

# Dishonest deeds lead to 'cheater's high,' as long as no one gets hurt, study finds

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People who get away with cheating when they believe no one is hurt by their dishonesty are more likely to feel upbeat than remorseful afterward, according to new research published by the American Psychological Association.

Although people predict they will feel bad after cheating or being dishonest, many of them don't, reports a study published online in APA's *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

"When people do something wrong specifically to harm someone else, such as apply an [electrical shock](#), the consistent reaction in previous research has been that they feel bad about their behavior," said the study's lead author, Nicole E. Ruedy, of the University of Washington. "Our study reveals people actually may experience a 'cheater's high' after doing something unethical that doesn't directly harm someone else."

Even when there was no tangible reward, people who cheated felt better on average than those who didn't cheat, according to results of several experiments that involved more than 1,000 people in the U.S. and England. A little more than half the study participants were men, with 400 from the general public in their late 20s or early 30s and the rest in their 20s at universities.

Participants predicted that they or someone else who cheated on a test or logged more hours than they had worked to get a [bonus](#) would feel bad or ambivalent afterward. When participants actually cheated, they

generally got a significant emotional boost instead, according to responses to questionnaires that gauged their [feelings](#) before and after several experiments.

In one experiment, participants who cheated on math and logic problems were overall happier afterward than those who didn't and those who had no opportunity to cheat. The participants took tests on computers in two groups. In one group, when participants completed an answer, they were automatically moved to the next question. In the other group, participants could click a button on the screen to see the correct answer, but they were told to disregard the button and solve the problem on their own. Graders could see who used the correct-answer button and found that 68 percent of the participants in that group did, which the researchers counted as cheating.

People who gained from another person's misdeeds felt better on average than those who didn't, another experiment found. Researchers at a London university observed two groups in which each participant solved math puzzles while in a room with another person who was pretending to be a participant. The actual participants were told they would be paid for each puzzle they solved within a time limit and that the other "participant" would grade the test when the time was up. In one group, the actor inflated the participant's score when reporting it to the experimenter. In the other group, the actor scored the participant accurately. None of the participants in the group with the cheating actor reported the lie, the authors said.

In another trial, researchers asked the participants not to cheat because it would make their responses unreliable, yet those who cheated were more likely to feel more satisfied afterward than those who didn't. Moreover, the cheaters who were reminded at the end of the test how important it was not to cheat reported feeling even better on average than other cheaters who were not given this message, the authors said. Researchers

gave participants a list of anagrams to unscramble and emphasized that they should unscramble them in consecutive order and not move on to the next word until the previous anagram was solved. The third jumble on the list was "unaagt," which can spell only the word taguan, a species of flying squirrel. Previous testing has shown that the likelihood of someone solving this anagram is minuscule. The graders considered anyone who went beyond the third word to have cheated and found that more than half the participants did, the authors said.

"The good feeling some people get when they cheat may be one reason people are unethical even when the payoff is small," Ruedy said. "It's important that we understand how our moral behavior influences our emotions. Future research should examine whether this 'cheater's high' could motivate people to repeat the unethical behavior."

**More information:** "The Cheater's High: The Unexpected Affective Benefits of Unethical Behavior," Nicole E. Ruedy, PhD, University of Washington; Celia Moore, PhD, London Business School; Francesca Gino, PhD, Harvard University; and Maurice E. Schweitzer, PhD, University of Pennsylvania; *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, online, Sept. 3, 2013.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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