

Anticipating temptation may reduce unethical behavior, research finds

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Credit: George Hodan/public domain

Why do good people do bad things? It's a question that has been pondered for centuries, and new research published by the Society for Personality and Social Psychology may offer some insights about when people succumb to versus resist ethical temptations.

"People often think that bad people do bad things and good people do

good things, and that unethical behavior just comes down to character," says lead research author Oliver Sheldon, PhD. "But most people behave dishonestly sometimes, and frequently, this may have more to do with the situation and how people view their own unethical behavior than character, per se."

In a series of experiments, participants who anticipated a temptation to act unethically were less likely to then behave unethically, relative to those who did not. These participants also were less likely to endorse unethical behavior that offered short-term benefits, such as stealing office supplies or illegally downloading copyrighted material. The study was published online in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* on May 22, 2015.

"Self-control, or a lack thereof, may be one factor which explains why good people occasionally do bad things," says Sheldon, an assistant professor of organizational behavior at Rutgers University.

In one experiment, 196 business-school students were divided into pairs as the buyer or seller of some historic homes. Before the negotiation exercise, half of the group was reminded of ethical temptations; they wrote about a time in their lives when bending the rules was useful, at least in the short term, while the control group wrote about a time when having a back-up plan helped.

The sellers were told that the property should only be sold to a buyer who would preserve the historic homes and not destroy them for a new development. However, the buyers were told that their client planned to demolish the homes and build a high-rise hotel, but they were ordered to conceal that information from the seller. More than two thirds of the buyers (67 percent) in the [control group](#) lied about the hotel plans so they could close the deal, compared to less than half (45 percent) of the buyers who had been reminded about temptation in the [writing exercise](#).

Anticipating temptation may only help, however, if people identify an unethical act as having the potential to jeopardize their self-image, integrity, or reputation. In a second experiment with 75 college students, participants were instructed to flip a coin that was labeled "SHORT" or "LONG" several times to determine whether they had to proofread short or long passages of text for spelling and grammatical errors. The participants were divided into two groups who completed the same writing exercise as the first experiment (recalling unethical behavior or a back-up plan). Additionally, half of the participants were told that a person's values, life goals and personality are stable, while the other group was told that those characteristics can change radically even within a few months' time. This information was intended to affect whether participants would view their behavior in task as consistent or not with who they would be in the future.

Participants who were encouraged to anticipate temptation and who thought their behavior was consistent with their future self, were honest: they reported short coin flips that didn't differ from chance. However, participants not encouraged to anticipate temptation and/or who believed that their behavior was inconsistent with their future self, were more likely to lie about the number of short coin flips so they would have less work to do.

People also may be more likely to engage in unethical behavior if they believe the act is an isolated incident. In an online experiment with 161 [participants](#), people were less inclined to support unethical behavior in six workplace scenarios if they anticipated temptation through the writing exercise and considered all six scenarios at once, rather than did not anticipate temptation and/or viewed and considered each scenario on a separate computer screen. The scenarios included stealing office supplies, calling in sick when just tired, and intentionally working slowly to avoid additional tasks.

"Unethical behavior may not be experienced as something that needs to be resisted if people think it's socially acceptable or does not reflect on their moral self-image," Sheldon says. "People often compartmentalize their experiences of temptation, making it much easier for them to rationalize the behavior. They might say, 'Just because I took office supplies home for personal use one time, that doesn't mean I'm a thief.'"

If people want to avoid [unethical behavior](#), it may help to anticipate situations where they will be tempted and consider how acting upon such temptation fits with their long-term goals or beliefs about their own morality. "You may not be concerned about getting caught or about your reputation if people found out, but you might be concerned about your own ethical self-image," Sheldon says. "Keeping such considerations in mind as one enters into potentially tempting situations can help people resist the temptation to behave unethically."

The same suggestions may apply for employers, Sheldon says. For example, a manager could email employees before a work trip to warn them against the temptation to inflate travel expenses. The reminder about upcoming temptation might help protect the company's bottom line, especially if employees view the [temptation](#) to inflate travel expenses as something they will encounter repeatedly in the future.

More information: Sheldon, O., and Fishbach, A. (2015). Anticipating and Resisting the Temptation to Behave Unethically. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 41 (7).

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