

Many truth tellers opt for honesty because lying seems too complicated or makes them anxious.

Most religious and philosophical traditions include some version of “Thou shalt not bear false witness,” and Mendelson aims to follow that dictate to the letter. “Telling the truth helps me sleep at night with a clear conscience,” he says. But some social scientists believe lying isn’t a universal ethical *faux pas*—it depends on the situation at hand. “People who tell lies are very oriented to other people and what they think,” says Bella DePaulo, a psychologist at the University of California at Santa Barbara. Telling “appropriate lies”—like the time you told Aunt Erma you loved the chartreuse pantsuit she got you for the holidays—isn’t a sign that you’re morally bankrupt. It’s a sign you’re attuned to her feelings.

Shading the truth has its share of social advantages, so why do a few rare individuals insist on honesty at all costs? In some cases, straight shooters may be a product of the family environment they were raised in, says Victoria Talwar, a developmental psychologist at McGill University in Montreal. In a study examining children’s moral development, Talwar found that parents who do not talk about the importance of preserving other people’s feelings are likely to raise offspring with a blunt relational style.

Mendelson, however, says his penchant for honesty evolved as a result of a teenage prank that got a little out of hand. “In high school, I made a Web site making fun of everyone at the school—it had a top-10 list of jerks and some funny audio.” After word of the site leaked out all over the school, Mendelson eventually decided to admit he was responsible. That experience made him realize it was simplest to stand behind what he believed was true, he says. “I knew I

couldn’t stay under the radar, so from that point, I decided just to tell the truth about everything.”

Many truth tellers opt for honesty because lying seems too complicated or makes them too anxious. Liars have to remember to keep their false stories straight. A University of Portsmouth study found that liars usually pause more often in their speech, for example, and some people blush profusely when they lie. Being a blunt truth teller, on the other hand, “is really easy,” Talwar says. “You just tell it as it is.”

In some cases, truth telling may be a byproduct of the way the brain is structured. People with Asperger’s syndrome, for example, are extremely forthright because they have a limited capacity to understand the social repercussions of their blunt honesty. “My mother had Asperger’s, and she literally could not tell a lie,” says Ellen Snortland, a writer and producer in Los Angeles. “After my father died, I asked her, ‘Do you ever miss Dad?’

She said, ‘Nope, I’m glad he’s dead.’ She didn’t say it with malice. It was merely true for her.”

Not all truth tellers are scrupulous or socially naïve, however; some of them use the truth as a kind of sophisticated bludgeon. “It can be almost a holier-than-thou thing,” DePaulo says. “Sometimes people use honesty as an excuse to hurt others. They say something nasty and then say, ‘Well, I’m just being honest.’”

“As Emily Dickinson said, ‘Tell the truth, but tell it slant,’” DePaulo says. “You can convey what you really mean without being hurtful.” But Mendelson’s not a big fan of the “tell it slant” approach. The possibility that he might offend a few people doesn’t scare him. “I want to tell 100 percent absolute truth, or else I’m wasting my time,” he says. “Being able to give people a straight, honest answer is a gift.”

ELIZABETH SVOBODA is a writer living in San Jose, California.

TELL THE TRUTH—TACTFULLY

Adopting a straightforward attitude can change your life and relationships for the better—as long as you use the truth wisely.

■ **Weigh the specifics.** Ask yourself whether telling the truth has real potential to improve a less-than-ideal situation. If someone you know is engaging in self-destructive behavior, for instance, airing your opinions might be more helpful in the long run. On the other hand, if you detest people on your team at work but know there’s little chance of getting reassigned, it’s probably best to keep mum.

■ **Zero in on the other person’s motive and address it.** If an acquaintance blindsides you with an inquiry like “I’m your best friend, aren’t I?”, don’t resort to the quick fix of telling a lie. Instead, parry with a reply that teases out the questioner’s true intent: “Are you feeling lonely these days? Should we get together more often?”

■ **Tell the truth to build rapport.** Should you confide to a friend that you’ve had plastic surgery or that you once lusted after your ninth-grade science teacher? You don’t have to, of course, but DePaulo says people willing to disclose slightly embarrassing truths are likely to have deeper, more intimate personal relationships.