



How to Tell if Someone is Lying to You!

By Jane C Woods

In conversation with a colleague recently, they mentioned that they didn't trust someone known to both of us. When I thought about this particular individual I realised that I had a similar feeling about him and pondered why. He was perfectly pleasant, had never done me an ill turn and I had no apparent reason to mistrust him. Yet I did.

The next time I was in his company I paid particular attention to how I felt and where those feelings might be coming from; again he was perfectly pleasant but his body language was incongruent with what he was saying and he came across as insincere.

He was saying one thing but his body was saying another. No wonder he was mistrusted as it has been estimated that 55% of how we receive a message from someone is based on what we actually see, with the spoken word coming in at a mere 7%!

Trust

There are people we trust the minute we meet them, often even before they have said a word. And there is the opposite like the chap above.

Although we can control the words we say it is much harder to control our body language; much of it is outside our conscious control and experts believe we can never control it completely. Even when we practise hard there will often be a little involuntary gesture, a micro expression, which gives us away. (However, you can learn how to improve your overall communication skills by being aware of how you are using your body. See this article)

Lying

To lie is to deliberately give false information. We all do it some of the time, and for good reasons:

"No, your new haircut does not make you look like Godzilla's grandmother, it's fine...honestly!"

Or

"What a lovely gift! I've always wanted a monogrammed nose hair clipper!"

It's been estimated by Dr. Charles Ford, a psychiatrist and professor at the University of Alabama, US, that most of us massage the truth like this at least once or twice a day!

Spot the Fibber

In a study by Texas University people in 60 countries around the world were asked how they knew if someone was lying. The most popular answer was 'they look away from you'.

However, it's not that straightforward. Sometimes fibbers make more than usual direct eye contact with you. The signs of lying are so much more subtle than that and tend to be a collection of gestures, not just one; otherwise no one would ever win a poker game! In tests, we are usually only just better than 50% accurate in working out when someone is lying to us, even when we know we're looking for it!

Why Do We Get it Wrong?

Well, sometimes we get it wrong because we rely on our gut instinct too much. We should make more of a determined effort to focus on the other person and look out for subtle gestures, micro expressions, and changes in language. We sometimes see one gesture, like looking away when speaking, and make our decision when actually we need to look for a whole cluster of gestures.

For example, if I am standing in a seminar with my arms folded in front of me people might think I'm feeling a bit defensive. But unless I am giving away other clues which lead to that conclusion it could just be that I'm standing under the cold spot of the air conditioning or even that my blouse button has just popped off and I am 'defending' my modesty!

Some Tell Tale Signs

There are some giveaway signs when people are not telling the truth but they are only reliable when you compare them with what you already know of that person's behaviour. For example, are they blinking less or more than usual? When people are thinking hard they blink very rapidly, much more than normal. This may indicate that they are making up a story. The voice may sound a little tighter and they may move their hands and arms less than they might normally. They are guarding their non verbal language by trying to keep still.

What Can You Do?

One technique is to ask them questions about something you know they will probably answer truthfully, maybe about the weather, or their journey. Look at their body language as they answer. Try and build up a picture of what they do when they are being truthful. Then ask the questions that you suspect may not answer truthfully and see if there are any inconsistencies.

Notice the small changes, like the angle at which they hold their head, which direction their eyes move, how they are breathing.

We all have very individual ways of being untruthful so spotting the inconsistencies is a good way of spotting if there is any deception. Someone who is being truthful is consistent and congruent in what they do and say.

Get the Detail

If you ask a liar a lot of questions on the detail of something you suspect is not true they are more likely to become uncomfortable, and speak slowly so they can construct their answers as they speak.

Mother (& father) Knows Best

Parents are usually very good at spotting when children are not telling the truth, assuming they can see them. A recent study found that kids away at college lied much more than the average to their parents on the phone, probably along the lines of 'yes, I am eating healthily', 'no, I'm not staying out all night,' and 'I am doing loads of studying' !

Don't Fidget!

Fidgeting and touching are giveaway signs of not being comfortable but it doesn't always mean that someone is lying but rather that there is a change in their emotions.

Mask it

The simplest way liars cover up is by trying not to show any emotions at all and present a rather blank exterior. Or they may give a fake smile which doesn't reach the eyes and isn't symmetrical. A genuine smile is usually symmetrical.

Micro Expression

The part of our brain that processes emotions, the limbic system, causes an immediate physical reaction when we have a negative emotion like fear or jealousy or guilt. So when we don't want anyone to read our emotions we try to show a facial expression that gives a different message.

However, we usually can't hide it entirely and raw emotion will leak onto our faces, even for a micro second. It's called a micro-expression and the person may not even realise that they've done it. For this reason it's not usually a good idea to enter into serious agreements with people by phone.

Watch Your Mouth

Another gesture to look out for is someone covering their mouth, almost as if they don't want you to see the lie issuing forth. Again, it can be the tiniest of gestures, maybe just a touching of the side of the mouth or their hand crossing often in front of their face.

And Finally the Pinocchio Effect

Pinocchio, as you probably know, was a puppet and each time he told a fib his nose would grow. Well, it's not just in fairy tales that our noses can give us away! When we lie, blood fills the vessels in the nose causing a tiny Pinocchio like effect. Along with this comes an itchiness and so we rub our noses. And a nose rub may indicate a lie!

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A very famous example of this was ex American President Bill Clinton who, when questioned about his infamous relationship with a White House intern, touched his nose often as he denied having had 'relations' with her. It could have meant a number of things but closer analysis of video footage shows how his other body language- stiff hand movements, tenseness, an increase in sweating- all combined to make it look like he was lying!

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