

Following Lance Armstrong Scandal, Study Links Integrity, Good Health

After years of denial, cyclist Lance Armstrong admitted in January he had used banned substances to win seven straight Tour de France races. A few weeks later, *American Idol* contestant Matthew Farmer abruptly left the television competition after confessing he had fabricated a tale about being wounded in Iraq.

From political doublespeak to celebrity scandals, deception appears to be rampant in today's culture. And the habit of lying isn't limited to those in the spotlight.

A University of Massachusetts study suggests most people are less than truthful. In the course of a 10-minute conversation, 60 percent of participants told an average of two to three lies.

"It was a very surprising result," said psychologist Robert Feldman, the study's author. "We didn't expect lying to be such a common part of daily life."

Yet there is scientific evidence that honesty is the best policy. A study presented last year at the American Psychological Association's annual convention showed a link between integrity and good health.

"Recent evidence indicates that Americans average about 11 lies per week," said lead author Anita E. Kelly, professor of psychology at the University of Notre Dame. "We wanted to find out if living more honestly can actually cause better health. We found that the participants could purposefully and dramatically reduce their everyday lies, and that in turn was associated with significantly improved health."

Half the subjects in the study were asked to stop telling major and minor lies. The other half made no changes. After just 10 weeks, the truth-telling group reported better physical and mental health. As participants became more honest, they experienced fewer headaches and other symptoms of physical illness. They also didn't feel as tense or melancholy, plus they noticed improvements in their close personal relationships and social interactions.

Brenda Spina, a family therapist and licensed Assemblies of God minister, isn't surprised by these findings. Spina says even small deceptions can be a drain on a person's physical and emotional reserves.

"We have all this increased alertness because we're having to stay on top of what we said and how we said it," says Spina, owner and director of the Center for Family Healing in Appleton, Wisconsin. "We spend additional energy worrying about how to cover ourselves. But when we're honest, it frees us up to be ourselves and experience God's grace for our shortcomings."

Thomas Lindberg, lead pastor at First Assembly Memphis in Cordova, Tenn., says true integrity can only come from God.

"It's a constant battle," Lindberg says. "It really takes a transformation from the Holy Spirit and a genuine desire to obey the Scriptures and become more like Jesus. First John 3:3 says, 'All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure' " (NIV).

Lindberg recalls someone who once came to him for counseling. The young man confessed he had been switching tags at a store to get false discounts on sports merchandise. To pull off the deception, the man had sought out cashiers who appeared to have little knowledge of sporting goods.

Plagued with feelings of guilt, he followed his pastor's advice to return to the store and make restitution. Lindberg

says when the stunned store manager asked the churchgoer why he wanted to come clean, the man had a chance to tell him about the difference Christ had made in his life.

"The young man told me when he drove off the parking lot it felt like a ton of bricks had been lifted off his chest," Lindberg says. "Just as it feels good to be clean physically, it feels good to be clean spiritually."

Nonetheless, Lindberg believes dishonesty is on the rise.

"I don't think there's a whole lot of debate that the quantity of deception is increasing exponentially," Lindberg says. "I hope it's much lower in the church than in the general public, but I think even Christians have a more cavalier attitude about telling the truth."

Danny Friend, who owned a construction business for 25 years, says he always tried to follow principles of honesty and integrity instilled in him by his Christian parents. Being fair and trustworthy was good for business, he says. But after accepting Christ as his personal Savior, Friend found a more profound motivation for speaking the truth.

"Once you become a Christian, the Holy Spirit convicts you," says Friend, who now serves as music pastor at Grand Assembly of God in Chickasha, Oklahoma. "And operating honestly becomes so important because you realize people are watching you. If you mess up, it can cause a lot of damage to the church's reputation. Whether you own a business or you're in ministry, every Christian should strive to walk in integrity."

Spina says most lies arise from fears and insecurities.

"People hide the truth because they fear being abandoned, rejected or facing up to the consequences of their own actions," she says. "It's a power move to keep people away from the real you."

Deceptive habits can start at an early age. Meredith Knapp, a music teacher in Emporia, Kansas, offers rewards to third-graders who get parental signatures indicating they have completed their recorder practice schedules.

"I've called home on three of my students this year because the signature didn't look valid, and it turns out it wasn't," says Knapp, who attends Life Church Assembly of God in Emporia. "Some of the parents were very concerned, and others laughed it off. If the students can't be honest about a little homework project, how can they be honest concerning big things?"

Spina says falsehood is part of humanity's sinful nature, but it has no place in the lives of Christians.

"God can help us conquer the fears and behaviors that keep us stuck in deception," Spina says. "It really starts with being honest with God and with ourselves and allowing Him to work on us from the inside out."

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