

The White Lie

The white lie wears many hats and is tricky in its disguise. It is hard to define and sometimes not that easy to recognize. "Do you like this dress on me?" — "*Of course.*" "Did you enjoy the party?" — "*Absolutely!*" This tactic penetrates our society, and often, we don't even notice that we're employing it. It has become almost second nature for people to slip in an untruth that can help a situation.

White lies, as innocent as they seem, have a meaning behind them. If I asked my sister "Do I look fat in this dress?" and my sister were to tell me, "Yes, that dress makes you look as ugly and large as the Eiffel Tower," I wouldn't believe her for a second. The absurdity of her statement allows me to see that she is joking. White lies, however, are not so transparent. The liar provides the desired answer to a question because it is proper at that moment. When a guest tells the hostess that an obviously boring party was "fantastic" everyone within hearing range, except for the hostess, knows that it is a lie. But because it is socially acceptable to tell this type of falsehood, no one passes judgement. Why is it okay to lie blatantly when one is fulfilling a social convention? It's because the white lie establishes that the liar is playing by the rules of society: they're being polite.

The innocence associated with a white lie tricks us into looking past its addictive nature. However, the white lies we tell initiate a spiral downward into heavier, more serious lies that have lethal effects on our reputations and interpersonal relationships.

The most important element of a white lie is its destructiveness: it hurts both the receiver and the sender. On the surface, it's a handy fix-all for an uncomfortable situation. But a deeper look reveals the disconnect to communication between a speaker and their audience: the receiver of the lie is never allowed to hear the truth, while the speaker cannot trust the situation they are in to speak honestly. It is easier for the speaker to hide behind the shield of a white lie because, after all, this is a socially acceptable option. But then the speaker grows dependent on this shield.

Going back to the "Do I look fat in this dress?" example, say that this question was asked in the context of a marriage. A wife asks this of her husband as they rush out the door, late for a dinner appointment. The husband, not wanting to waste time by his wife changing her clothes, says immediately, "No, you look fine." This lie creates a first crack in the foundation of their relationship. As soon as he understands that he's gotten away with this lie, he sees no problem with one or two more. His wife, perceiving his lies, begins to doubt any statement or excuse that he makes. What seemed like an easy answer at the time, in the long run, is only the first step toward the destruction of their marriage.

The ease and politeness that we associate with the white lie prevents the liar from looking beyond the here-and-now to the problems and consequences that will inevitably arise from its use. This is why the white lie is the most dangerous form of lying. This is why it is morally and ethically unacceptable. I don't mean to condemn those who tell white lies. We all do. And I don't propose that no one should ever tell a white lie again. Rather, I mean to reveal the white lie for what it truly is and to make us aware of its danger. Perhaps the next time you're grappling with the decision of whether to tell the truth or to slide your way out of confrontation with a white lie, you'll think twice before choosing the latter.

Which verb does the verb *do* in "We all do" in the last paragraph refer to?

1. Tell.
2. Mean.
3. Propose.
4. Condemn.