

SUMMARY

LYING

SAM HARRIS



Summary of “Lying” by Sam Harris

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Learn why lying is so pervasive in our society and what we can do to stop it.

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Introduction

How often would you say you lie? If you're like most of us, you'll probably lie right now as you're answering this question! Because whether we realize it or not, human beings lie all the time. We lie to avoid offending someone, like when we tell a friend that that dress doesn't make them look fat. We lie to protect someone else's feelings, like when you tell your mother-in-law that you really love her potato salad, even when it's dreadful. We feign enthusiasm in response to gifts we don't want, even though we know perfectly well that we would never wear that dress in public or put that painting up in our homes. We lie to get out of trouble, like when you tell your teacher you forgot your homework at home. (In fact, you never did the assignment in the first place). We lie about small things and big things with an equal-opportunity cavalierness to our deception.

And often, we even lie to ourselves. The latter category might seem like the least insidious sub-type of lie because, after all, if we're only lying to ourselves, no one else will get hurt, right? Wrong! In fact, the author argues that lying to ourselves is often the worst thing we can do, even when the lie seems small and insignificant. We might, for example, see nothing wrong with telling ourselves that we'll take out the trash when we get home or that we'll get up early and check off those items on our to-do lists tomorrow. But as the author sees it, every lie conditions us to normalize deception. And as we grow more and more comfortable with lying, we're literally encouraging our culture to be comfortable with dishonesty. Over the course of this summary, we'll examine the danger of this practice and what we can do to stop it.

White Lies Aren't Innocent

We've probably all heard the phrase "little white lies." In fact, it's a pretty safe bet that everyone has said that phrase at one time or another. And it's equally likely that we say that phrase without realizing what it really means. So, let's kick off this chapter by unpacking that terminology. At first glance, we can identify one key thing about the phrase: it places significant emphasis on the use of diminishing language. Diminishing language can best be defined as something we say to minimize the impact of our words or a certain topic.

For example, if you've ever tried to broach a difficult subject with someone or worried about how your words will be received, you might say, "Sorry, but I just wanted to talk to you for a minute..." Whether you realize you're doing it or not, when you employ words like "just" or "for a minute," you're diminishing the value of what you have to say. That's because "just" implies insignificance; it's not a big deal, it's just... whatever you wanted to say. Likewise, "for a minute" hints that it won't take up much time and shouldn't be inconvenient at all. So, when you put that all together and say, "Sorry, but I just wanted to talk to you for a minute..." what you're really saying is, "I'm so sorry to bother you or imply that my words are of any value at all, but I wanted to take a fraction of your time to talk to you about something that totally isn't a big deal in any way!" This approach may sometimes be helpful because it works on some people. Because you're inviting them to devalue you and your time, many people are only too glad to do so, so you might get a moment of their time and they may not be too rude about it.

Well, the same principle applies to the use of the phrase "little white lies." If we unpack this phrase using the same critical lens, you'll notice that the whole phrase is littered with diminishing language. For example, "little" automatically infers that what we're dealing with is not a big deal. Sure, it might be a lie, but it's only a little, insignificant lie! Likewise, the use of the word "white" invokes our relationship with color psychology. We instinctively associate the color white with innocence, purity, and simplicity. So, when

we describe a lie as being “little and white,” we’re cancelling out the negative association of the word “lie” and implying that because this lie is “little and white,” it must be harmless and therefore okay. And thanks to the pervasive spread of “little white lie” ideology, human beings have concluded that any number of deceptions are okay as long as they fall into the “little white lie” category.

But if you’ve ever had a little white lie backfire on you, you know that they can be dangerous too. For example, let’s imagine that your best friend gets a new pair of boots. Bright red cowboy boots with lightning strikes down the sides, to be exact. And he asks you if you like them. You think they’re the most ridiculous things you’ve ever seen. You think they make him look like an idiot. But because our society has conditioned us to believe that it’s better to be nice or “not offensive” than honest, you feel pressured to say something that will ease his feelings. So, you tell him you love them. In fact, because you feel so guilty about the difference between your words and your true feelings, maybe you even go a little bit overboard and carry on about just how much you love them. You probably feel worse by the end of the conversation, but no harm done, right? You said the right thing.

Or at least that’s what you think until he comes over to your house the next week. He’s carrying a gift box. And you have a sinking suspicion that you know exactly what’s in that box. Unfortunately, your suspicions are correct: because you said you loved them so much, he’s bought you your very own pair of stupid boots to match. And as you quickly discover, it turns out that they were very expensive. Now, you feel even worse-- and under a lot of pressure, too! What should you do? Should you be honest with him and admit that you hate the boots? Do you kindly tell him to return them and get his money back? Or do you continue to protect his feelings and your “little white lie” and wear boots that you hate for the sake of your deception?

This example might seem a little extreme, but the scary truth is that isn’t far-fetched at all! Something like this could easily happen as a result of a little white lie. So, as you begin to think critically about your mental and moral classification of lies, you might do well to start by asking yourself a

question: are little white lies really so innocent? And, more importantly, are they worth it?

The True Impact of a Lie

Have you ever listened to a friend gossip about someone else? Have you ever sat, silent and complicit, as they tell you things like, “I told her _____, but I really thought _____?” Or maybe you’ve heard a friend tell you how much she hates someone’s outfit seconds before she tells that same person how much she loves their clothes! If any of these things have ever happened to you, you’ve probably noticed that it’s impacted your opinion of your friend. Even if your opinion has only changed slightly or your discomfort has been subtle, it’s still there. Why? Because, in each scenario, you’ve just watched your friend lie right in front of you. And any time this happens, it’s unavoidable to wonder, “Is she honest with me? What does she say behind my back? What does she tell people when I’m not around?” But if you had never witnessed your friend lying, you might never have those thoughts!

