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Kavanaugh Or Ford? Why It's So Hard To Read The Body Language Of A Liar



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Leadership Strategy

Recognizing that we are being lied to is an important social and business skill. And if it were only a matter of paying closer attention to nonverbal cues, then we'd all be polished deception-detectors. But it's not that simple. Our biases and desires can hijack our logic and clarity.

For example . . .

We believe people who are part of our “in-group”

There is a well-known principle in social psychology that people define themselves in terms of social groupings: Any group that people feel part of is an “in-group” and any group that excludes them an “out-group.” (It's the “us” and “them” “Republican and Democrat” division.)

We assume we know what in-group people are like – they're good people, like we are. When we see people as part of an out-group, we are more likely to judge them as untrustworthy. Deceivers with whom we have things in common are much more likely to gain our trust – regardless of how little they may deserve it.

We disbelieve people who act “inappropriately.”

We make judgments about another person's integrity based on our idea of appropriate behavior. Whether it is Dr. Ford's rapid breathing and shaky voice (how did she stay composed through that emotion?) or Judge Kavanaugh's displays of anger, contempt, rage and tears (was his intensity over-the-top?), we tend to believe that we know how we'd act if we were telling the truth – and that other truthful people would behave the same way.



Supreme Court nominee Judge Brett Kavanaugh gives his opening statement before the Senate Judiciary Committee, Thursday, Sept. 27, 2018 on Capitol Hill in Washington. (Saul Loeb/Pool Image via AP)

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Christine Blasey Ford testifies before the Senate Judiciary Committee on Capitol Hill in Washington, Thursday, Sept. 27, 2018. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik, Pool)

We look for inaccurate body language “tells.”

The biggest body language myth about liars is that they avoid eye contact. While some liars find it difficult to lie while looking you in the eyes, many liars, especially the most brazen, actually overcompensate to "prove" that they are not lying by making strong, direct eye contact and holding it steadily.

We tend to suspect people who squirm or fidget, believing that their nervousness is a sign of deceit. We forget that the first physical reaction to stress (before the urge to fight or flee) is to freeze – which means that liars may actually reduce movement and gestures – not increase them.

We want to believe some liars.

Brain-imaging studies show that when we have a personal stake in the outcome of any event, our brains automatically include our desires and aspirations in our assessments. The process is called motivated reasoning, and it utilizes a different physical pathway in the brain (one that includes parts of the limbic system) than the pathway used when we are objectively analyzing data. Subliminally, we are all highly susceptible to the power of self-interest. But, because motivated reasoning is unconscious, we may believe that we are making unbiased decisions when we are really making choices that are self-serving.

Practiced liars can fool us.

Most of the observable signs of lying are dependent on the liar feeling a negative emotional arousal and an uncomfortable sense of conflict. In those cases, the act of lying triggers a heightened stress response. Blood pressure, heart rate and breathing rates all increase, and this gets displayed in a variety of "tells."

Tali Sharot, a cognitive neuroscientist at University College in London, found that the brains of people who are unused to lying show a huge response in regions involved in emotion – like the amygdala and the insula – when they tell a falsehood. But, as a person lies more frequently, the emotional response lessens and the negative feelings associated with lying dissipate.

Habitual and well-rehearsed liars can become quite comfortable with their falsehoods. But the same response is true for liars who believe their own lies. When Ford and Kavanaugh say they are "100% positive," they may both genuinely believe it.

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*I am an international keynote speaker who helps leaders enhance their influence and impact skills. I'm the author of "The Silent Language of Leaders" and the creator of "Body Language for Leaders," LinkedIn Learning's most popular video course for 2016, 2017, and 2018. I'm a... **MORE***