

How to handle chronic liars

with

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It’s hard to have a healthy relationship with a liar. Here are some ways of dealing with their deceptive behaviour.

Think about why they’re lying

Sometimes people lie in order to avoid *your* difficult behaviour. How do you handle bad news? Do you get angry or out of control? If so, you might be prompting ‘defensive’ lying. Other reasons people might lie include low self-esteem, anxiety about admitting the truth, a need to save face or a desire to shift the blame for problems. How you respond will depend on why the lie has been told in the first place.

Watch for patterns

Most liars have habits that give them away. For example, a workmate might speak with exaggerated confidence when lying. Once you detect this pattern, you’ll be able to spot their lies more easily. In this case you could adopt the policy “the more confident they sound, the less I can believe them.” Patterns that can give liars away include changes to voice tone, rate of speech, posture, eye contact and depth of breathing.

Look for evidence

Listen for inconsistencies in the liar’s story. Most liars fail to plan their stories properly – so they get details wrong. Ask questions about the details of the situation. Keep track of the liar’s responses, so you pick up on inconsistencies.

Make decisions based on facts

Never make a decision based purely on what a known liar says. Always check the facts behind their story. If possible, get someone else’s opinion before acting on the advice of someone who lies frequently. See this as an assertive action, rather than as a challenge to the liar

Remember they could be ill

Keep in mind that incessant lying can be a sign of mental illness. There’s no point letting the liar’s distorted sense of reality upset you. Instead, remind yourself that the lies might be a symptom of a more serious problem. These could include borderline personality disorder or histrionic personality disorder. In some cases, the ‘liar’ might actually be describing their version of reality. For example, someone who suffers auditory hallucinations might claim they have been told things no-one has really said.

Need advice on what to say in tough situations? Ask Eleanor now. Send your question and we’ll answer it in a future newsletter.

How to confront a liar

by **Eleanor Shakiba**

Director, Think Learn Succeed

Need to challenge a liar’s version of events? Do it in four simple steps.

Repeat back their story

Listen carefully to what the suspected liar says. Then repeat back, in your own words, their key points. Doing this serves two purposes. First, it ensures that you’ve accurately understood what they’ve said. This can save you time and energy if there’s been a misunderstanding. Second, it helps you pin the suspected liar down to a single version of events. This makes it easier to challenge their misrepresentations.

For example:

- “Let me check I’ve understood you correctly. You’re saying you returned your library books at 5.00 p.m. on the 3rd of May.”

Express surprise

This is a way of challenging their story without painting the liar into a corner. It minimises the risk that they will need to save face. Thus, it makes your task of moving on to your version of events easier. You can express surprise by saying something like:

- “I’m surprised to hear that.”
- “That surprises me”
- “I feel surprised by that”

Use a contrast frame

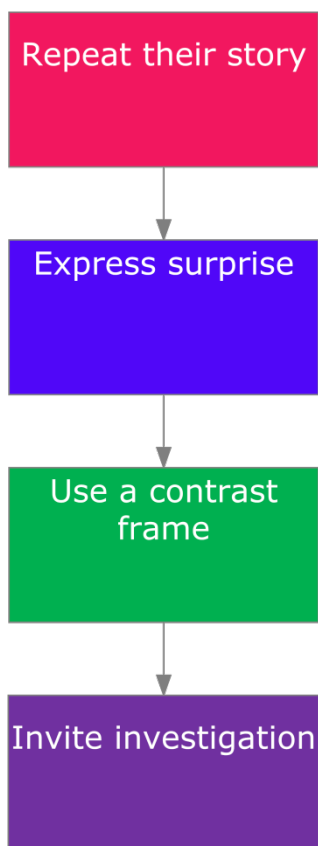
This verbal pattern allows you to spell out the evidence which indicates the other person is distorting the truth. It avoids creating a judgmental tone, so that defensive reactions are less likely to occur. To create a contrast frame, start by summarising what the suspected liar has said. Then outline the facts you have observed which contradict their version of events. For example:

- “That’s because we date stamp all books when they come through the chute. Your book was stamped at 3.45 on the 5th of May.”

Invite investigation

Let them know the situation needs to be resolved. This opens the door to proving your point. It also makes the liar think twice before distorting the truth in future. Say something like “Let’s investigate this right now.”

Need advice on what to say to difficult people? Ask Eleanor now. Send your question and we’ll answer it in a future newsletter.



Spotting a pathological liar

Real Life Success Story

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Melanie couldn't understand why her colleague, Sandra, lied so much. She enrolled in a course on dealing with difficult people with Eleanor.

During the course, Melanie realised that Sandra was a pathological liar. This is someone who lies so often they're considered to have a disease. There were some clear signs that told Melanie that she was dealing with a 'sick' form of lying. You can use them to spot pathological liars, too.

The lies just pop out

Everyone lies sometimes. Most 'normal' lies are planned and have an aim. For example, you might lie to avoid hurting someone's feelings or to cover up an embarrassing mistake. But Sandra's lies were aimless. She didn't seem to plan her lies. Instead, she just made things up on the spot. This made her lying seem blatant. But it also made it easier for Melanie to spot.

The story changes constantly

Since Sandra didn't think her lies through, her story shifted rapidly. Sandra didn't show any embarrassment about this. Instead, she kept on embroidering her tale. This sign helped Melanie confirm the fact that Sandra felt compelled to lie.

They exaggerate all the time

Sandra distorted everything. Her stories were so wild they sounded absurd. Her motivation seemed simple. She wanted to one-up everyone around her. Instead of getting upset by this behaviour, Melanie decided to view it as a sign that Sandra was suffering from a psychological disorder.

There's no reason for lying

Telling lies seemed to be fun for Sandra. She looked like she got a buzz from making things up. She also enjoyed watching others respond to her lies. The more often she lied, the better she seemed to feel. Melanie felt better about this when she reframed Sandra's behaviour. She decided that the deceptive behaviour wasn't aimed at her. It was simply a pathological liar's modus operandi.

They never admit they're wrong

Melanie quickly realised that Sandra would never admit she might be wrong. Instead, she came up with elaborate 'explanations.' Often, these were designed to make Melanie look foolish. So Melanie decided to avoid challenging Sandra's story unless she really needed to. After all, Melanie knew that everyone else doubted the veracity of Sandra's claims. She now feels much more confident dealing with Sandra.

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Read course outline.

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6 December: Beat the Time Vampires at [ITCC, Sydney](#)

15 December: Managing Conflict at [CCE, Sydney](#)

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