

WHY WE LIE  
TO THERAPISTS

GOOD NEWS  
ABOUT SCREENS

THE OPPOSITE  
OF NARCISSISM

PSYCHOLOGY'S  
REVOLUTIONARIES

# Psychology Today

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JUNE 2019

## THE ENDLESS BREAKUP

How to Handle An  
Ambiguous Split

THE NEW SCIENCE  
*of*

# SLEEP

# 8

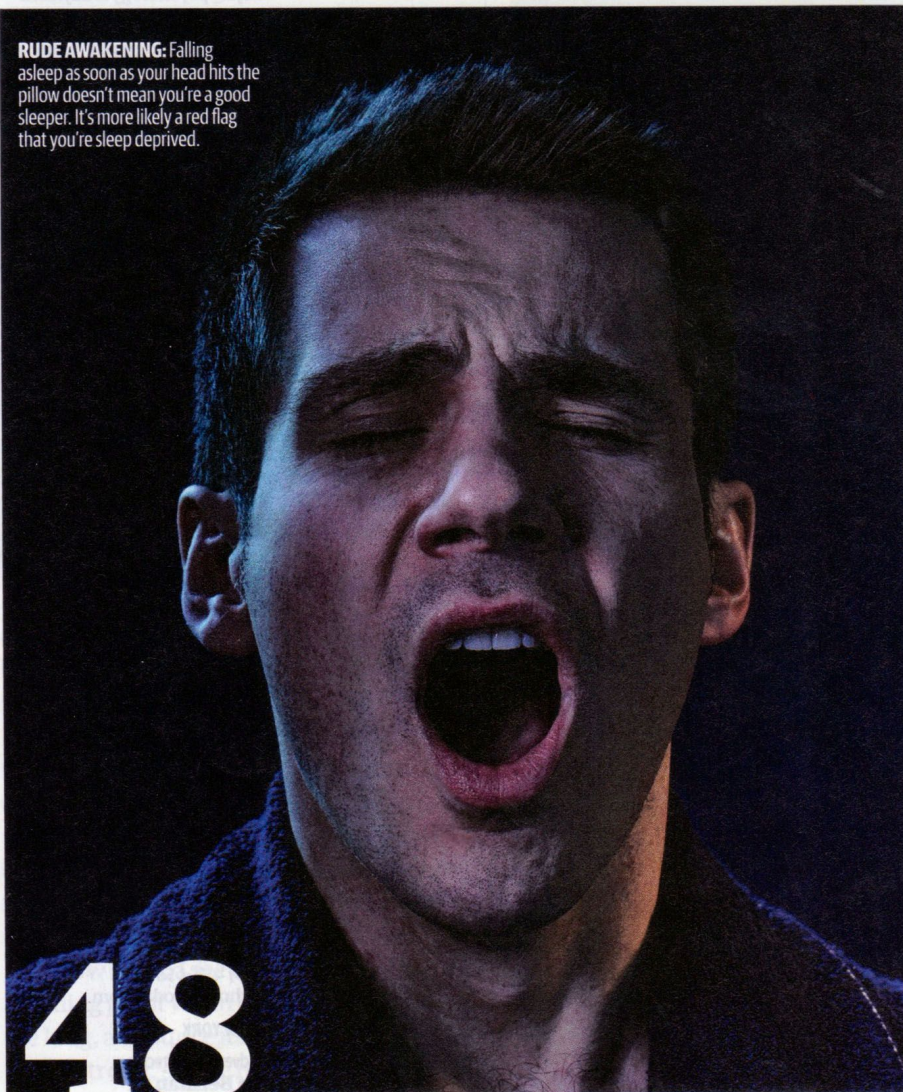
Changes To  
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**RUDE AWAKENING:** Falling asleep as soon as your head hits the pillow doesn't mean you're a good sleeper. It's more likely a red flag that you're sleep deprived.



HANNAH WHITAKER, FASHION CREDIT: BLUE ROBE-SLEEPY JONES

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# INsights

## COMFORT ZONES

SOCIAL GROUPS ARE ALL GUIDED BY RULES—SOME MORE STRONGLY THAN OTHERS.

