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, research on what's commonly known as ?pathological lying? is fairly limited. However, there does seem to be some differences between this kind of lying and telling the occasional whopper ? namely, pathological liars tend to lie impulsively, compulsively, frequently, and have a lengthy track record of stretching the truth. Whether or not this behavior is problematic depends a lot on how the lying makes you feel, what you lie about, and maybe even why you lie (more on this later). Fessing-up may be challenging, and could carry the risk of hurting the people you care about ? but if it's something you'd really like to do, it might help to engage in some self-reflection before you own up to the fibbing.

But first, to address the little elephant in the room: while lying is usually frowned upon in good company, it's actually a pretty common social behavior. Some studies suggest that adults might lie in up to 20 percent of their social interactions! And people lie for all sorts of reasons: sometimes people lie to deceive or manipulate a situation to their advantage or to avoid negative consequences (like cheating on an exam or a partner). Sometimes people also tell half-truths as a social courtesy, without any hurtful intentions or consequences (like telling a friend you loved the itchy sweater they got you for your birthday). Lies might also be motivated by a need to maintain relationships or encourage cooperation, to reduce stress or embarrassment, or to compensate for traumatic experiences. All this to say, Reader, most people lie at some point in their life.

So, when do a few tall tales start to qualify as ?pathological?? It's worth noting that while the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) doesn't list pathological lying as a disorder by itself, frequent lying can be one of the many symptoms associated with other psychological disorders. Mental health professionals do, however, set pathological lying apart from typical fibs because it happens repeatedly, and the person lying might feel like they don't have much control over it. Pathological liars often
lie even if it benefits no one, including themselves. They may not even understand why they can’t tell the truth.

Though unconventional, even very frequent lying might not be psychologically harmful unless the behavior also causes the person a great deal of distress or significantly interferes with their daily life. You may ask yourself the following questions to get more clarity: Have you considered taking some time to think about how this behavior affects your day-to-day activities? What motivates you to lie? What do you think might happen if you tell the truth? Have there been any times when telling the truth has been particularly painful to you? Do you ever feel guilty or remorseful after lying? Are these feelings strong enough to disrupt your ability to interact with your family and friends, go to classes, or complete your work? You could even consider keeping a journal ? the next time you catch yourself bending the truth, try to take notice of the specific situation or any emotions you feel. This kind of reflective exercise might help to reveal some clues or patterns that might get at the roots of your behavior.

As for coming clean, it’s difficult to predict how a confession might affect the people with whom you’ve been less than honest. Before you talk to them, it may be helpful to think about different ways they might react, and how you might feel as a result. Each situation is different?you may decide that some lies are not worth mentioning (it might be okay if your friend still thinks you like the itchy sweater), while others really need to be set right. Only you can decide if and when it’s time to come clean. Remember that it’s natural to feel anxious about the negative impacts it may have on your relationships with family and friends. At the same time, consider that the damage might not be permanent, if there’s damage at all. Solid relationships can withstand setbacks; it’s possible that your loved ones could find ways to forgive and trust you again. When you’re ready to break the news, try your best to be kind and respectful, and understand that they may want some space to process everything. A sincere apology and patience can go a long way towards mending broken trust.

Finally, you could also consider seeking the help of someone you can trust, such as a clergy member or mental health professional, to talk about what you’re going through. You’ve already made a big step in confronting yourself about this behavior, but you don’t have to go it alone! These folks might be able to help you explore some of the difficulties you’ve been having with telling the truth, as well as offer additional support and guidance as you move forward. If you’ve been keeping a journal, bringing this to your meeting might help you start that conversation. If you’re interested in more information about accessing mental health resources, check out some additional Q&As in the Relationships and Emotional Health categories in the Go Ask Alice! archives.

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