

HEALTHY LIVING

# How Lying Changes Your Brain In Just A Short Period Of Time

Acting dishonestly can prime your brain for bigger whoppers in the future.

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Lies of little consequence can escalate.

We all tell little fibs now and then to help us get through awkward social situations or stressful workweeks. But the more lies you tell, the easier it becomes to tell them. And although the fibs may start off small, don't be surprised if you find yourself easily telling big whoppers.

A new study claims to provide the [first empirical evidence showing that dishonesty gradually increases](#) over time. By using scans that measured the brain's response to lying, researchers saw that each new lie resulted in smaller and smaller neurological reactions — especially in the amygdala, which is the brain's emotional core.

In effect, each new fib appeared to desensitize the brain, making it easier and easier to tell more lies.

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Take the recent scandal at Wells Fargo bank, where [thousands of employees were](#) starting accounts without their customers' knowledge. They were initially motivated by an aggressive incentive plan to improve employee performance, and management's poor decision to comply with the sales quota instead of pushing back on it eventually led to the dismissal of more than [5,000 staffers](#).

Or consider the Bernie Madoff Scam, a long-term Ponzi scheme that [prosecutors say started in the 1970s](#). The compounding lies it took, both to sustain the fraud and continue adding new clients to fill Madoff's coffers, are examples of what Garrett described as "minor dishonest decisions" snowballing into big lies over time.

Getting to the bottom of why some people seem at ease with lying, and over long periods of time, may one day be able to explain and perhaps prevent large-scale fraud from wreaking havoc on society at large.

### Would you lie to earn more money?



DEBORAH PENDELL VIA GETTY IMAGES

To see how escalating lies affect the brain, Garrett invited 80 participants to come to a lab in London, where they were paired up with someone whom they thought was another participant. In fact, the second participant was an actor helping facilitate the experiment. The pairs then had to play a game in which they guessed the amount of money in photos depicting jars of pennies.

However, the 80 study participants were incentivized differently according to which scenario they were privately assigned beforehand. Some were incentivized to be accurate and honest with their lab partner, while others were paid more if they lied to their partner to influence the guesses.

The researchers made two important observations. The first: Lies participants told got larger and larger over the course of the hour-long game, but only when the participants lied for their own benefit. This finding means that in a constant environment with the same incentives, repeated lies increase over time if it helps the person get a better

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So what can we do to increase honesty in ourselves and others? Behavioral economist Dan Ariely, a co-author on Garrett's paper, has a few research-backed ways to encourage truthfulness: [avoid conflicts of interest](#), say no to "fuzzy" rules that are open to interpretation (perhaps by [signing an ethics agreement](#) before the opportunity to cheat) and remind yourself of your values.

In one prior experiment, Ariely had participants [write down as many of the Ten Commandments](#) as they could remember before being given the opportunity to cheat, which resulted in significantly higher levels of honesty in this group compared to the control.

And perhaps in the case of Garrett's coin experiment, one more suggestion: Don't put yourself in a profit-making situation where dishonesty is baked into the incentive process (or in the case of Wells Fargo, don't put other people in a position where they may have to [choose between honesty and keeping their jobs](#)). You think you're strong enough to withstand temptation, but you're actually setting yourself up for failure.

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