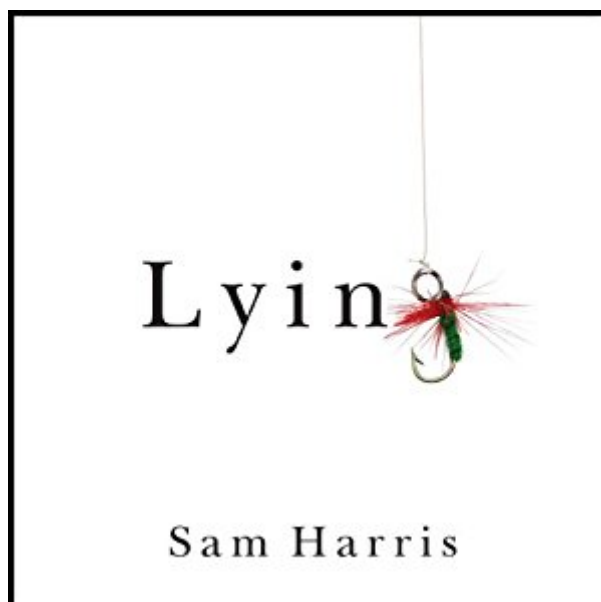


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# Lying



## Synopsis

As it was in Anna Karenina, Madame Bovary, and Othello, so it is in life. Most forms of private vice and public evil are kindled and sustained by lies. Acts of adultery and other personal betrayals, financial fraud, government corruption - even murder and genocide - generally require an additional moral defect: a willingness to lie. In *Lying*, bestselling author and neuroscientist Sam Harris argues that we can radically simplify our lives and improve society by merely telling the truth in situations where others often lie. He focuses on "white" lies - those lies we tell for the purpose of sparing people discomfort - for these are the lies that most often tempt us. And they tend to be the only lies that good people tell while imagining that they are being good in the process.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I bought this book for two reasons: I sometimes tell white lies in certain situations and wanted to see what Harris had to say about this, and I wanted to see what he had to say about lying in extreme situations (the hitler/anne frank example). I have to say that I'm disappointed. Sam, I feel, does a poor job of investigating this topic deeply. He also made the basic mistake of confirmation bias. For example, he says that he asked friends to share stories where white lies got them into trouble, and these stories constitute the bulk of his discourse and conclusions on white lies. This is a rather ridiculous thing to do when one is concerned about making such wide-reaching statements and conclusions as "do not lie" (ever). He looks at only the evidence he wants to see. He doesn't bother to see whether there are any situations in which telling a white lie led to a positive outcome, or

conversely, whether there are situations where telling the truth resulted in severe and long-term negative consequences. I personally have experienced such situations so I was curious to see what Sam had to say on this, but alas, apparently the thought didn't occur to him. In one of the stories he shares, a woman called Sita tells her friend that the gift she got for her friend, a bunch of shower-related products, were purchased by her in a hotel gift shop. The truth is that they were simply the complimentary products that came with the hotel room she was staying at. Her daughter overhears this lie and calls it out in front of the two women, leading to a bit of awkwardness. On this basis, Sam makes a judgement call about Sita, saying there is something distasteful about her because she will lie when it suits her needs.

It's hard to judge the length of a kindle book, but this one is short enough to be considered a good chapter. It's Sam Harris, so it's well put, succinct, and a pleasure to ponder. He makes some excellent points about the effects, costs, and alternatives to lying - even small lies - and I believe I may become an even more honest person because of it. Lying, he says, is "almost by definition a refusal to cooperate with others. It condenses a lack of trust and trustworthiness into a single act. ... To lie is to recoil from relationship." This is a brilliant observation, and it's almost seems like common sense. Harris goes on to make a case for vigilant truth-telling, quite well. It is a strong argument, but it's not airtight. State secrets present an exception, he points out; espionage sometimes requires a complex set of lies. But spies, Harris says, operate under the ethics of war and therefore the "ethics of emergency," and are therefore not only exempt from the golden rule of truth-telling, they are irrelevant exceptions. "We can draw no more daily instruction from the lives of spies than we can from the adventures of astronauts in space. Just as most of us need not worry about our bone density in the absence of gravity, we need not consider whether our every utterance could compromise national security." This begs a question. Without a limiting definition of "emergency," emergency ethics \*are certainly relevant to daily life. There is a spectrum of emergencies. I've had emergencies. If on one end lying is ok, the other end not -- doesn't that suggest a spectrum of wrongness to lying, as well? As I read through it, interesting questions arose for me which unfortunately were not addressed.

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