

Does Telling White Lies Negatively Affect Our Character?

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It's often said that the habits that we create for ourselves in relation to being honest and truthful, caring for our peers, friends and family members and taking part in well-intentioned civic duty define our lifetime character.

But what about white lies? These well-intentioned untruths make the qualities of being 'honest' *and* 'caring' mutually exclusive. When is it okay to tell lies to the people close to us for their own protection from worry, doubt and other negative feelings?

What Are White Lies, Exactly?

Look in any dictionary for an explanation of the definition of a white lie; you'll find the same general idea: white lies are harmless, well-intentioned and usually about a non-impactful situation. Most of the time white lies concern something trivial enough that the person telling it is only trying to keep their loved one from emotional distress.

Most of the time, the effect of these untruths is a net positive for the person to whom the information is being changed or withheld, so white lies are inherently okay, right? Unfortunately, it's not as simple as that. If honesty, trustworthiness and kindness are all pillars of character, then white lies cannot signal a strong character.

It stands to reason; in what situations can we retain our good character at the expense of honesty and trust?

The Many Forms of White Lies

Are white lies really always well-intentioned or are they sometimes a tiny bit selfish? When we consider these implications, we differentiate between different types of white lies.

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- **Outright Lies:** These are pure, white lies. If your doctor gives you a placebo pill for your medical condition- either real or perceived -he simply wants to give you a positive mindset without being the reason you're bogged down with medication. Note that there are other, ethical dilemmas involved with prescribing sugar pills in place of actual active chemicals to remedy a situation, but that's a topic for another time.
- **Omissions of Truth:** Also known as half-truths, these are situations in which a person tells someone close to them part of the story. Say you're watching someone's home for the weekend and you leave the door open. Their dog gets out and you search the neighborhood, eventually finding him down the street. When the person whose house you were watching gets back from their trip, they may ask how the weekend went and if the dog was well behaved. You give them as much detail as possible, without, of course, mentioning the brief panic over the dog's escape because you don't want the home's owner to worry.

Despite how many people view them, selective truth telling is no less of a lie than an outright lie. A person is purposely withholding seemingly trivial information from another person, who arguably has a right to know this, to keep them from distressing over it.

Altruistic White Lies

White lies that don't benefit the lie-teller in the slightest are referred to as *altruistic white lies*. For example, proliferating the belief of mythical holiday characters like the Easter Bunny, or Santa Claus, with ones' children is an altruistic white lie. The person informing belief in these falsehoods is probably going to end up with more work around the holidays keeping up the illusion of these characters in the interest of producing a more fun environment.

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We lie to our children pretty often, due in part to the fact that children cannot comprehend complex reasoning, and also in part to their lacking the emotional development needed to handle complex emotions.

This is why you might tell a child that if they don't eat their vegetables at the dinner table, they'll never grow up to be big and strong, or that when their adored pet dies that it actually went to a wide open field where it can play with other pets and be free.

A less white lie one might tell to their child is that their favorite restaurant or toy store is closed to ensure that you won't have to take them there or spend extra money. These are lies that aren't built on love and concern for your child, but on selfishness and laziness.

We want to see to the health of our loved ones, and make sure they don't have to attempt to process grief at a young age so we use half-truths and untruths to protect their feelings and keep a healthy lifestyle.

Selfish White Lies to Protect Friendships and Relationships

This is where we reach a sort of ethical gray area when discussing the types of white lies we tell to others. If a lie benefits us when we tell it, can we really call it a white lie? Is there more to a white lie than simply a net benefit?

Some lies are selfish, but for a good reason. If there is a person you meet at a bar that's intimidating you, and you think you should give them your phone number to avoid the possibility of them becoming offended and taking retributive action against you, your giving them a fake number to keep them away from you doesn't benefit anyone but yourself. Yet, you protected yourself from possible harm. We call this sort of a *grey lie* because it isn't for anyone else's benefit but it does create a net good.

