spare another person’s feelings. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, a “white lie” is “a lie that is told in order to be polite or to stop someone from being upset by the truth.” With this in mind, being dishonest at times can seem perfectly reasonable, but is it truly that simple? I am reminded of a story I read many years ago about a husband lying to his wife about their son’s death. They were already in their eighties, and they have been married for over fifty years. However, they still split after the husband lied to his wife. Their son died in a car accident in his forties. The husband did not tell his wife about this tragedy because he feared that his wife would have a heart attack due to her heart problems. Despite the goodwill of her husband, she was furious because she could not see her son for the last time. After the incident, she could not bear to see her husband due to the pain his dishonesty caused her. In this case, the husband tried to use a white lie in order to keep the sad truth away from his wife. His actions came from good intentions, but his wife did not accept the fact that he made decisions for her that she did not want in the first place. White lies come from goodwill. People use them for good intentions; however, does that mean those lies told can be accepted just because they intend to be good? This anecdote suggests otherwise.

Before arguing how white lies are harmful, the concept of lies need to be clarified. The commonly accepted definition for a lie is “a statement made by one who does not believe it with the intention that someone else shall be led to believe it.” (Isenberg, 1973) Adding to this definition, a white lie is a false statement made by someone with good intentions. However, goodwill is easily taken advantage of by liars, and deceptive behavior is beautified in the name of goodwill. When a lie is exposed, not only is trust called into question, but the reliability of every statement thereafter is cloaked in doubt. The resulting dynamics can cause a vicious circle where trust quickly vanishes.

“The reason I deceived you is because I don't want to make you angry”, “I don't want to make you sad”, and “You weren’t ready for the truth-my intentions were good” are all often said after a lie has been exposed; in this moment, whether or not it was a white lie is of little consequence. No matter who the liar is, they often want to maintain a relationship with the other party; hence their motivation to be dishonest. However, does using deception as a means to achieve a desired end make one nefarious, regardless of the circumstances?

In essence, telling a white lie is often a high-risk and low-reward action, because the lie will almost certainly be exposed. In the moment the lie is exposed, all trust can be lost. With an honest approach, the two sides can communicate with each other sincerely without the need to hide any dishonesty.

The word "goodwill" is easy to say, but it is too subjective and cannot be judged by an objective standard, let alone falsified. If one wants to make people believe that one has good intentions, the premise is that the person has won the trust of the other party through various methods, and the most basic way to win trust is to be honest. If the person has already lied, how can one make others believe that he or she has good intentions? Trust and lies are mutually exclusive. If goodwill is based on lies, the foundation of that goodwill will not be firm. Some people are willing to live in dreams and laugh when they are deceived by the other party. Some people are willing to pursue truth, goodness and beauty, regarding truthfulness as the highest standard of value, and detest lies. Is the kindness within a white lie considered the standard version of kindness? Does that not mean the liar becomes both an athlete and a referee? Therefore, in the logic of "using deceptive means to achieve a reasonable goal", the "reasonable goal" will be marked with a big question mark. The goal is correct, and the means to reach the goal are correct. This is a relatively ideal state of morality. If the purpose is correct, but the means are unethical, how do people evaluate this behavior?

People cannot simply evaluate the right or wrong of this matter. If one evaluates and compares their choices, it is their duty to decide what action will be most beneficial to the relationship between the two parties after weighing the pros and cons: if the other party knows the truth, the emotional loss is greater than the damage caused by the truth.. It seems that this will become a direct reason and excuse for one to tell a white lie, but the paradox is whether the other party is hurt more after knowing the truth or after the lie is uncovered. Without knowing the person well, the liar cannot make a judgment in advance. Even if they make their best judgment based on their knowledge of this person, there is no guarantee that the person who was deceived will hold the same view. If one honestly feels that the truth will hurt the other party immensely, then communication with the other party about whether they want to know the truth is extremely vital. Without an open dialogue, lies can easily cause uncontrollable chain reactions. One's behavior will cause the other person's suspicion. When one senses it, the liar himself will become suspicious as well. The relationship between the two parties will continue to deteriorate as time goes on. Therefore, the risk of lying is too great and honesty may result in short-term pain, but will lead to long-term happiness.

There is also a value judgment involved when harmonious interpersonal relationships conflict with honesty, it is difficult to judge which action is best to take. Sometimes, one lies just to maintain the harmonious interpersonal relationship. The question is discussed in the following situations: When a friend or a close family member asks people for their opinion on something, they do not say their truest thoughts on the subject. Questions regarding people's looks, or other comparably insignificant factors can be dishonestly conveyed frequently. We all use the behavior of others to infer the motivations behind their behavior. When inferring the motivation, an important basis for information is the person's record with honesty. If their record is marred by lies, we will tend to make bad motivational judgments about their future behavior.

No matter how much kindness is present, the lie cannot be masked forever. Once one strays from the truth, one is conveying false information to others, and one is depriving others of the right to know the truth. The liar's firm expression of "I am good for him, I have a clear conscience" will make others more inclined to hearing the truth. After knowing what the lie was, the more one trusted before, the greater the betrayal can be. Therefore, even lies with the best of intentions come with significant risks.

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