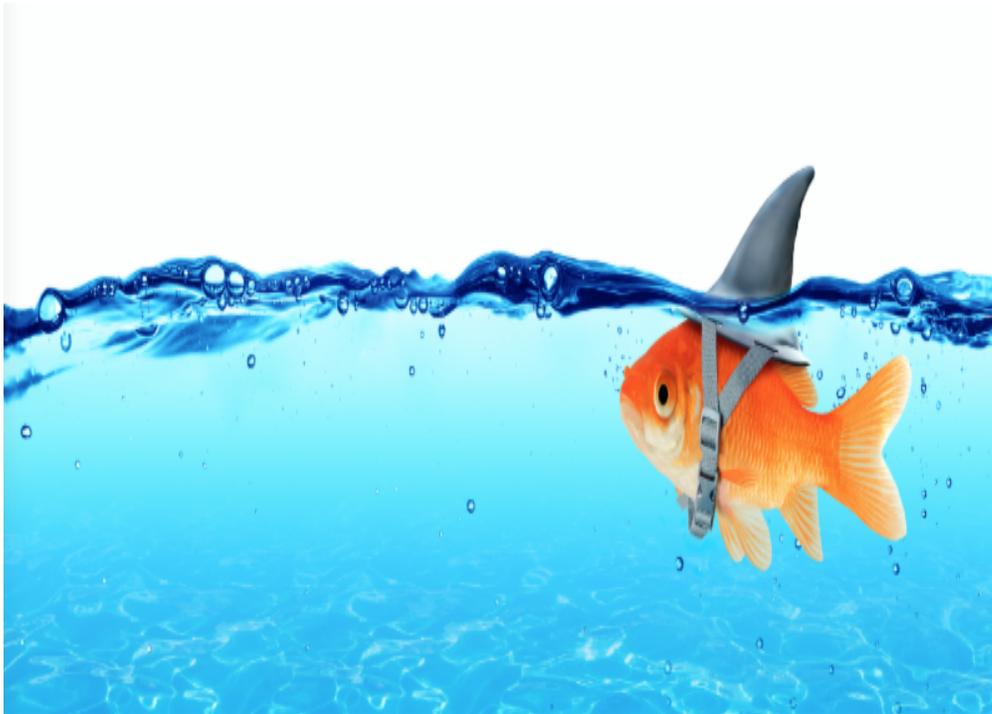


If Truth isn't Truth, What about Lies?

written by Kathleen M. Pike, PhD
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This week, the media went wild with commentary on Trump lawyer Rudy Giuliani's Meet the Press statement that ["truth isn't truth."](#)



[Photo Credit](#)

Giuliani's jaunt into philosophizing about truth was highly impolitic, especially given the situation, but possibly not incorrect. And his assertion set me to ponder the science and psychology of telling the truth and its obverse, lying, as they relate to cognitive and moral development and mental health.

1. What's the link between telling the truth and mental health? People with certain psychiatric disorders exhibit specific lying behaviors. Those with characteristics of antisocial personality tend to tell manipulative lies, while individuals with more narcissistic character traits tend to tell falsehoods that serve their self-image. People suffering from psychotic disorders may frequently engage in telling stories that are not true. In this case, what may appear to be lying is actually a function of the inability to distinguish reality from fantasy.

2. The truth about lying. Lying reflects two important [developmental milestones](#). In our youngest years, we are essentially incapable of lying because we only understand our world view and think that everyone shares it. At around three or four years, we develop what psychologists call a "theory of mind," which is the capacity to understand the concept of perspective and the idea that different people can hold varying beliefs, intentions, and knowledge of others. Also fundamental to lying are the cognitive abilities of planning, attention, and self-control, which reflect the development of executive functions of the brain. With these maturational milestones comes experimentation with lying. By 4 years of age about 80% of us will have already made our first forays into not telling the truth. By 5 - 7 years, nearly 100% of us are part of the club. Because theory of mind and executive functions of planning, attention, and self-control are not only useful for lying but also for effective communication and social interaction, early white lies might, ironically, be secretly applauded as reflecting healthy cognitive development.

3. Choosing not to lie is a further milestone. As we mature we internalize social norms that promote honesty. We begin to understand that, although we can lie, we shouldn't. And if we do, we should confess. A [classic psychology experiment](#) illustrates this developmental milestone well: Children were told about a character who committed a transgression and initially kept it secret. As the story unfolds, the character either continues to lie or confesses. Younger children (4-to-5 years) imagined feeling better when they acted badly, lied, and didn't confess. They justified their thinking by the gains they perceived from the lie and the desire to avoid punishment. Older children (7-to-9 years) had the opposite pattern of responses. They reported that they would feel better if they confessed and expected that their parents would react more positively to their confessing than did the younger children. If this complex set of cognitive and moral development milestones do not advance in synchrony, the pattern of lying becomes highly problematic. In fact, by middle childhood, chronic lying without correction is related to poor development of conscience, weak self-regulatory control, and antisocial behavior.

4. The brain and lying. A line of research suggests structural brain differences in frequent liars and implicates the prefrontal cortex as an important component in the neural circuitry of lying. [One study](#) suggests that lying is associated with more neural fibers by volume in their prefrontal cortices, suggesting that habitual liars have greater connectivity within their brains. It's possible this predisposes some individuals to lying because they can think up lies more readily than others. Alternatively the increased volume may be the result of repeated lying. Psychologists have also scanned the brains of subjects using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) and found that those who act dishonestly show [greater activation in the nucleus accumbens](#) - a structure in the brain that plays a key role in reward processing.

5. Lying, truth telling, and mental health. "Truth isn't truth" may be true if the intent is to say that multiple understandings of a particular issue may exist simultaneously. That being said, it is probably true that "lying is lying" when we consider its essential features. In terms of the implications for our mental health, lying is inherently interpersonal and has profound implications on relationships causing loss of trust and feelings of betrayal. But we know from research on exposure to adverse consequences, that as much as the lying has implications, these will be mediated by how we respond and repair the damage done, which essentially rests on truth telling to restore trust.

At the end of my yoga session on Tuesday, my teacher spoke about the yogic tradition of pursuing truth as the practice of seeking "the right understanding," which in turn brings humility and strength. This aspirational notion of truth rings true for me.