**EVERYONE KNOWS** a stickler for the rules, and probably some scofflaws, too. But how tightly social norms are adhered to varies at more than the individual level. A theory developed by University of Maryland psychologist Michele Gelfand and colleagues posits that groups, regions, and entire nations can be sorted on a spectrum from “tight” to “loose,” depending on how strongly their members value sticking to rules and norms. Though it’s just one way of assessing cultures, it could have implications for nationwide trends and individual well-being. —Devon Frye

### CREATIVE MEASURES

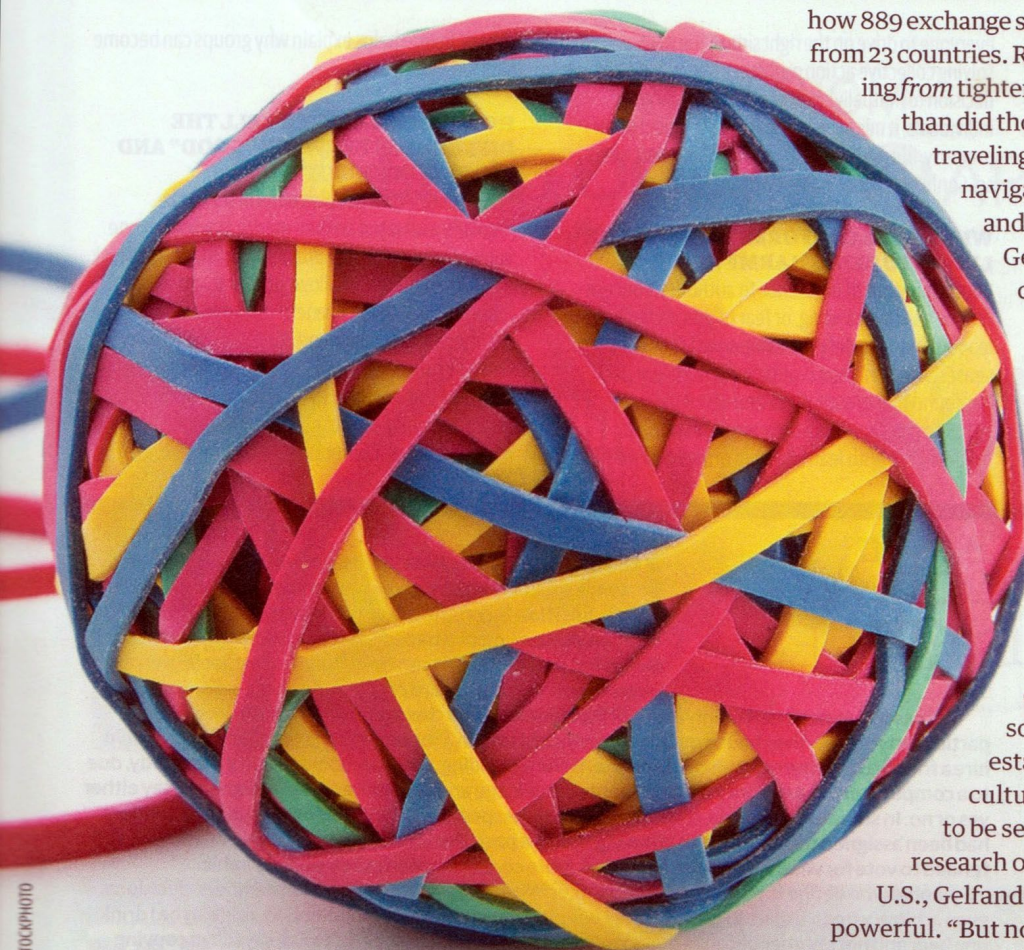
The U.S. has grown noticeably more tolerant over time. Researchers sought to gauge changes in tightness and looseness empirically by measuring the frequency of certain “tight” words (such as *forbid* and *compel*) and “loose” words (*freedom* and *create*) in published books. American culture appeared to loosen from 1800 to 2000, they found, with ups and downs along the way. Tighter periods were linked to measures of societal order—fewer teen pregnancies, less debt, and greater school attendance—but also higher crime rates (possibly, they speculate, due to greater enforcement). Looser times saw increases in markers of national creativity, including patent applications and films.

### TIGHT SPOTS

How does tightness-looseness impact those who cross cultures? Research from *Psychological Science* examined how 889 exchange students fared as they traveled to and from 23 countries. Researchers found that students traveling from tighter cultures tended to adapt more easily than did those traveling from looser cultures; those traveling to tighter cultures struggled more to navigate new norms. “Culture is omnipresent and all around us, even though it’s invisible,” Gelfand says. “There can be backlash when cultures collide.” Yet individual personalities also made a difference: Students with higher agreeableness and humility adapted to tight places just as well as those who visited loose locales.

