

People can handle the truth (more than you think)

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Credit: University of Chicago

Most people value the moral principle of honesty. At the same time, they frequently avoid being honest with people in their everyday lives. Who hasn't told a fib or half-truth to get through an awkward social situation or to keep the peace?

New research from the University of Chicago Booth School of Business explores the consequences of [honesty](#) in everyday life and determines that people can often afford to be more honest than they think.

In the paper, "You Can Handle the Truth: Mispredicting the Consequences of Honest Communication," Chicago Booth Assistant Professor Emma Levine and Carnegie Mellon University's Taya Cohen find that people significantly overestimate the costs of honest conversations.

"We're often reluctant to have completely honest conversations with others," says Levine. "We think offering critical feedback or opening up about our secrets will be uncomfortable for both us and the people with whom we are talking."

The researchers conclude that such fears are often misguided. Honest conversations are far more enjoyable for communicators than they expect them to be, and the listeners of honest conversations react less negatively than expected, according to the paper, published in the *Journal of Experiment Psychology: General*.

For purposes of the study, the researchers define honesty as "speaking in accordance with one's own beliefs, thoughts and feelings."

In a series of experiments, the researchers explore the actual and predicted consequences of honesty in [everyday life](#).

In one field experiment, participants were instructed to be completely honest with everyone in their lives for three days. In a laboratory experiment, participants had to be honest with a close relational partner while answering personal and potentially difficult discussion questions. A third experiment instructed participants to honestly share negative feedback to a close relational partner.

Across all the experiments, individuals expect honesty to be less pleasant and less social connecting than it actually is.

"Taken together, these findings suggest that individuals' avoidance of honesty may be a mistake," the researchers write. "By avoiding honesty, individuals miss out on opportunities that they appreciate in the long-run, and that they would want to repeat."

More information: Emma E. Levine et al, You can handle the truth: Mispredicting the consequences of honest communication., *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* (2018). [DOI: 10.1037/xge0000488](https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0000488)

Provided by University of Chicago

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