

Understanding why we believe compulsive liars and what makes them tick

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One of the fascinating aspects concerning the saga of convicted entrepreneur Elizabeth Holmes and recently indicted New York Congressman George Santos is how long they got away with lying to

investors, patients, voters and the public.

Holmes lied about the blood-testing capacity of her health tech startup, Theranos, for years before being found guilty of [fraud charges](#) and being sent to a Texas prison May 30.

Santos lied on his resume about his educational and professional achievements, falsely claimed to be Jewish and now faces 13 federal charges relating to fraud, money laundering and lying to the House of Representatives—while still serving in the House.

Given the sheer number of prevarications, shouldn't observers, even casual ones, have caught on to them sooner?

Lying is a skill set

It turns out it's harder than you think to discern when a compulsive liar is making things up, says Laura Dudley, an associate clinical professor in Northeastern's Department of Applied Psychology.

For the most part, people tend to trust other people. It's part of the bond that holds society together. And compulsive liars are good at what they do, Dudley says.

Children and honest adults tend to give themselves away when they tell a fib, she says. Strictly amateurs, they may elaborate more than they ordinarily would and flood their suspicious listener with reams of words they seem helpless to stop. The case is not so with adults who lie on a regular or compulsive basis, Dudley says.

Don't rely on body language

That individual "is someone who has honed this skill of telling a lie. They have learned what body language to use and what words to use," she says. People who want to protect themselves from liars sometimes want to learn "three telltale signs that someone is lying," Dudley says.

"But there aren't three things," she says.

Compulsive liars who have achieved success in business or politics "are people who have probably been doing it for a while. Like anything else, we get better at it, and it gets easier," Dudley says.

Why do they do it?

"Someone might lie to gain praise, to gain accolades or maybe some tangible reward," Dudley says. "So you might lie in order to gain money or something like that."

"We also engage in behaviors that allow us to avoid punishment of some sort," she says. And that's where lying can come in.

"A politician might tell a lie because they are trying to avoid getting into hot water or they are trying to portray a version of themselves to the public that is more palatable than the actual version," Dudley says.

Compulsive liars may lie about educational achievements or non-existent military service. They may even make up tragedies, such as the loss of a family member or a fatal disease. "This could lead to the person receiving sympathy or attention, which feels good," Dudley says.

"There can also be this sort of intrinsic reward, this sort of automatic reinforcement that can happen when the person who is telling the lie gains a [sense of control](#) over the situation or boosts their own self-esteem," Dudley says.

"If you're someone who lied, and got caught in a lie, you might experience shame. Your own learning history leads you to not engage in that behavior anymore," Dudley says.

Lack of repercussions

But a lack of negative repercussions, along with the potential attainment of rewards, can contribute to a pattern of behavior, she says. "It can get to the point where it's compulsive, where it's pathological," Dudley says.

The American Psychological Association describes pathological lying as a continuous pattern of not telling the truth that can be related to a personality disorder. "In some cases, the reward for lying is just too great. Or the urge to avoid a hefty punishment is just too great," Dudley says.

Why do we rage at them?

When the truth comes out, the rage directed at the liar can be great. "How we respond when we learn someone has not told the truth can elicit some pretty strong emotions. We might feel really angry or betrayed," Dudley says.

In the Holmes case, Dudley says she was struck by the intensity of the reporting on Holmes' sentencing for more than 11 years and the start of her prison time. "It seemed like everyone wanted to report on or see her going into jail. Everyone wanted to see the minutiae of the punishment that she was receiving for what she did," Dudley says. It's indicative of how, collectively, "we want justice and retribution for people who have lied," she says.

Compassion and trust

Dudley says feeling some compassion for people who feel they won't be accepted for their true selves can help blunt rageful reactions. "It's really sad," she says. If someone turns out to be a chronic liar, Dudley recommends keeping one's distance from that person.

But don't overreact by becoming cynical and second guessing everyone's stories and motivations, she suggests. "It seems putting our trust in other people is a better way to live than to be constantly questioning whether someone's telling the truth."

Provided by Northeastern University

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