Like Lance Armstrong, we are all liars, experts say

January 21 2013, by Melissa Healy

Although we profess to hate it, lying is common, useful and pretty much universal. It is one of the most durable threads in our social fabric and an important bulwark of our self-esteem. We start lying by the age of 4 and we do it at least several times a day, researchers have found. And we get better with practice.

In short, whatever you think about Lance Armstrong's admission this week that he took performance-enhancing drugs to fuel his illustrious cycling career, the lies he told may be no more persistent or outsized than yours, according to psychologists and others who study deception. They were just more public. And the stakes were bigger.

"People do it because it works," said Robert Feldman, dean of social and behavioral sciences at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst and a leading researcher on the psychology of lying. "We get away with lies all the time. Usually they're minor: 'I love your tie.' 'You did a great job.' But in some cases they're bigger, and in Armstrong's case, he was pretty confident he could get away with it."

It's not easy to lie. Psychologists and neuroscientists have found that - initially, at least - deceit requires mental exertion for most of us. The effort to reconcile a lie with the truth - or with our notions of ourselves as good people - takes up so much brainpower that as we do it, we may actually forget to perform such effortless acts as blinking.

To sustain a lie for years, and against mounting evidence of its untruth,

liars large and small must "develop an infrastructure around it," Feldman said - a litany of justifications that makes it possible to cling to deception and convince ourselves that we are good people in spite of it.

"But as time goes on, it gets easier," Feldman said.

For Armstrong, who has been stripped of seven Tour de France titles and an Olympic bronze medal, the justifications for his long-standing deceit were on full display during two nights of televised interviews with Oprah Winfrey. Acknowledging that he took a forbidden drug that increases oxygen retention in the blood, he noted that his dose was "not a lot." He said he rationalized his illicit use of testosterone by convincing himself that it probably made up for the loss of the male hormone that resulted from his treatment for testicular cancer.

"It's probably a tribute to the human ability to rationalize," said Daniel Ariely, a Duke University behavioral economist and author of the book "The (Honest) Truth About Dishonesty." "We really have this amazing capacity to tell ourselves the story about why what we're doing doesn't represent dishonesty in any way."

Although we may lavish our indignation on the practice, lying certainly isn't rare. During a 10-minute conversation between two strangers, 60 percent lied at least once, Feldman reported in a 2002 study in the journal Basic and Applied Social Psychology. Those liars told an average of two to three fibs.

Although men were more likely to lie to make themselves feel good, women more often lied to make their conversation partner feel good. Either way, Feldman said, the urge to make oneself likable and competent was a powerful motivator.

To lie in the first place, as well as to keep the lie going over time,

requires two things: motivation and justification. Whether the motivation is money, fame, status or the high esteem of others, it must be counterbalanced with enough justification that we can sustain our image of ourselves as good people, said Shaul Shalvi, a psychologist at Ben-Gurion University in Israel.

In his lab in the Negev desert, Shalvi found evidence that when faced with an opportunity to lie, subjects made a quick but precise calculation of that balance. Study participants were shown to a quiet place and given a die to roll. What they came up with on their first roll would determine their reward, they were told: the higher the roll, the more money they would be given.

When given three chances to roll, subjects frequently lied, reporting not the value of their first roll but of their highest roll, Shalvi and colleagues found. But when they had only one chance to roll the die, far fewer of them lied: given a single, clear outcome, subjects could not "fudge" the truth with the justification that they had, after all, gotten a higher number at some point in the game. The results were published last year in the journal Psychological Science.

For Lance Armstrong, Shalvi said, the decision to lie could have been easy. With much to gain - and hence, high motivation - Armstrong could tell himself he was inspiring people with his story of triumph over cancer; that he was using his fame and money to help cancer patients and find a cure; that he was universally admired for his grit and his skill as an athlete and a team leader.

Armstrong probably drew on these lofty accomplishments not only to justify his denials of using banned substances, Shalvi said: They would probably have been a crucial piece of personal armor as Armstrong lashed out at those who crossed him, telling lies and filing lawsuits that hurt teammates and backers.

Not all of us tell lies so big, or for so long, Shalvi said. Some of us are also cognitively better equipped to lie - and therefore, more likely to do so.

In a series of experiments, Ariely and Francesca Gino of Harvard Business School assessed a wide range of cognitive skills in a group of volunteers and then put them through a battery of challenges that gave them ample opportunity to lie and cheat. Those subjects who had scored highest on attributes such as creativity and flexible thinking - but not intelligence - were most likely to engage in deceitful behavior. And when subjects were encouraged to think creatively as they completed the tasks, they were more likely to take shortcuts and stray from the truth.

"Not only do naturally creative people cheat more than uncreative people," Ariely and Gino wrote in a 2011 study in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology. "Subjects cajoled into thinking outside the box became cheaters too. This suggests that the creative process isn't just tied to dishonest behavior: it actually enables it."

People who are highly creative appear to have the vision and the flexibility of mind to find justifications for their deceptions, and quickly, Ariely said. For Armstrong, whose racing style suggests he was creative and flexible in taking advantage of openings to victory, those same qualities might have allowed him freer rein not only in concocting deceptions, but in justifying them to himself.

"This is how lies become self-perpetuating," Ariely said.