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Liar! Liar?

How to tell if someone is lying to you

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By Meghan Rubado
Staff writer

There's a little bit of a liar in everyone.

You encounter it everywhere - the guy in the cheap suit who blabbers on about his six-figure salary, the woman who claims that knock-off bag really is Prada or the criminal who swears he didn't do it.

In a world full of little white lies and big ugly ones, can you tell when you're being duped?

If you're like most people, research suggests you're probably a poor lie detector. In a study that confronted average people with five liars and five truth-tellers, people showed about 57 percent accuracy in determining who was honest and who was full of it, said Mark Frank, an associate professor in the School of Informatics at the State University at Buffalo. Frank earned his doctorate in social psychology at Cornell University and has researched the physical signs of deceit and how well people detect them.

"What we've found is that there is no Pinocchio response - no one clue that says deception," Frank said. "There are lots of clues, and they vary by person."

Syracuse police Detective David Buske conducts interviews and polygraph tests for criminal investigations. Buske said the physical clues have to be carefully observed in order to help give away a liar.

Here, Frank and Buske give their advice about how to improve your lie detection, to know when somebody's feeding you a whopper.

Facial expressions

Frank said emotions and related facial signs can indicate deception, but usually these "micro-expressions" appear and disappear in a fraction of a second. Here are some emotions and facial expressions to look for:

Fear: If someone is trying to hide fear they might have their eyebrows pulled up and together or the lower part of the mouth stretched back toward the neck.

Disgust: If someone is trying to conceal disgust, say when they're eating a terrible meal, they may show subtle signs, including the upper lip being pulled upward or a slight nose wrinkle.

Contempt: A person who feels contempt will often show a half-smile, where the corners of the

lips are pulled in and to one side.

Happiness: If someone is truly happy, they will smile with their mouth and eyes, activating the muscles that show crows feet. People who try to fake happiness often will smile only with the mouth.

The other signs

Buske and Frank agreed that facial expressions have to be looked at in conjunction with a person's speech and body movements.

Excessive fidgeting: If someone can't keep their eyes or limbs still, they might be lying. Indicators include if they won't look you in the eye or continually look away from you or if they cross and uncross their legs or cross their arms in a defensive manner.

Stalling: If a person repeats your question back to you each time you ask one, he might be allotting himself some extra time to think of a response. Lying takes more thought, more energy and therefore, more time.

Vague answers: Phrases like, "I don't think so," "I don't remember," or "To the best of my recollection," may indicate someone is telling only partial truth, which means they're being deceptive to some extent.

Increased nervousness: If someone shows signs of nervousness that increase over the course of a line of questioning, they might be lying. Someone who is telling the truth usually becomes more comfortable over time.

A word of caution

If you see that little nose wrinkle or tipped smile, don't assume you've caught a liar.

The emotions that can be related to deceit, such as fear, don't always indicate deceit. Someone might be afraid for other reasons, for instance if they are being interviewed by police, Frank said. Frank has trained local, state and federal groups, including law enforcement, in detecting deception through physical cues.

"We don't teach it as an end but as a means to an end," Frank said. "We teach is as a way to gather more information rather than make a summary judgement. Then you use that information to find unimpeachable, corroborating evidence."

Buske has been conducting polygraph tests for criminal investigations for six years. When a subject appears to be lying, Buske will follow up with more questioning, such as "If I'm wrong, and you're not being deceptive, you tell me how it happened."

That's where liars get themselves into trouble. They often slip up while trying to create a believable story.

The verdict

Frank said regular people can become more proficient in spotting the signs of deception. In one study, people who received 30 minutes of training were able to improve their ability at detecting deception about 50 percent.

But they shouldn't use that proficiency to make quick judgements. They should use it to find "hot spots," or areas where someone shows signs of lying. From there, you should ask more

questions or look for evidence that proves whether the person is lying.

So if you think your spouse is cheating, ask questions and see how he or she responds. People in this situation might act nervous or anxious even if they're innocent because they're afraid you won't believe them. But if they do show multiple signs of deception, ask more questions and investigate.

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