

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Little White Lies or Big Problem: When Bending the Truth is Okay and when it's Unethical

Do I look fat in this? Did you learn much from the meeting? White lies: we all tell them. If you say that you don't, then you're almost certainly lying. We bend the truth fairly often to smooth things over, avoid bigger explanations we don't want to get into, spare someone's feelings or to steer clear of confrontation. Although there's a lot of debate on this topic, it's usually accepted that embellishing the truth is ok when it isn't told out of malice and can't really do any harm. Aren't there times you would rather hear a white lie than the ugly truth?

Honesty Isn't Always the Best Policy

Sometimes there is no real benefit to telling the truth if the information is unnecessary, potentially hurtful, or irrelevant. It's generally okay to hide the harsh facts to:

Spare feelings. The best kind of a white lie focuses on the positive and ignores the negative. If your spouse spends hours preparing an anniversary dinner that's hard to swallow, spare him or her. Sometimes the brutal truth is just better left unsaid.

End or avoid an argument. If you're in a heated discussion about politics or sports with people whose opinions are way out in left field, telling a white lie can help you keep the peace and move on. Instead of getting worked up and trying to prove your point, you can choose to say that they have some valid ideas and thank them for sharing before quickly changing the subject.

Be supportive. There will be times when friends or colleagues ask for your opinion on something they created, accomplished or are proud of. Even if you don't agree, it's not worth your relationship to share this. If it's clear their "talent" isn't going to take them anywhere, it's not likely they will peruse things very far. You just don't want to be the reason they gave up.

Preserve your privacy. If you've been dealing with something personal like a health problem, an affair or a mental illness you don't need to divulge all these details. Anything to do with your health or personal life is strictly your business and there's nothing unethical about leaving this out of the conversation.

Protect your kids. Every parent has told a lie to their children to get from point A to B a little more smoothly. Maybe you've told them that the restaurant is out of chicken fingers to encourage healthy choices or that the toy store is closed on Tuesdays. Just be careful not to overdo it or try this approach with older children as you may start to send the wrong message.

Unethical Embellishments

Whether it's inflating your salary or "minimizing" your age, most of us are guilty of the odd embellishment. But when does our tendency to tell tales start to go wrong? The major difference between a white lie and an unethical lie is the intent behind it. A white lie is typically told to protect others, while a flat out lie protects you in some way or strives to make you a better, richer or more experienced person than you really are. You're probably stepping over the line if you:

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Extend lengths of employment, create job titles or lie about incomplete education on a resume. Not only are you likely to get caught out during a reference check, but you're definitely not doing yourself any favors down the line if you do get the job and have to contend with your own inexperience.

Manufacture elaborate excuses for tardiness. Rather than saying "I didn't RSVP because I never received your invitation," or "sorry I'm late, there was a huge accident on the highway," try a simple apology. Lying to save face can make you feel like you have permission to be irresponsible which may start to affect your relationships.

Use "the dog ate it" as a reason for not getting the job done. Okay, so most of us wouldn't actually use this but blaming an unfinished job on a fictional computer crash, power outage or some other made up excuse not only steps over the line, but actually may only serve to mask a deeper issue (i.e., unrealistic work expectations, turnaround times or a personal crisis) that could be solved if it were openly and honestly addressed.

Keep a tally of all the times you stretch the truth in a week—from praising a friend for their hideous outfit to telling your boss his boring presentation was riveting. This will help you distinguish between where being truthful matters and where it doesn't. Be aware that the whitest of lies can take on lives of their own as people ask you to validate something they've heard. If you find yourself lying to make yourself look better, cover up a mistake or hurt other people, your lies have marched over that imaginary line and into dangerous territory.