### LOOSE LEADERS

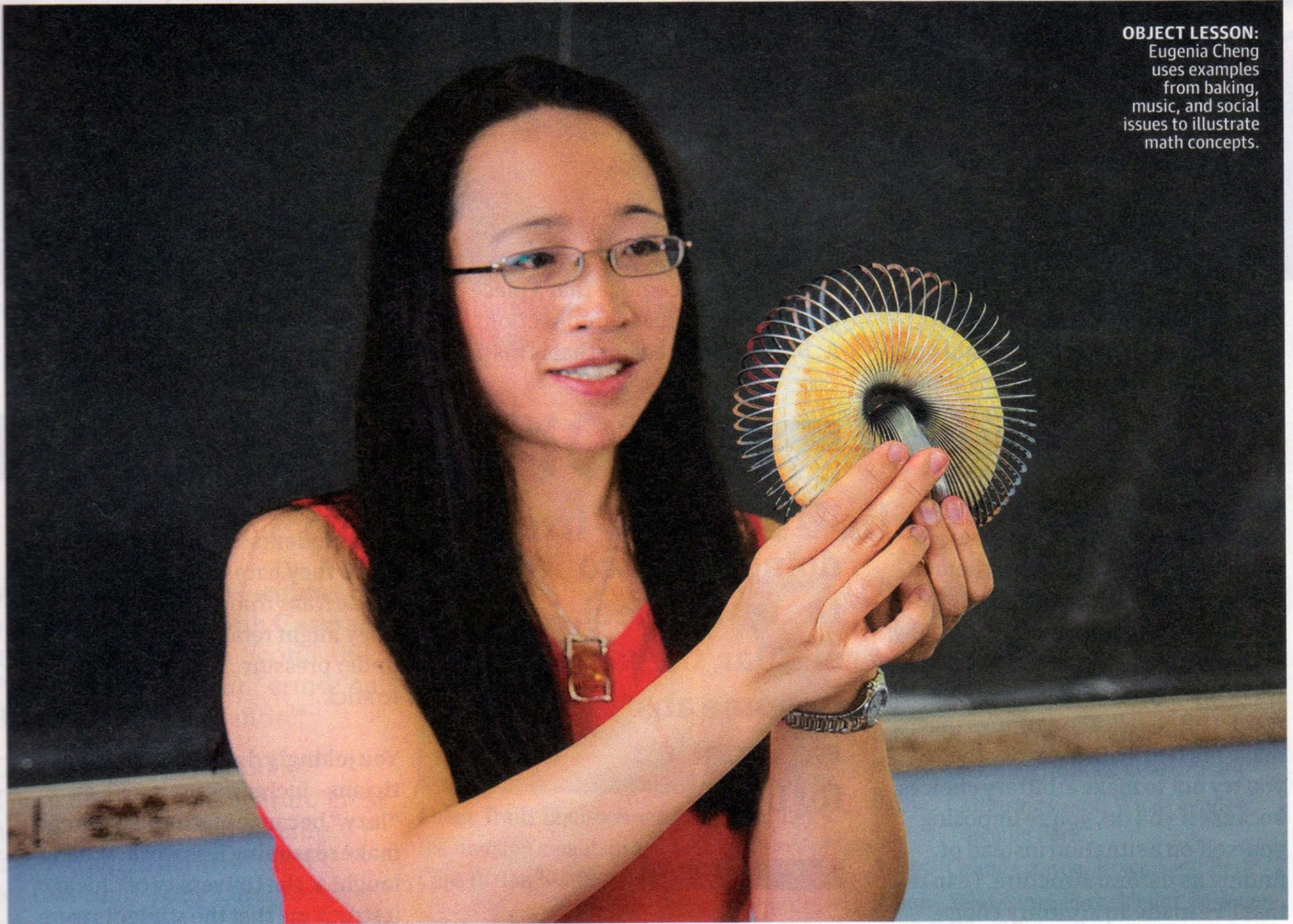
No matter how dearly societies value rules, violations still occur. How does culture affect how violators are perceived? In a third study, more than 2,300 participants in 19 countries reacted to a vignette in which someone either followed or strayed from established workplace norms. In tighter cultures those who followed norms tended to be seen as better potential leaders. Past research on this effect was done in the looser U.S., Gelfand says, where rule-breakers are seen as powerful. “But norm violations aren’t automatically celebrated across the world.”





