



TO FIB OR NOT TO FIB: It's not always black-and-white, but "sparing" others often backfires.

can we be honest?

Small lies are a big part of our lives. Daring to tell the truth—to yourself and to others—improves your relationships and de-stresses your mind and body.

SO, ARE YOU INTERESTED IN RENTING THE PLACE?" the landlady asked me, after she'd taken me on a tour of the kitchen, the bath, the bedroom, and the porch. It would have been so easy to say, "Yes," and I almost did, just to keep my options open. "I mean, what's your feeling about it?" she added. And because she put it that way—as if she really did want to know what I was feeling—I told her the truth.

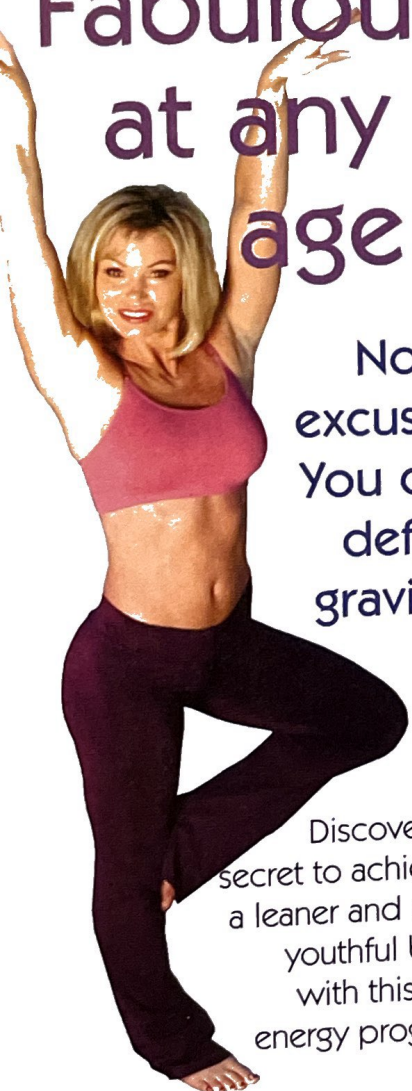
"It might be a bit too isolated for me in this town," I said. "I'm thinking about moving out altogether." A year before, I'd relocated to this one-saloon town, tucked between bay and ocean and hills, to write and surf and hike. When my lease ended, I went searching for another rental nearby. But as I

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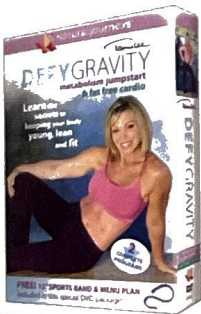
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Presence of Mind

stood there in the cottage's hillside garden, I found myself wondering if perhaps the loneliness of the place had begun to outweigh its natural beauty. "I'm really not sure what I want to do," I told her.

"Oh?" she responded, with the wisdom of someone who knew where she lived and why. "It sounds to me like you've already made up your mind."

Three weeks later I was happily ensconced in a flat in a small city 25 miles away, closer to friends, potential friends, cafés, and the cheery shrieks of children playing in the neighborhood. Apparently, I had known what I wanted. But it didn't come to my attention until I spoke past the easy lie and trusted the truth with a stranger and, therefore, with myself.

the size-12 sham

SMALL LIES are a big part of our lives. We tell them for convenience and comfort, to smooth things over for others as much as for ourselves. "It's all right with me," we say when it's not. "I'll call you," we insist when we won't. And, perhaps the most pervasive prevarication of all, we say we're "fine" when we aren't. "The most common lies are told to avoid conflict," says psychotherapist Susan Campbell, Ph.D., author of *Saying What's Real: Seven Keys to Authentic Communication and Relationship Success*. "People want harmony. But this compulsive quest for harmony gets in the way of true harmony."

To admit the truth to oneself and then speak it to others can be difficult. But the rewards far outweigh the risks. "The most important thing you can do for your personal growth is to be honest with yourself," says life coach Harriette Cole, author of *Choosing*

Truth: Living an Authentic Life. Honesty, she explains, begins with the self and emanates outward. Once we face our own true feelings and beliefs, we can start to act on them, bringing our behavior, relationships, and professional lives into alignment. "Truth is essential for healthy living," she says.

For an example, Cole offers up the story of a woman she knows who tells herself she wears a size 12, when actually she's a size 16. As a result of this self-deception, she squeezes herself into clothes that neither feel nor look good, which in turn causes her to be ill at ease in her dealings with the world. In addition, her health is compromised because she's not facing the truth about her need to exercise and eat better. And her relationships suffer: Since no one is supposed to mention the size-12 sham, it's become a barrier to intimacy with friends and family.

truth or consequences

LIVING truthfully is an avenue to self-healing, says Campbell. It's a crucial tool to help people face old fears of rejection or abandonment and wounds that they may have acquired in childhood. "Being honest helps you stop avoiding emotional pain so you're more able to be with what is," she says. "Getting real is an inner practice for bringing you into the moment." The result can be a clearing away of psychological clutter, greater freedom from fear, and a kind of clarity that leads to a stronger sense of well-being.

Research on the benefits of disclosing versus suppressing feelings suggests that doing the former can reduce your susceptibility to illness. James W. Pennebaker, Ph.D.,

a professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Austin, and author of *Writing to Heal: A Guided Journal for Recovering From Trauma and Emotional Upheaval*, has conducted numerous clinical studies on the psychological and physiological effects of talking and writing about emotional experiences. His conclusion: "Emotional expression may have important links with the functioning of the immune system."