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Another example of a grey lie is when you lie to protect the feelings of a friend or other loved one. Saying to someone, "sorry I didn't respond to your email, I must have missed it when you sent it" is the type of untruth that most of us tell pretty often, but we lie to make the friend or family member to whom we say this feel better about being neglected. Many people are busy with work, family and health issues and aren't great about getting back to other people from time to time, but they know lying to a friend about it is easier than explaining your many responsibilities to them.

There Are Many Shades of Grey

Grey lies are anything but simple. For example if you lie to a dying person about their prognosis so that they can adequately enjoy their remaining days, many people may feel that this is a positive lie. This one might be viewed as a light grey lie.

A darker grey lie is pretty obvious. An example of a dark grey lie would be a lie told for the purpose of procrastination. If your boss asks you about that project he told you to finish, and you haven't started it, you might tell him that you're working on it currently to get him off your back.

This lie is for purely selfish reasons, and actually slows down the productivity of the workplace in many cases. This calls into question that relative white-ness of such a lie, but all you care about is the fact that you won't be fired, your boss is none the wiser, and you can continue to put off the project for now.

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"What They Don't Know Won't Hurt Them"

Have you ever heard anyone use this phrase? Essentially, it's the philosophy behind white lies in general, but can have massively varied implications. For example, if you're telling a lie to protect your job or your reputation, the lie isn't hurting anyone, but it also isn't helping anyone but you.

On the other end of the spectrum, if you tell a lie to protect someone's feelings or make sure they take into account their personal health, it's a lie that may not benefit, but produces benefit for the person you're lying to. You're helping them by not revealing the truth at that time.

The Implications White Lies Have on Character

So, can a relationship involve keeping secrets and telling lies and still be built upon ethical character and trust? This is an issue that many people wrestle with on a daily basis. The pillars of character don't encompass the complex daily scenarios that we find ourselves in sometimes, so there's little guidance on how to deal with situations.

We may tell a lie that we believe is wholly good, but still gives others a reason to not trust the other things you tell them. The name for what we experience in this case, is *cognitive dissonance*.

The Justification of White Lies

When we experience cognitive dissonance in the form of internal conflict about whether we should tell the truth or tell a lie for the greater good, we often attempt to justify our behavior to make it easier.

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This is why many people hold such strong beliefs about white lies and whether or not they are beneficial to their own character. If a person values being kind to others over being a trustworthy friend or family member, they may tell more lies to protect the feelings of the people around them.

To justify our actions, we usually dismiss the lie as 'harmless', even if it isn't anything close.

The 'Harmless' Fallacy

In all honesty, no lie is truly harmless. It is still a purposeful form of deceit, lying to the face of someone whom you may care about very deeply. Whether you mean well or believe the lie is harmless, healthy relationships are built on trust and honesty, so simply dismissing a lie as harmless doesn't clear us of any wrongdoing.

This is where the idea of character comes into play. Humans aren't perfect. Even the people who are the most good tell lies once and a while, and don't set a good example for the most impressionable people around them. Humans also have the tendency to get lazy and unmotivated and have the instinct to cover these qualities up with white lies.

If you tell a lie now and then with good-intention, this doesn't make you a bad person, but for parents, it's natural to want to set a good example for your children. When they eventually find out that Santa isn't real, they probably won't feel as betrayed as your friend would if they found out that you blew off plans with them to stay in and watch television.

This is why in the interest of making sure your choices lead to strong character development for yourself and the people who look up to you, carefully selecting the scenarios and situations when it is alright to tell a white lie is important.

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White Lies Erode Trust

In the grand scheme of things, telling any type of lie makes a person less trustworthy, even if their dishonesty is well-intentioned. If, for example, you told an ex that you weren't seeing other people soon after you'd broken up to save their feelings, and they found out that you had been, it would be near impossible to establish a friendship in the future.

Once you've positioned yourself as untrustworthy in another person's eyes, it is difficult to be a trusted friend in the future, which reflects negatively on your overall character.

From this point of view, white lies are never okay, though it's certainly understandable that so many people believe that they are in certain cases. Sometimes, despite the implications on our character, we have to strike a balance between honesty and kindness for the greater good of the emotional health of our friends and family.