# personality

ECCENTRIC'S CORNER



**OBJECT LESSON:**  
Eugenia Cheng  
uses examples  
from baking,  
music, and social  
issues to illustrate  
math concepts.

## The Logic Of It All

Mathematician and musician **EUGENIA CHENG** exposes the patterns at play in the kitchen, the concert hall, and everywhere else.

BY MATT HUSTON

**T** **HE BONES OF** musical compositions, the tools for dissecting an argument, and the mathematical concepts embodied by cakes and bagels are as essential to Eugenia Cheng's lessons as are raw figures and calculations. The British mathematician and pianist teaches math at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and, in talks for the public, draws from her expertise in category theory—the study of math as a conceptual system, or the “mathematics of mathematics.” Her first book, *How to Bake Pi*, offers an introduction to the subject that leverages her knowledge of desserts. Her latest, *The Art of Logic in an Illogical World*, deploys ideas from her discipline to help readers grapple with the types of thorny questions that don't appear in math textbooks.

**What do you say to people who think they can get by in everyday life without math?** That is completely true—but I think you can get by better with some math. Not long division and solving equations, necessarily, but the principles of abstraction and logic are things that we can all use. Abstraction is how you get to the



core of what an argument is really saying and make good analogies between things. I think that's what empathy is about: analogies between people. If you can draw an analogy between yourself and somebody else, then you can empathize with them, even if you're not actually in their situation and have never experienced it.

**What can thinking like a mathematician bring to a contentious conversation?** Math has a clear framework for how you unravel an argument back to its beginnings—which, in life, are your fundamental beliefs. Instead of saying one person is right and one is wrong, we can ask what it is about an argument that is right, and what starting points make that happen.

**You argue that logic and emotions should work together. Do others in your line of work agree?** Mathematicians I talk to acknowledge that we use instinct and emotions, especially at the beginning of research, when we're just trying to find a way forward. I often talk about things that make me feel ill. In category theory, you try not to make arbitrary choices, because if you do, you're imposing yourself on a situation instead of finding its natural structure. I can tell that I've made an arbitrary choice more quickly if I feel a bit sick to my stomach. Another time we use emotions is when we're trying to explain things to other people. We often use language that anthropomorphizes mathematical concepts: "This is really trying to be an equivalence. How can we help it?"

**Math concepts like 4-D shapes transcend what's possible in the real world. Does art do that too?** Picasso depicted people's bodies in unreal positions, but that work gives us some feeling about an aspect of humanity or somebody's character

that you can't see in real life. One of the reasons that opera is probably my favorite art form is that you can encapsulate somebody's character so quickly with a little phrase of music.

**As a musician, how do you find that a grasp of song structure relates to mathematical understanding?** We are awfully prone to compartmentalizing, and it may be partly because of the education system: There is a subject called History, a subject called Music, a subject called Math. But if a person can recognize that a piece of music is organized into sections A, B, and then A again, that is math.

**If I find myself doing even two things that feel similar, there must be some abstract explanation for both.**

Just seeing that the abstract structure is there and that it has symmetry means that you can save brain power.

**What gives you hope for the power of logical thinking?** People get stuck in their ways as they get older—I do, too—so it's hopeful when new generations are not afraid to do things differently and point out what the older generations have been missing. I think it's wonderful that the younger generations care about other people, about the environment, and about injustice, and that they can see a bigger picture than just their own lives as

individuals. One of the big problems of the world is the boundaries that we've imposed—abstract boundaries between subjects, such as the idea that math is only useful for certain things, but also boundaries between communities.

**You've used bagels and wine glasses as teaching aids. How can fun help convey complex ideas?** Keeping people amused is one way of keeping them interested. It can also make the material more memorable. I've been to plenty of boring talks in my life, but people have particularly low expectations for a math talk. So they are very ready to laugh. I feel that the first thing we should care about in teaching is that students are having a good time. There's a backlash against that idea, but if learning is not fun, then students are going to hate it, and if they hate it, they're not going to learn anything in the long run. They might retain it temporarily, under pressure, but nothing's going to stick.

