Liar, liar, pants on fire: Am I a pathological liar? [1]

Dear Alice,

I AM A LIAR... I lie to my friends, I lie to my family, I lie to people I don't even know, but most of all, I lie to myself. Sometimes I catch myself telling a story to someone and actually believing myself when I made the whole ordeal up. Do I have a problem? Am I a pathological liar? How can I reverse my lies and come clean without hurting the people I love?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Truth be told, little research has been done on pathological lying. Though there's no exact medical definition, pathological lying is characterized by the following:

- Lies are unplanned and impulsive.
- Behavior is repeated over a long period of time.
- Lies don't seem to exist for any external reason.
- Behavior may not always be a conscious act.
- Lies are admitted, changed, and/or adapted if a false story is challenged.

Pathological lying is not currently listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition (DSM-IV), which means it's not recognized as an official psychological disorder. Some doctors who have done research on pathological lying think that it should be included in the DSM-IV, but the medical world hasn't reached a conclusion on the matter. In some cases, repeated lying is a symptom of a more serious psychological problem, but it can also be independent of other conditions.

Whether or not you "have a problem" according to the DSM-IV, it sounds as though you're worried about how your behavior affects you and the people you care about, and it's commendable that you're asking for assistance. A good first step might be to ask yourself some questions about your behavior. What do your lies do for you? What do you think might happen if you tell the truth? Have there been any times when telling or hearing the truth has been particularly painful to you? Try to take notice of your feelings and the situation the next time you catch yourself bending the truth. Perhaps if you watch yourself closely, you can find some clues to help you get at the roots of your lying.

If you want to come clean to people you care about, be aware that the truth might indeed hurt them. Also know that damage done need not be permanent — solid relationships are solid
because they can survive bumps in the road. It's up to you to decide which lies can be laid to rest and which need to be corrected, but whatever you choose, try to be honest and respectful when you break the news. It's hard to know how someone will react to what you say, so be ready to deal with the consequences. The truth, a heart-felt apology, and patience can go a long way towards reconciliation.

You've already made a big step by trying to learn the truth about yourself, and a counselor, psychologist, or psychiatrist can help you as you explore the issues you're facing. To find a mental health professional in your area, read some of the Related Q&As listed below.

Yours truly,

Alice!

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