

Liar, Liar: How to Break Free from Habitual Lying

by Rita Milios

My client seemed genuinely perplexed. “I really don’t know why I lie so much,” he said. “I lie about almost everything, even stupid, little stuff. It’s like I don’t know how to tell the truth.”

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I could see in my client’s face and hear in his voice that he really did not want to be a compulsive liar. He just didn’t seem to be able to stop himself. Lying is extremely common among people with addictions. But why?

Lies seem to serve the same purpose as the addictive substance itself—they provide an escape from difficulty and unpleasantness. At first, the addict will lie to protect his or her secrets, to get out of trouble, or to avoid criticism that might lead to feelings of shame and guilt. Eventually, lying becomes a habit, even another addictive process, because it comes to feel comfortable and safe, while telling the truth becomes ever more risky and scary.

Denial, Delusions and Lies

It is important to distinguish between denial, delusions, and lies. Even though they are similar and all three are often techniques used in addiction as defense mechanisms, the subtleties between them can help a recovering person learn about themselves, their motivations, and ultimately, how to turn away from these self-destructive habits.

- **Denial** is not limited to addiction. It is a subconscious, protective mechanism that the brain uses to prevent a mental “computer crash” when an experience is too traumatic to be processed immediately.
- **Lying** is a deliberate changing of the truth, by either restating facts as something different, or by “adjusting” or leaving out certain portions.
- **Delusions** are distortions of reality, akin to “wishful thinking,” where the mind subconsciously or unconsciously comes to believe that the self-created distortions are real—at least in the part of the mind where the addiction lives and thrives.

The addictive process tends to progress from denial and outright lying toward delusion because it makes it easier to live with oneself if the fabrications that seem to be necessary for survival feel “real.”

Yet, there is always another part of the mind that knows the truth. Addiction becomes a battleground for these two opposing mental states. Recovery happens when the truth, with all its pain and shame, is finally acknowledged, and a conscious choice is made to commit to honesty and healing versus lies and self-destruction.

Barriers to Honesty in Addiction

We all seek approval and avoid rejection. Lying in addiction is a defense mechanism to protect one's self-image against:

- **Shame:** John Bradshaw, a leading authority on addiction, believes that shame is the driving force behind addiction. Shame is recognition of wrongdoing, but without a separation of one's self from the wrongful act. Shame processes mentally as “ I made a mistake and I cannot recover. I am a failure. I am defective,” rather than “I made a bad choice and acted badly. I need to change and make up for my mistake.”
- **Negative Consequences:** People with addictions hope that things will work themselves out without them having to take any action. So they convince themselves that they can avoid the consequences associated with their bad choices. This avoidant coping style is common in addiction.
- **Criticism and Confrontation:** Intense shame often makes it difficult for addicts to handle criticism, so they lie to avoid confrontation or other circumstances where criticism of them may arise.
- **Fear of Repercussions:** Addicts at some level know that sooner or later they will have to change if they are to survive. But fear of the repercussions of returning to a state of honesty (shame, guilt, possible additional damage to relationships) makes it difficult to commit to this path until all possible options for avoidance have been exhausted.

Steps to Overcome the Habit of Lying and Become Trustworthy Again

Recovery is hard. It requires intense and difficult soul-searching and facing one's most shameful feelings. But it is worth it. One of the first steps toward recovery is to recognize that shame and guilt and other negative character traits are not qualities that are unique to addicts. Such obstacles are in all of us, and it is simply the job of adulthood to address them and—rather than try to eliminate them—to integrate these “shadow parts” into our larger personalities. In the same way, we often need to recognize that we will never fulfill the internal images of our “idealized selves” (the failure of which is the source of much of our shame and guilt). These unrealistic counterparts to our shadow selves must also be integrated so that the real self, that lies somewhere in between, can emerge. Recovery requires calling a truce in the war between our idealized selves and our shadow selves.

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This is where a 12-step program can help. Step 1 is about recognizing the need to align with, and ask for assistance from, something higher than the personality part that you are currently aligned with. Calling on a Higher Power (God, your own higher nature, your soul part) allows you to define yourself as someone who has this positive aspect, but not in a self-centered, egotistical way as viewed by the idealized self. It aligns you to a greater Will, which has not only your own, but the good of all, as its agenda. Then you can begin to dissolve your shame and restore your faith in your own innate goodness.

Next, act on your commitment to change:

- **Admit that you have a problem with lying.** As long as you are in denial, you won't stop lying.
- **Be accountable to someone.** Talk to a friend, a counselor, or a 12-step sponsor and commit to being completely truthful with them.
- **Consider the consequences.** Sooner or later, your lies will be exposed, and you risk losing people's trust and friendship. But by admitting your lies and committing to positive change, it is more likely that you will be given a second chance to repair broken trusts.
- **Journal.** When you lie, reflect on the reasons for your lies. Become aware of automatic, habituated, irrational thoughts. Then consider alternate, more positive choices that will help you meet your emotional needs with honesty and honor.
- **Set positive, life-enhancing goals** and make concrete plans to work toward these. Give yourself something to be genuinely proud of yourself about, so that lies and deceptive, pretentious ego-booster are no longer necessary in your life.