**You jokingly describe mathematicians—including yourself—as "lazy," because math concepts can make reasoning less work.** When I taught at the University of Chicago, it struck me that the students were not nearly lazy enough. They were used to drilling huge problem sets and would often go through the most laborious calculations instead of finding elegant ways to get there. To me, elegance in mathematics is about avoiding tedious busy work. If I find myself doing even two things that feel similar, then there must be some abstract explanation for both. I have always liked the idea of using the same thing in slightly different ways. I once became very cross with a particularly utilitarian chair I had—I just couldn't find more than one way of sitting in it.



# health

SUPPLEMENTAL SCIENCE



## A Nimble Nutrient

The ingredient that gives turmeric its dazzle may perk up the brain by many routes. **BY ABIGAIL FAGAN**

**ONE THING THAT** enables the nutrients in foods to be so important to health is the power of repetition. For example, numerous phytochemicals exist in many fruits and vegetables, and consumed daily, even in small amounts, they can provide an outsize benefit to the mind and body. You've probably heard of carotenes, linked to eye health, and resveratrol, thought to be important for longevity.

Consider curcumin, the vivid yellow-orange substance that gives the root turmeric its distinctive color. A member of the ginger family, turmeric has long been a staple of Indian culture, consumed in curries or prescribed as a natural remedy. Turmeric contains just 3 to 5 percent curcumin, but even such a low concentration of the nutrient, consumed regularly, can address ailments from inflammation and depression to cancer and dementia.

Curcumin is a polyphenol, one of a group of chemicals that occur naturally in plants to ward off disease or destruction—from insects or solar radiation—and aid recovery from such threats. Consumed in foods, polyphenols remain bioactive, delivering similar perks to their new human hosts.

Although curcumin has long been used in traditional medicines, recent clinical trials have given it the stamp of scientific approval. Studies show that curcumin stimulates the release of proteins called cytokines that calm and heal inflammation. Chronic inflammation plays a role in many illnesses, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity, dementia, and depression.

"There's a lot of evidence that



according to a 2015 Columbia University study.

It's hard to imagine taking a car to a mechanic and failing to mention the ominous banging coming from the engine; disclosing the problem is the only way to bring about a solution. Lying in therapy may be similarly counterproductive: Individuals who conceal secrets from their therapist feel less satisfied with the outcome of treatment than those who are truthful. Even if the act is painful at first, disclosing once-hidden secrets ultimately brings about feelings of relief, authenticity, and pride, according to the University of Maryland study.

Caution is always appropriate when revealing one's most intimate self to someone new. But therapy is a deeply personal enterprise, and therapists aren't run-of-the-mill strangers; they are professional secret keepers, legally bound (except in cases of self-harm or abuse) to keep their clients' information confidential. What's more, those who make the decision to attend therapy have likely prepared themselves to invest money, time, and emotional energy in the process.

Undermining the effort by lying may make little sense on the surface. Understanding why patients continue to lie anyway—and the situations in which they're most likely to fudge or fib—can help therapists and clients work together to strengthen the therapeutic process.

### WHAT'S WITHHELD?

Lying in therapy is as old as therapy itself. But only in the past few decades have researchers begun to formally explore its prevalence and the motivations behind it. To look into the problem, Teachers

College at Columbia University even has the Psychotherapy, Affirmation, and Disclosure Lab—nicknamed the “Lying Lab” by its members—which produced the 2015 study as well as several others. Its leaders, psychologists Matt Blanchard, Barry Farber, and Melanie Love—authors of the recently published book *Secrets and Lies in Psychotherapy*—scrutinize in-session deceit from every angle.



## Therapists aren't run-of-the-mill strangers; they are professional secret keepers, legally bound to keep their clients' information confidential.



What they've found is that deception comes in many degrees between the truth and a lie—from simple omission to full-blown fabrication—and clients serve up lies ranging from merely concealing their real feelings about a situation to covering up a criminal act. “We found it particularly interesting that 73 percent reported lying about therapy itself,” Blanchard says. “They pretended to like their therapist's comments, for example, or to find therapy more helpful than they really did.”

Patients are three and a half times more likely to keep important information out of the discussion than they

are to create completely new material. A patient is more inclined to keep his nightly marijuana habit to himself than to spin a yarn about a great weekend with a fantastic (but imaginary) boyfriend. Even when telling partial truths, clients are six times more likely to under-report their actual behaviors (“I don't purge that much anymore”) than to tell tall tales (“I've had more than 200 sexual partners”). Regardless of the subject or magnitude of a lie, it appears that patients would rather minimize the truth than exaggerate it.

