Why We Lie So Much

By Eben Harrell

A professor of psychology at the University of Massachusetts, Robert Feldman has spent most of his career studying the role deception plays in human relationships. His most recent book, *The Liar in Your Life: How Lies Work and What They Tell Us About Ourselves*, lays out in stark terms just how common lying has become. He talked to TIME magazine about why we all need a dose of honesty.

**What are the main findings of your research?**

Not only do we lie frequently, but we lie without even thinking about it. People lie while they are getting to know someone new an average of three times in a 10-minute period. Participants in my studies actually are not aware that they are lying that much until they watch videos of their interactions.

One of the reasons people get away with so much lying, your research suggests, is that we are all essentially naive. **Why do we believe so many lies?**

This is what I call the liar's advantage. We are not very good at detecting deception in other people. When we are trying to detect honesty, we look at the wrong kinds of nonverbal behaviors, and we misinterpret them. The problem is that there is no direct correlation between someone's nonverbal behavior and their honesty. "Shiftiness" could also be the result of being nervous, angry, distracted or sad. Even trained interrogators aren’t able to detect deception at high rates. You might as well flip a coin to determine if someone is being honest.

What's more, a lot of the time, we don't want to detect lies in other people. We are unwilling to put forward the effort to suspect the truthfulness of statements, and we aren't motivated to question people when they tell us things we want to hear. When we ask someone, "How are you doing?" and they say, "Fine," we really don't want to know what their problems or struggles are. So we hear “Fine,” and we accept that answer.

**Do you feel deception is a particularly relevant topic to our society?**

We are living in a time and culture in which it's easier to lie than it has been in the past. The message that is all over society is that it's O.K. to lie — you can get away with it. One of the things I found in my research is that when you confront people with their lies, they very rarely display sorrow. Lying is not seen as being morally reprehensible in any strong way.

You can make the assumption that because it often makes social interactions go more smoothly, lying is O.K. But there is a cost to even seemingly harmless lies. If people are always telling you that you look terrific and you did a great job on that presentation, there's no way to have an accurate understanding of yourself. Lies put a smudge on an interaction, and if it's easy to lie to people in minor ways, it becomes easier to lie in bigger ways.

**In your book, you offer a way to cut back on lies. What's the "AHA!" remedy?**

AHA! stands for active honesty assessment. We need to be aware of the possibility that people are lying to us, and we need to demand honesty in other people. At the same time, we have to demand honesty of ourselves. We have to be the kind of people who don't tell white lies. We don't have to be cruel and totally blunt, but we have to convey information honestly. The paradox here is that if you are 100% honest and blunt, you will not be a popular person. Honesty is the best policy. But it's not a perfect policy.