



“Human beings seem to have an almost unlimited capacity to deceive themselves”

Lies, damn lies

Is the occasional white lie essential for smooth social interactions, or do they destroy our integrity?

By Josephine Brouard

I TOLD AN ABSOLUTE PORKY the other day and even now, days later, I feel ashamed. I tend to pride myself on my candour and integrity, so what the hell happened?

My husband was shocked too. *What a tangled web we weave* hardly begins to describe the lengths to which I went in order to get out of a social engagement. I had a couple of good reasons, excuses, rationalisations or whatever you want to call them, but essentially I didn't do what I normally do: that is, tell the truth.

I'm practically famous for my honesty – some of my friends beg me *not* to tell them what I really think, that's how honest I am – but on this occasion I succumbed to that ubiquitous social lubricant: the white lie.

According to social researchers, we all fib a lot of the time. Which is a depressing thought, but it doesn't surprise me to hear it. People from all walks of life are continually exposed in the media for varying degrees of duplicity – it's no wonder we're all left spin-weary and cynical.

And then I come along and add to the pile of bunkum told in order to grease the machinery of polite society. Shame on me.

In his book *Right and Wrong: How to Decide for Yourself* (Hachette, \$29.95),

psychologist and social researcher Hugh Mackay says we live in a culture of lying, and suggests that every lie, no matter how harmless, contributes to this culture of untruthfulness.

Indeed. Why couldn't I just tell my friend that I'd rather stay home on a Saturday night watching television than don a fancy-dress costume and drive for an hour (there and back) to celebrate her birthday?

Obvious, really. We may hate it when we discover that people have been lying to us, but sometimes – honestly – we'd also prefer that people didn't tell us the truth.

“You look great,” you tell a friend when, in fact, she's looking a bit haggard. But you know she's had a tough day and a simple compliment might lift her spirits. The lie, you rationalise, is a gesture of affection... even compassion, possibly.

“Thank you for a lovely evening,” we lie, when, really, we were bored out of our minds. “I'm not cross with you,” we say, when, truthfully, we are seething. “I'm sorry, she's not home,” we fib, when a charity calls just as the family is sitting down to dinner.

In *The Road Less Travelled*, US psychiatrist M. Scott Peck says the reason people lie is to avoid possible confrontation. “Lying,” he explains, “is an attempt to circumvent legitimate suffering.”

We also lie to impress (in job interviews

and résumés); lie to be liked (at work and play); and we lie to obfuscate (as in the case of unfaithful spouses, for example).

Says Mackay, “Every lie we tell makes it easier to lie next time, but each lie also produces a subtle shift in our value system. Lying erodes our integrity, and we can usually sense when that is happening.”

The lies that truly corrode are the lies we tell ourselves. As Scottish psychiatrist R.D. Laing observed in his 1967 magnum opus, *The Politics of Experience and the Bird of Paradise*, “Human beings seem to have an almost unlimited capacity to deceive themselves, and to deceive themselves into taking their own lies for truth.”

Mackay agrees. We lie to ourselves, he says, whenever we convince ourselves that a lie is justified; when we lull ourselves into thinking that a deception has been “successful”; and whenever we fall for our own propaganda.

Luckily for me, my conscience is alive and well and pricking me till it hurts. While I won't be 'fessing up to my friend anytime soon, it will be a long time – hopefully never – before I stoop so low again.

And that's the truth, I promise. ●

Josephine Brouard has a psychology degree and a fascination for human behaviour. Sick of the lies people tell? Tell us what you think at healthsmart.com.au