### WHY LIE?

The type of lie, Blanchard says, is less important than the motivation behind it. Studies conducted at the Lying Lab and elsewhere identify four broad reasons why clients fail to tell the whole truth.

**1. To avoid shame.** Clients lie to circumvent the embarrassment, discomfort, or guilt they feel about their own thoughts or behaviors—feelings that don't dissipate even in the protected space of the therapy room. Nearly half of clients who reported lying in one sample cited shame or embarrassment as the main cause, according to a 1993 study published in the *Journal of Counseling Psychology*. They were especially likely to do so if the secret was sex- or relationship-related.

“The topic was uncomfortable,” “I didn't want to look bad,” and “I wanted to avoid shame” topped the reasons for dishonesty in the 2015 Lying Lab study. Anecdotally, many of my own clients tell me that when they first vocalize something they had failed to face (such as a drinking habit or an early history of abuse), they suddenly realize that the



## treatment

## THERAPY

problem can no longer be avoided. The shame triggered by such abrupt awareness can be overwhelming. Hiding or omitting the truth—for as long as possible—is a preemptive defense against negative emotions.

**2. To control the focus.** “Clients also report lying to avoid a distracting topic they believe will take the therapy off track,” Blanchard finds. Most people come into therapy with preconceived notions about where the therapeutic relationship should go or which topics warrant discussion. If a therapist attempts to broach a subject that the client feels isn’t worth diving into, he or she may seek to steer around it to keep the conversation from going off the rails.

I’ve worked with many clients who would much rather focus on external problems or the faults of others than on their own internal challenges or shortcomings. While they do want relief from their problems, the risk of revealing their own flaws feels too great. In such cases, clients may omit critical information—or lie outright—to redirect treatment to something that feels less threatening.

**3. To avoid repercussions.** As in real life, many therapy patients lie in order to avoid a specific negative outcome, the Lying Lab has found. “When clients lie about therapy, it’s generally to avoid upsetting the therapist” or harming the relationship, Blanchard says. Fears of hospitalization or medication are also common motivations for lying, particularly lies of omission. “When patients lie about suicidal thoughts, it’s almost universally to avoid tangible repercussions, like being sent to a psychiatric hospital,” he observes.

**4. Lack of trust.** It’s hard to be honest with someone in whom you have no faith. Individuals who had a poor relationship with their therapist (as measured by the Agnew Relationship Measure, a tool commonly used to assess the strength of a therapeutic alliance) were significantly more likely to report that they had lied in therapy, according to an exploratory study conducted by psychologist Leslie Martin of Appalachian State University. The Lying Lab observes the problem over and over. Says Blanchard: “More dishonesty hap-

**Clients tell me that when they first vocalize something they had failed to face, they suddenly realize the problem can no longer be avoided.**

pens when the bond between client and clinician is felt to be weaker.”

#### WHY DOES DISHONESTY MATTER?

Therapists dislike their clients’ lies. They may become frustrated when they know or even just suspect that a client isn’t being honest. But given its prevalence—and the decades of research demonstrating that therapy is still generally helpful for the majority of people—is it worth aiming for unadulterated honesty?

The answer is yes, Blanchard argues. “We study dishonesty in order to learn how to better foster honesty for our clients.” Though it isn’t always easy, he adds, a therapist’s role is to encourage clients to directly face reality so they can take control and live their best possible life; only by being truthful with themselves and others can clients identify their biggest obstacles and progress toward their goals. What’s more, the Lying Lab’s research indicates that clients *want* to honestly confront the important or shameful secrets in their lives, “but they need our help.”

Sometimes, therapists can elicit clients’ secrets by delivering facts. “Clients concealing suicidality, for instance, report exaggerated fears of being locked up the moment they mention it,” Blanchard notes. When a therapist suspects such thoughts are being concealed, a simple explanation of the real triggers for hospitalization could relieve a client’s worries and open the way for discussion of his or her suicidal notions.

In many cases of concealment, all a therapist needs to do is ask. The Lying Lab ends each study by soliciting what therapists could do to help clients be more honest, Blanchard says. “We imagined that clients would want more warmth or skill from their therapist, or to know that their therapist shared their problems or understood their culture or class.” But that wasn’t the case. Much to his surprise, the clients want something much more clear-cut: “If my therapist asked me directly, I would tell.”

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