

Liespotting series: A beginner's guide to becoming a human lie detecting machine

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In a previous article we discussed the emergence of the study of lies. We discussed the heavy lifting scientific work done by Paul Ekman and David Matsumoto and the amazing contributions that they have made to our understanding of this science.

In this article we will move on to Pamela Meyer, described as “the [American] nation’s best-known expert on lying,” Meyer is the author of the 2010 book *Liespotting: Proven Techniques to Detect Deception*. It was however her 2011 TED talk, “How to Spot a Liar,” exceeding 16 million views to become one of the 20 most popular TED talks of all time that truly propelled the art of lie detecting into the minds of the general public.

In contrast to the previous article, I have chosen not to concentrate on the figure involved but rather the content she provided. By the end of this article, you may truly never believe anyone again.

Rather than allay any panic, let us up the ante with some truly worrisome facts about the occurrence of the common or garden fib. It is currently estimated that we are each lied to between ten to two hundred times per day. Should you meet a stranger it is common that both you and the other person will commit a lie three times within the first ten minutes.

Within the average marriage, estimates suggest one in every ten statements is untrue. If you are male you are eight times more likely to lie about yourself than females. Females are far more likely to lie about others often as a means to protect them.

One might question how this all goes by unnoticed. The simple answer is that we are all complicit. Lying is a collaborative act that we seem to accept. Common wisdom about the need for a pinch of salt is evident throughout our discourse. We allow others to exaggerate their successes and minimize or disguise their shortcomings because we are conscious that we do the exact same thing. Ultimately all lies tend to concentrate on how we wish to be perceived rather than our true selves.

For those of you who no longer wish to adhere to this web of deceit contained in everyday discourse, look no further, as we will now explore the necessary skills to become a powerful lie detecting force for truth.

The first step is possibly the most difficult, but certainly the most important, and that is to make the switch from passive to active participant in all conversations. Next time you are in discussion with someone, rather than waiting for a chance to make your next point, simply engage with what they are saying. Watch their physical reactions and pay attention to the manner of their speech and the choice of words that they use. Truth lies within.

The physical symptoms of lying

When considering the physical manifestations of lying, rule of thumb suggests that you simply invert expectation and look for the opposite of what you expect. Liars, as hard as they might try, cannot prevent their physical body from displaying the truth.

- 1) People expect liars to fidget. This is not the case. A more likely tell-tale sign would be the freezing of the upper body. Liars react with minimal physical motion as they are overly conscious of giving the game away.

- 2) Liars do not avoid direct eye contact. It is more likely that they will hold the gaze for an uncomfortably long period. Once again, they overcompensate to remove suspicion.
- 3) As a rule, it always pays to observe the feet. It is almost as if the geography of the feet creates a disconnect. As the furthest point from the brain, the feet are particularly traitorous. Positioning alone will tell you whether the participant is engaged or planning a hasty escape. Where the feet point the body will follow.
- 4) Only trust a smile once it reaches the eyes. It is simple to control the muscles around a smile, but it is impossible to create the impact around the eyes. If you don't see crows' feet it is not a genuine smile. Botox has complicated this one a wee bit.
- 5) Most impressive is the human propensity to 'leak'. Most people remain completely oblivious to the fact that the body reacts in a truthful way regardless of the words being uttered by our mouths. There is a plethora of this amazing phenomena online and, once witnessed, it is hard to believe. Watch politicians shake their heads while answering in the positive. Cultural leaders espousing strong and steadfast statements while shrugging. And possibly the "Great White" of leaks, duping delight. Murderers will often smile during a long session of lying as they believe they will not be caught.

The verbal symptoms of lying

Just as telling is the liar's speech patterns and choice of words. While we heartily attempt to convince people of the veracity of a statement, we demonstrate the blueprint of the lie itself. The version we have rehearsed with the detail we deem necessary. This practice and concentration create noticeable difference to our general speech.

- 1) Whether you stutter and stammer in everyday interactions expect this to increase during a lie.
- 2) Non-contraction is a serious red flag. As with any prepared speech our language strays toward the more formal in a lie telling scenario. Expect a stream of "did nots" and "would nots" to replace the colloquial didn'ts and wouldn'ts.
- 3) Liars use distancing language showing as little personal relation or involvement to the topic as possible. Names will be replaced by "that man/woman" and possessive nouns will be extremely hard to find.
- 4) The use of qualifying language is another clear sign. People telling the truth rarely find it necessary to mention that it is "by their honour" or that "God would serve as their witness".
- 5) Finally, the tools of the everyday modern detective, detail and chronology. A liar will invariably supply far too much unhelpful detail and will stick to a predetermined construct in terms of their version of events. While Hollywood may have us believe that repetitive tellings will out the lie, in truth the method is far simpler. By asking any liar to reverse their story chronologically, you render them at a loss to maintain logical integrity. The story was learnt and rehearsed a specific way, to reverse it entails way too much thinking. Details will jumble, and the entire body is likely to leak physical reactions in an unconscious interpretive dance session.

So, you are duly prepped and armed to deconstruct the lies we face in our daily lives. With practice, you hold the key to dismantling the greatest to the whitest of untruths. Well. At least that is what Pamela Meyer would have you believe.