

[News](#) › [Science](#)

Whenever you lie, your brain adjusts to make telling bigger whoppers easier, study finds

'Deceivers often recall how small acts of dishonesty snowballed over time and they suddenly found themselves committing quite large crimes'

Ian Johnston Science Correspondent | Monday 24 October 2016 | 



Brain scans showed a strong emotional reaction when lying for the first time that reduced with repetition

Telling small lies causes changes in the brain that lead people down a "slippery slope" towards increasingly large acts of

We use cookies to enhance your visit to our site and to bring you advertisements that might interest you. Read our [Privacy](#) and [Cookie Policies](#) to find out more.



but this effect gradually reduced over time as they played.

And, while players initially tended to tell relatively small lies, they gradually became more untrustworthy as they got used to deceiving other players for their own advantage.

The researchers said the study, described in [a paper in the journal *Nature Neuroscience*](#), was a warning to people to stick to the truth because failing to do so could have serious consequences.

READ MORE

[UK heading for 'integrity crisis' after boom in dishonesty](#)

[Lying for lending: families hide the truth to secure mortgages](#)

[Official: one in three job applicants tells lies on their CV \(is that](#)

[Plebgate: I have experience of police telling lies, says Stephen's](#)

One of the researchers, Dr Tali Sharot of University College London, said: “In life, you’ve probably observed small acts of dishonesty grow over time to larger and larger ones. This anecdotal seems to be true.

“Whether it’s evading taxes, infidelity, doping in sports, making up data in science or financial fraud, deceivers often recall how small acts of dishonesty snowballed over time and they suddenly found themselves committing quite large crimes.”

She compared the effect to ‘emotional adaptation’. Under this process, someone who is shocked by a photograph of a mutilated body, for example, gradually becomes less affected by the image when shown it repeatedly.

Dr Sharot said while there could be many reasons behind this, the researchers had suspected there could be a physical process in the brain.

They got a group of 80 volunteers to play a game designed to test how honest they were. They were asked to estimate how many

[READ MORE](#)

Trump's post-truth campaign and what it says about US politics

In some cases, they were told they would benefit financially if they were both closer to the real answer. In others, they were told they would profit if their partner got the answer wrong.

In the tests, the scientists discovered that at first people were willing to tell small lies, but this gradually escalated over the course of the game.

By monitoring their brain with an MRI scanner, they were able to show that an area of the brain associated with emotion, the amygdala, initially reacted strongly to a lie but this effect decreased over time. Large reductions in this reaction were associated with particularly big lies.

“When we lie for personal gain, our amygdala produces a negative feeling that limits the extent to which we are prepared to lie,” Dr Sharot said.

“However, this response fades as we continue to lie, and the more it falls the bigger our lies become.

We use cookies to enhance your visit to our site and to bring you advertisements that might interest you. Read our [Privacy](#) and [Cookie Policies](#) to find out more.

Science news in pictures

[show all](#)

Her colleague, Dr Neil Garrett, said a similar process could affect other forms of behaviour, such as violence.

“This is in line with suggestions that our amygdala signals aversion to acts that we consider wrong or immoral,” he said.

“We only tested dishonesty in this experiment, but the same principle may also apply to escalations in other actions such as risk taking or violent behaviour.”

There were at least some in the study who appeared to be relatively honest and who remained so.

We use cookies to enhance your visit to our site and to bring you advertisements that might interest you. Read our [Privacy and Cookie Policies](#) to find out more.



However, he added the study should be taken as a warning to all.

“It highlights the dangers of small acts of dishonesty,” Dr Garrett said.

More about: | [lies](#) | [lying](#) | [Honesty](#) | [truth](#) | [Psychology](#)



**Start your day with
The Independent's news email**



COMMENTS

indy100

TRENDING

If you can't stand someone chewing, you may have Misophonia

The scariest thing you'll read this Halloween

You can only access this café's WiFi by solving an equation

The secret to great sex in a long term relationship

Attempt to 'relax' mum with virtual reality backfires completely

We use cookies to enhance your visit to our site and to bring you advertisements that might interest you. Read our [Privacy](#) and [Cookie Policies](#) to find out more.



~~Sorry stories,~~
contraceptives do have
side effects – put up
with them

Chris Hemsworth
apologises for cultural
appropriation

Here's why you
shouldn't use cotton
buds to clean your ears

What's next for Michelle
Obama?

Powerful 7.1 magnitude
tremor strikes central
Italy near Perugia

**CCTV shows family being
thrown into air in London hit-
and-run**

[Gregor
'totally confused'
about Scottish
independence

[shop that is
bracing for things to
go 'crazy' if Clinton
wins

SPONSORED FEATURES

Seven of the best
graduate schemes

Why banking and
finance degrees are a
great investment

My Glasgow: food writer
Sumayya Usmani on her

We use cookies to enhance your visit to our site and to bring you advertisements that might interest you. Read our [Privacy and Cookie Policies](#) to find out more.





Going to market: Christmas in Kraków

Follow us:



We use cookies to enhance your visit to our site and to bring you advertisements that might interest you. Read our [Privacy and Cookie Policies](#) to find out more.



[Code of conduct](#)[Subscriptions](#)[Complaint Form](#)[Advertising Guide](#)[Contact Us](#)[Syndication](#)[Contributors](#)[Evening Standard](#)[All Topics](#)[Novaya Gazeta](#)[Archive](#)[Install our Apps](#)[Newsletters](#)

We use cookies to enhance your visit to our site and to bring you advertisements that might interest you. Read our [Privacy and Cookie Policies](#) to find out more.

