

Telling the whole truth may ease feelings of guilt

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People feel worse when they tell only part of the truth about a transgression compared to people who come completely clean, according to new research published by the American Psychological Association.

Cheaters who confessed just part of their wrongdoing were also judged more harshly by others than cheaters who didn't confess at all, according to five experiments involving 4,167 people from all over the United States. The article appears in the February issue of APA's *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

"Confessing to only part of one's [transgressions](#) is attractive to a lot of people because they expect the confession to be more believable and guilt-relieving than not confessing," said lead author Eyal Pe'er, PhD, who ran the studies at Carnegie Mellon University and is now at Bar-Ilan University in Israel. "But our findings show just the opposite is true."

Confessing to some bad behavior was more common than making a full confession among those who cheated as much as possible in the study. But only telling part of the truth, as opposed to not confessing at all, was more likely to lead to increased feelings of guilt, shame and anxiety, the research found. In other words, it's best to commit to an all-or-nothing approach when it comes to confessing, said Pe'er, who conducted the research with Alessandro Acquisti, PhD, of Carnegie Mellon University, and Shaul Shalvi, PhD, from Ben-Gurion University in Israel.

All of the experiments were conducted online. The first involved virtual coin tossing, in which [participants](#) were asked to predict the results of 10 coin tosses and report how many times they were correct. They received a 10-cent bonus for each correct guess.

In that study, which involved 2,113 people (58

percent male, average age 30), 35 percent of participants cheated by adding about three correct guesses to their report. Among those who cheated, 19 percent then confessed – and of those, 60 percent confessed to everything and 40 percent confessed partially. Researchers assured participants that even if they acknowledged cheating, they would still get paid according to their original report. The percent of partial confessors was higher among those who cheated to the fullest extent, whereas it was lower among those who cheated to only some extent.

In another coin-tossing experiment involving 719 people (65 percent male, average age 29), the researchers asked participants to report their feelings, both positive and negative, just before or after their decision to confess. Participants who partially confessed, especially those who cheated the most, expressed more negative emotions, such as fear, shame and guilt, compared to those who confessed everything, did not confess or did not cheat at all. The participants in both coin-tossing experiments were unaware that the researchers had tracked the outcomes of their individual coin tosses and compared those outcomes to what each participant reported.

In another experiment, 357 participants (60 percent male, average age 30), described a time when they had partially or fully confessed to a misbehavior. People who described partial confessions expressed higher regret than people who reported full confessions. The experimenters were unable to determine if participants regretted their decision to confess or if they regretted their decision to confess only partially. However, full confessors were more relieved after their confessions when compared to partial confessors, and partial confessors felt more guilt than the full confessors, according to the findings.

People confessed to a wide range of transgressions, including cheating in school, drug

and alcohol use, infidelity and lying. People were more likely to say they had fully rather than partially confessed to infidelity. But more participants said they only partially confessed when it was about lying or hiding the truth.

In another test, to determine how people judged others who cheated, researchers told participants about a man in a previous die-rolling study who reported that he rolled a six, knowing the higher the number, the more money he would receive. One group was told he later confessed to actually rolling a one, which was considered a full confession. Another group was told he confessed to rolling a five – a partial confession – and another group learned that he made no confession, maintaining that he rolled a six. All participants were asked if they believed the person after hearing what he said he actually rolled. Participants were more likely to believe the full confession than the partial confession, and the partial confession was more credible than a non-[confession](#), according to the results.

Previous studies have focused on confessions as an "all-or-nothing" decision but this new research shows that the extent to which people are willing to come clean varies depending on the consequences of the decision, according to the authors.

"Paradoxically, people seeking redemption by partially admitting their big lies feel guiltier because they do not take complete responsibility for their behaviors," Pe'er said. "True guilt relief may require people to fully come clean."

More information: "I Cheated but Only a Little" – Partial Confessions to Unethical Behavior," Eyal Pe'er, PhD, and Alessandro Acquisti, PhD, Carnegie Mellon University; and Shaul Shalvi, PhD, Ben Gurion University, Israel; *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, February 2014, Vol. 106, No. 2.

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