

How To Use Distraction To Spot A Liar (M)



Studies regularly find that even experts do little better than chance at detecting lies.

It is notoriously difficult to tell when people are lying.

But, research has found one method that makes lying easier to spot.

When people's brains are busy with another task, they find it harder to lie to convincingly.

Any task that takes people attention away from what they are saying could work.

Having a second task to focus on makes liars seem less clear and plausible than if they were telling the truth, researchers found.

Distracting liars

The evidence comes from an experiment in which 164 people were asked their opinions on a series of topics to find out what they felt strongly about.

They were then told to either lie or tell the truth about those strongly held beliefs when interviewed.

The trick was that two-thirds of the participants were also given a secondary task of trying to remember a car registration plate.

Professor Aldert Vrij, the study's first author, explained the results:

"In the last 15 years we have shown that lies can be detected by outsmarting lie tellers.

We demonstrated that this can be done by forcing lie tellers to divide their attention between formulating a statement and a secondary task.

Our research has shown that truths and lies can sound equally plausible as long as lie tellers are given a good opportunity to think what to say.

When the opportunity to think becomes less, truths often sound more plausible than lies.

Lies sounded less plausible than truths in our experiment, particularly when the interviewees also had to carry out a secondary task and were told that this task was important."

Small improvement

Distracting liars with a secondary task only produced a small improvement in lie detection in this study, but it is still a good result as lies are very hard to detect.

Indeed, studies regularly find that even [experts do little better than chance at detecting lies](#).

Professor Vrij said:

“The pattern of results suggests that the introduction of secondary tasks in an [interview](#) could facilitate lie detection but such tasks need to be introduced carefully.

It seems that a secondary task will only be effective if lie tellers do not neglect it.

This can be achieved by either telling interviewees that the secondary task is important, as demonstrated in this experiment, or by introducing a secondary task that cannot be neglected (such as gripping an object, holding an object into the air, or driving a car simulator).

Secondary tasks that do not fulfil these criteria are unlikely to facilitate lie detection.”

About the author