LIAR, LIAR
Patt Aptaker, Ph.D. (225) 929-9030

“I tried to call... something must be wrong with my phone (your phone).” “My pager’s not working right.” “All of my e-mail was somehow deleted.” “I don’t remember saying that.” “I don’t know where that came from, how that happened, what you’re talking about.” Are these statements familiar to you- ones you have spoken or ones from the mouths of coworkers, friends, or relatives? Were the statements mere facts or excuses or lies? Do the following rationalizations hit home: “What she doesn’t know won’t hurt her.” “I was being polite.” “What’s a little white lie?” “It’s not worth telling the truth.”

Whether we are commenting on our electronic connections, our communication, the size of a fish or a diamond, or to ourselves on behaviors or situations, most of us have experienced that twinge of awareness (or lightning bolt!) about lying. The shades of “distortion” (a more palatable word for lying) range from “boldface” lies to choosing to leave our information to minimizing or exaggerating our perceptions.

What’s behind “distortion?” One view would hold that truth is in the eye of the beholder that each person’s perception is his or her truth and not a distortion at all. Another view is that lying to oneself and to others is a defensive maneuver. Lying then is used to avoid the pain- the pain of feeling inadequate, unloved, rejected; the pain of the consequences of our actions or inactions. Lying to employ to build ourselves up and to look better to others. Lying may be a way to pay back others for perceived hurts. A last view involves lying as a habit imbedded from watching caretakers, etc., and sustained by practice and by the usual psychological payoffs.

Can lies ever be justified? Moral and philosophical debates aside, chronic pervasive deception of self and others rarely works in the long run. While lying provides the temporary relief of pain and the enhancement of self, it keeps us from identifying our vulnerabilities and changing dysfunction patterns. Lying becomes a wall, higher and thicker the longer it is practiced. Like any habit, we become blind to the consequences to self and to others.

It is unrealistic to expect yourself or anyone to tell the truth of perceptions all the time to others. It is unrealistic to expect yourself to face your interior truths 100% of the time. Each of us needs the defenses to protect ourselves from the whirlwind of ambivalence inside and from the not-so-safe world. Instead you might choose the journey of self-awareness and change. The following suggestions are offered:

1. Set your inner alarm to go off when you are getting ready to tell a lie or distort. (In the beginning, the alarm will probably go off after you speak or deceive yourself- maybe even hours or days later.)
2. Analyze the lie or distortion to find out the purpose- e.g., the avoidance of pain, enhancement of mood. If the purpose appears to help another, double check your motive and logic. Analyze the patterns to see how they may relate to the role models you observed.
3. Find other ways to address the issues triggering lying. This will usually involve the harder work of changing your beliefs about yourself and others, dealing with feelings of inadequacy and the threats of rejection, and learning new communication skills.

For those of us who tell the “truth” as a mission, to the extent of bluntness, remember that telling the “truth” can be a defensive maneuver against psychological threats also. Your work is also to find other ways to address the issues triggering your insistence on “telling it like it is.”