Summary. People often tell lies in an attempt to be kind or look out for others’ best interests. (“You look great in that outfit!”) When telling a well-intentioned lie requires someone to make an assumption about what’s in the recipient’s best interest, it’s called a paternalistic lie. In... more

A manager gives an employee overly-positive feedback to boost their confidence. A doctor gives a patient a too-rosy prognosis to foster hope. A government official conceals a security threat to prevent widespread panic.

These are relatively understandable scenarios in which an individual tells a lie because they think they are helping someone. In each case, however, it’s unclear whether the lie actually makes the recipients better off. Employees could benefit from honest criticism in order to improve; patients may benefit from a candid prognosis; citizens might take actions to make themselves less vulnerable to security threats.

Given the ethical issues surrounding deception, how can one be sure when telling a well-meaning lie is the right thing to do — and when it’s not?
Some would argue that deceiving others is never ethical, especially in today’s corporate climate. As reports of fraud, bribery, and privacy breaches abound, “transparency” is becoming a watchword in organizations. If an act of deception were uncovered in public, it could result in a severe blow to your reputation.

However, day-to-day life presents what comedian Jerry Seinfeld calls “must-lie situations” — or, at the least, situations in which people lie precisely because they believe it is the ethical thing to do. For example, if someone asks how they look on their wedding day, the only acceptable answer is “You look incredible,” regardless of whether this is true.

But what if your boss asked you for your opinion on an underdeveloped presentation that they had to deliver at an important meeting that is weeks away? This is a very different situation. True, it might cause you both discomfort in the moment if you tell your boss that you think the presentation is not in great shape. However, there is enough time before the meeting for you to save your boss from embarrassment if the presentation were to fall flat. To your boss (and perhaps the company), preventing this embarrassment later on could be more important than avoiding the discomfort of receiving criticism.

In this case, falsely telling someone that they did a great job could be considered a paternalistic lie—that is, a lie that requires the deceiver to make assumptions about whether lying is in the best interest of the person being deceived.

In our recent article published in Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, across seven studies with over 2,000 research participants, we find that paternalistic lies spark strong resentment from deceived parties. In several experiments, participants were paired with partners (“communicators”) who had the opportunity to lie or tell the truth in order to help participants earn different prizes. For example, in one of the studies, communicators had to report the outcome of a coin flip, but could do so honestly or dishonestly. If the communicator was honest about the coin flip outcome, the participant would earn one ticket for a $10 lottery that would be conducted that day; if the communicator lied, the participant would earn one ticket for a $30 lottery three months from that day.

This choice — a chance at $10 now or $30 later — requires the communicator to make assumptions about what’s best for the partner when deciding whether to lie. It models a number of real-world situations, such as when a financial adviser might lie to a client for the purpose of nudging them to save money for the future.
Although it’s well-intended, lying in this context is paternalistic, since it assumes that the client would prefer future savings over available cash in the present. We found that communicators who told lies in this context were viewed as less moral than communicators who told the truth. Three specific inferences underlie this judgment. In particular, participants believed that paternalistic liars did not have good intentions, that paternalistic liars were violating their autonomy, and that paternalistic liars misunderstood their preferences. In another study, we also found that participants were actually less satisfied with the prize they received when it resulted from a paternalistic lie.

Importantly, not all lies bring about these negative judgments. In our experiments, some participants learned that a communicator’s honest or dishonest statement influenced how many lottery tickets the participant earned, rather than which lottery they were entered into. In this case, there was no ambiguity about the fact that lying would help the participant—anyone would rather receive more lottery tickets than fewer. Indeed, in this situation, lying was not seen as less moral than truth-telling, and did not elicit the same negative inferences.

Our research yielded some specific steps you can take to determine whether your lies are paternalistic (and thus, whether they will be welcomed or met with resentment). To determine whether your lies will be seen as paternalistic, ask yourself the following questions:

1. *Can you safely assume that most people would be better off with the outcome associated with lying, rather than the truth? If not, tell the truth.*

Sometimes the answer to this question will be obvious. Believing you look attractive on your wedding day is clearly better than believing you do not, and earning two lottery tickets is better than earning one lottery ticket. In these cases, lying is likely to be appreciated.

In many other cases, the answer will not be as obvious. If you’re not sure whether most people prefer the outcome associated with lying, consider asking a group of people. If there is disagreement, tell the truth.

2. *Do you know whether the person with whom you are talking prefers comfort over candor in this context? If not, lean towards candor.*
Remember, it’s possible to learn people’s preferences simply by asking them. Consider asking your colleagues and family members the type of feedback they appreciate, and when and why they might appreciate constructive criticism over comfort. For example, you can ask your significant other whether they really want to know how they look when they ask you; and a doctor can ask their patients how much they want to know about their prognosis, or whether they would like to focus conversations on their treatment options.

We ran several studies examining paternalistic lies in close and professional relationships and found that people were more comfortable with a communicator’s deception if it was informed by an explicit conversation about a person’s preferences. For example, in one study, we found that people had a much higher regard for a doctor who offered a patient false hope when the doctor had previously discussed the patient’s preferences with the patient, versus when the doctor simply assumed these preferences.

3. Are you confident that the target of the lie knows that you are looking out for their best interest? If not, any attempt to justify the lie may be ineffective.

When caught lying (paternalistically or otherwise), people often defend themselves by saying they lied to protect the other person. But before lying to protect someone’s interests or feelings, ask yourself not only whether you are lying to protect them, but also whether that person would believe your lie was well-intended if they found out. In several studies, we found that people were not likely to believe paternalistic lies were well-intended, and reacted poorly to these lies even when the liar communicated good intentions. However, people were more likely to believe that paternalistic lies were well-intended when they were told by people who knew them well or had reputations as helpful, kind people.

Even though paternalistic lies are often well-intentioned, if uncovered, they will usually backfire. Lying may be helpful when there is no ambiguity about the resulting benefits for those on the receiving end. But in most other circumstances, honesty is the best policy.

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