

THE DARK YET LIFE AFFIRMING MAGIC OF SELF DECEPTION

It's conventional wisdom that lying to ourselves is a character flaw, but is there an upside to avoiding the truth?

By Katherine Gougeon

Call him the Ovary Thief. Since moving to San Francisco after university to pursue a career in tech, my elusive friend Richard* has spent the past 22 years ambling from one long-term relationship to the next. Long-distance courtships are his specialty, and the women he falls for are attractive, whip smart, often younger, sometimes older and always ambitious. Yet no matter how electric the connection seems, the relationship inevitably winds down around the time she turns 40. “Will ya make an honest woman of her?” I text him, after noticing on Facebook that he and Nathalie,* a 38-year-old film executive and cat lover from Oregon, are celebrating their six-month anniversary in Aspen. “Maybe,” comes the coy reply. Ovary Thief.

Or so I thought. Until I read *The Elephant in the Brain: Hidden Motives in Everyday Life*, which suggests that humans are prone to self-deception about their true motives for doing things. According to authors Robin Hanson and Kevin Simler, our brains are biologically hard-wired to act in our own interest while trying not to make us appear self-serving to others. “The brain is like a press secretary, constantly putting the most noble spin on our choices and behaviours while keeping our conscious minds in the dark,” says Hanson, who insists that the brain can post-rationalize anything—from why you didn’t call your mother today to why you believe in God to why you chose the partner you did. It all comes down to the story you tell yourself. Seen through this lens, perhaps Richard’s parade of long-distance girlfriends sub-

consciously targeted him not as husband material but as a socially acceptable explanation for why they never “settled down,” a lifestyle choice many women still feel the need to rationalize to others and themselves. “Self-deception is the strategic ploy our brains employ to avoid the appearance of violating social codes and norms, helping us look good to others while getting what we really want,” says Hanson. That self-deception could be a win-win proposition that upholds your social standing while furthering your endgame lies in the face of conventional wisdom. Especially for clinical psychologists, like Dr. Cortney Warren, who believe that the lies we tell ourselves are a sign of insecurity—something we do because we don’t have the psychological strength to face the truth and deal with the consequences. For Warren, honing one’s ability to become »



an “honest liar”—someone who can identify self-deception even if he or she doesn’t correct it—is a step up. “Being able to sit with the good, the bad and the ugly is empowering,” she says. “Pain is information, and it can create the anxiety and discontentment we need to motivate positive changes.”

While honesty may be the best policy, our brain often has other priorities. Before reading any further, think back to the last time you botched a presentation at work, said something terrible to a loved one, got caught stealing as a child or drunkenly spilled red wine on your host’s white sofa. That pang of shame and regret you just felt? That’s your brain protecting your self-image by telling you not to dwell on this particular information. “Cringing and flinching is your brain’s way of punishing your neural pathways so the upsetting information stays as far to the back of your mind as possible,” says Hanson.

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For Robert Trivers, the renowned evolutionary biologist who has spent decades studying how self-deceit gave our ancestors a competitive edge, the practice is not an ego-boosting end in itself. Rather, it serves an actual purpose: Human beings deceive themselves to better deceive others. “Lying is hard to pull off cognitively,” he says. “You must suppress the truth and construct a plausible lie that does not contradict anything that is known, or is likely to be found out, by the listener. You must tell it in a convincing way, and you must remember the story. Plus, there’s the fear of getting caught.” Drinking your own Kool-Aid—like the fake war hero who comes to

evolutionary advantage. Hanson admits that while the subconscious isn’t perfect, it tends to generate narratives that others are likely to go along with. “Usually there’s a long history, and you can just do something close to what others have done; the more you step into new territory with a story you want others to support, the greater the risk they will balk and reject it,” he says.

It all makes perfect sense. But rather than leaning into a perfectly calibrated deception that makes it easy for people to play along, wouldn’t it just be better to somehow infiltrate our subconscious, identify and correct our self-deceptions at the source and live free? Isn’t this why people go to therapy?

Hanson says he’s sure we can make small corrections, but it seems too much to hope to make big changes. The unconscious is a huge and highly evolved and planned out part of our brain. “Human beings have a limited

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Suddenly, I understand why change is so hard. I also understand that every time I’ve cursed my jeans for shrinking or blamed an unflattering selfie on bad lighting, my subconscious is probably working overtime, cushioning me from the cruel truth. In a 2008 study conducted by the universities of Chicago and Virginia, participants were asked to choose the most accurate photo of themselves from an array of images that were either unmodified or altered to make them look up to 50 per cent more or less attractive. Most selected the photo that looked 20 per cent better than reality. When it came time to select the most true-to-life images of strangers to whom they had been introduced a few weeks earlier, however, participants were remarkably successful at picking the accurate image.

Our tendency to self-inflate has been evidenced in all areas of life—from driving ability (93 per cent of Americans believe themselves to be better than average behind the wheel) to profes-

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believe he earned the medal of valour or the sketch boyfriend who insists he reads *Playboy* for the articles—can present you in your best light, all while eliminating the mental friction experienced by people who know they are lying. Hanson has found that the most successful self-deceptions are rooted in perceptions and intentions versus actual occurrences. “When we make up stories about things outside our mind, people can argue ‘Actually, that’s not what happened.’ But when we make up stories about our motives—for storming out of the meeting, for smoking, for not donating to charity—it’s harder for others to question us,” he says. Of course, there are limits. Stretching the truth too thin—like the politician who claims 99 per cent of his campaign promises have been met or the Facebook friend who touches up her photo to look 50 per cent better versus just 20 per cent—can leave you more vulnerable to being dismissed or manipulated by others, something that won’t work to social or

budget for honesty and have to focus on figuring out the best place to spend it,” he says, noting that a therapist’s job is to help you solve a specific problem by showing you something you don’t know about yourself that is standing in the way of your happiness. One thing. Not everything.

I ask Hanson if there is anything encouraging or reassuring about our species’ propensity for self-deception that readers can glean from his book. He points out that aside from becoming more attuned to people’s real motives, we may be heartened to learn that our peers often aren’t doing things for the important or altruistic reasons they claim. More likely, they’re just making it up as they go. Says Hanson: “It’s like swigging alcohol in a public park. As long as the bottle is in a paper bag, most people will turn a blind eye. When it comes to upholding social norms, sometimes just the slightest covering will do.” □

(*Names have been changed.)