Dale Larson, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at Santa Clara University in California, developed a self-concealment scale that is widely used in the helping professions. "We have found that self-concealment is associated with more physical symptoms and higher levels of depression and anxiety," he says. Apparently, both the body and the mind have to work extra hard to lie and keep secrets.

honest to goodness

TELLING THE TRUTH also does wonders for relationships. When we hold our tongues to avoid a conflict—declaring to our partners that we don't mind yellow wall paint when we really want green—the feeling doesn't just disappear. Presbyterian pastor Mark D. Roberts, author of *Dare to Be True: Living in the Freedom of Complete Honesty*, believes that the cost of avoiding even superficial conflicts can be quite high. "You lose the ability to be yourself with your own family," says Roberts, "and you sacrifice an authentic, growing, healthy relationship" with a spouse or child or friend.

Of course, knowing what you believe is one thing, but saying it out loud to people who have their own feelings and reactions can be quite another. Such communication requires tact, empathy, trust, good timing, and a willingness to take chances. Campbell has developed specific

TALKING THE TALK

In her book, *Saying What's Real*, psychotherapist Susan Campbell, Ph.D., offers a series of phrases that can help facilitate a safe and honest conversation.

"I want ..."

Assuming that other people know what we want is a self-protective mechanism; it helps us avoid feeling the vulnerability that comes from asking for what we want and possibly not getting it. But if you ask for what you want at the moment you actually want it, the other person can better feel the clarity and energy of your desire.

"Hearing you say that, I feel ..."

This phrase helps to keep our attention focused on the only truth we can know for sure: that of our own feelings. If you're talking about someone else's emotions, label your interpretation. For example: "I imagine you're feeling sad."

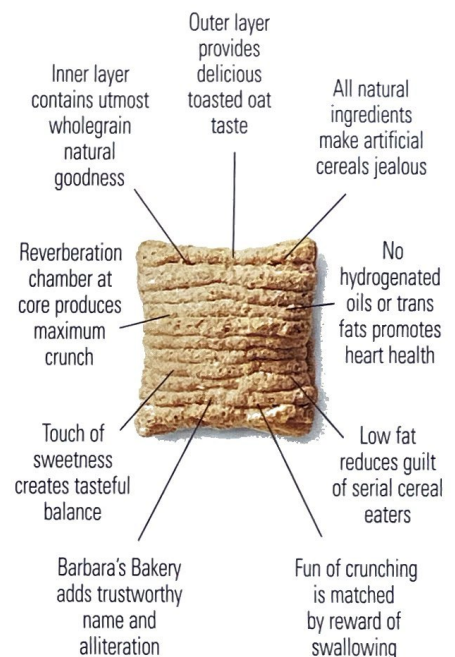
"I have some feelings to clear."

Old, uncommunicated emotions are like clutter: If they don't get cleared away, you'll just keep tripping over them. When you decide to do some emotional housecleaning, formulate a goal for the conversation. Tell the other person that your intent is to clear the air so the relationship can become stronger.



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WHEN TO HOLD YOUR TONGUE

Though some people practice an all-honesty, all-the-time approach, most of us need to incorporate caution and diplomacy, for our own sake as well as that of others. Here are three questions to ask yourself when you're deciding whether to reveal all.

1. What are my intentions?

Telling the truth to manipulate a situation or hurt someone is a dishonest use of honesty. Pastor and author Mark D. Roberts says we should make sure we are "speaking the truth in love," rather than meanness, while psychotherapist Susan Campbell, Ph.D., encourages honesty "with the intent to be transparent with thoughts and feelings."

2. Can this person be trusted?

If you don't feel safe revealing your emotions to someone, just say so, without anger or blame. For instance: "I don't want to share my thoughts with you right now because I'm afraid you might make fun of them" or, more simply, "I'm not comfortable talking about that right now." Even if we trust the other person's intentions, we may not have faith in their interest or ability to understand our feelings.

3. Is this the right time and place?

When the store clerk asks how you are, it's OK to say "fine," especially if there are other people in line. With co-workers, you could say, "Thanks for asking, but I don't really want to talk about it." If that seems heavy-handed, try "I'm still here"; "Well, it's Monday"; or simply "How nice of you to ask. How are you?"

language for practicing honesty in a safe and productive way (see "Talking the Talk" on page 89). Most important, she says, is that "you can only be honest about yourself." Truth is rarely objective; therefore, all we can really do is refer to our own perceptions of it.

In addition to its subjectivity, the truth can be messy, distasteful, even painful. "But when we take a risk and speak the truth," Campbell maintains, "we often find out that we *can* handle it, and we become inwardly stronger. And often the relationship benefits as well, because the air has been cleared."

Practicing honesty in relationships not only deepens intimacy and authenticity, but also produces better results with less effort. Cole, who pens a syndicated column, runs her own business, and tends to her husband and new baby, simply doesn't have the time to lie. "Stalling is very inefficient," she says. "I don't want people coming back to me again and again; I'd rather tell them no at first, rather than hedge things."

Her comment reminds me of my potential landlady. To have avoided rejecting her cottage would have cost me at least one more phone call, plus the guilt of knowing I was leading her on. But as Cole puts it, "Being nice is not nice. Being kind is nice. But playing nice is often a lie."

There are times, even with strangers, when being real rather than "nice" brings unexpected rewards. Perhaps the next person who asks how you're feeling really wants to know. If you answer truthfully, you may be surprised at the sparks of revelation and connection that can be created in a moment of pure honesty. 