These examples illustrate the fact that even little white lies can permanently change our relationships with others. Because if you let yourself think about it long enough, you might catch yourself distrusting your friend in other areas as well. Sure, she only lied about her opinion of an outfit; that’s not a very “big” lie. But it might prompt you to wonder what else she would lie about. You might find yourself asking questions like, “Does she even like me? Is she really my friend? Would she tell me if I had toilet paper on my shoe? Or would she let me walk around looking like an idiot so she could laugh about me behind my back?”

If these concerns weighed on your mind for very long, you might find that it changes your attitude and behavior towards your friend. You might not be yourself in her presence, for example. You might be reluctant to confide in her. After a while, you might get so nervous that you start to avoid her altogether. So, if even small lies can have this effect, imagine the power of big lies! Imagine if you caught your partner in the act of cheating on you or found out someone you trust was sharing your private information.

Betrayals such as these can have a profound impact on your relationships

with others and your view of the world. So, if you keep this fact in mind-- and imagine how you would want to be treated in similar scenarios-- it may help you to redefine your relationship with telling the truth.

However, there's no doubt about it-- being honest can be tough! No one wants to tell their grandmother that her spinach casserole is disgusting and it's no fun to tell your girlfriend that that dress really does make her look fat. Telling the truth can be scary because we worry that we might hurt or disappoint the people we love; often, it feels easier to tell a palatable lie because we hope that will make everyone happy. But the old adage really is true: if people truly value your friendship, they'll respect you for being honest with them. And, deep down, most people would rather hear the truth-- even if it's painful-- because they know it means that they can trust the people in their life. With that said, it's important to remember that telling the truth doesn't mean you have to be mean! You can always speak the truth in love, even if you're communicating something difficult.

For example, if you hate your grandmother's spinach casserole, you don't have to say, "Oh my god, this is the worst thing I've ever tasted!" Rather, you can kindly and respectfully say, "Sorry, this isn't my favorite! It's not that I don't like your cooking-- I'm just not a big fan of spinach!" Likewise, if you're trying to be honest with a friend about her outfit, you can lovingly say, "I feel like it doesn't really suit you! You're so pretty but I just don't think that dress brings out your beauty." If you feel that it's appropriate for the occasion or that it would be well received, you can even tactfully point out specifics like, "Yellow might not be your best color," or, "That shirt is a bit tight, so I feel like it's not super flattering."

All of these statements are truthful but tactful. And if your friend is really your friend, they'll appreciate the fact that you were honest with them and told them something that would benefit them. Because you took the time and effort to communicate the truth in a loving way, they'll recognize that you are kind and supportive and that you have their best interest at heart. Most people would rather have a friend like that than a "yes man," so it's

highly likely that your friendship will grow stronger as a result! So, don't be afraid to be brave and speak the truth.

Lies Are a Lot of Work!

Have you ever heard the quote that says, “Oh, what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive?” Sir Walter Scott said that in 1808 and his words still ring true today! That’s because maintaining a lie can actually be very hard work and it can generate a great deal of mental distress. We saw this in the first chapter on a very small scale when we considered the hypothetical example of the boots. In this example, we could see how stressful it might be to keep up the lie about liking the boots. But can you imagine how that stress would intensify if you were lying about something more serious, like covering up a murder or the fact that you were cheating on your partner?

Sometimes, when we want something badly enough-- like the ability to sleep with someone behind your partner’s back-- it’s easy to delude ourselves into thinking that the facade wouldn’t be too much work. But once you start lying about where you went, who you were with, and who you were talking to, you have to keep track of everything you said and who you said it to. And-- depending on the nature of your lie and the people you’re lying to-- you’ll probably have to tailor your lie to fit your audience. Now you have even more details to remember! And if you’ve ever misplaced your car keys or walked into a room only to wonder what you came in here for, you already know one thing: human beings are inherently forgetful. This means that, eventually, you’re going to slip up! As a result, the pressure to keep up your lie and avoid being caught can create significant distress. It might even result in the development of anxiety or depression.

By contrast, telling the truth can be unpleasant. If you’ve done something offensive or objectionable, owning up to your actions might even result in some negative consequences. But one thing is for certain: you never have to keep up with the details of the truth! You never have to spin a complicated web and ensure that you never get caught out. The truth may bring some unwanted results, but it will ultimately bring peace of mind. And in the end, that truly is the best option for you and everyone else in your

life. Because even if you've hurt someone close to you, they're more likely to forgive you if you admit what you did and apologize than if you lie to them and break their trust. So, do the right thing for you and your relationships and give everyone peace of mind!

Final Summary

We've all heard the old adage "honesty is the best policy," but we often forget to live by it. Even when we lack malicious intent, many people feel that lying is easier because it allows us to protect others' feelings or stay out of trouble. But as the author demonstrates, lying has significant negative repercussions in almost every case. Sure, you might get away with it-- but your peace and sanity will suffer as a result. Or you might get caught, losing the trust and respect of the people you love. In many cases, you might even irrevocably damage your relationships. That's why the author affirms that even "little white lies" are never innocent; a lie always brings more than you bargained for. So, as you move forward, resolve to be honest with yourself and with others. You may find that, when blessed with the gift of the truth, your self-esteem and your relationships will blossom!



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