

Adult Day Self-Care Newsletter

October 2023

Can Telling a Lie Be Therapeutic?

Most likely, if you work in dementia care, and/or if you have a family member with memory loss, you have found it easier at times not to tell the whole truth. One person we know was visiting her very agitated mother, who had been in a nursing home for about six months. Naturally, she asked, “What’s the matter, Mom?” The answer showed the source of the distress and also her mother’s level of confusion: “I can’t remember where I parked the car this morning!!” The daughter quickly replied, “Oh, I saw it when I came in. It’s easy to find—just to the left when you go out the door.” Although this resulted in immediate relief, the daughter felt terrible that she lied (again) to her mother. If a family member makes this sort of choice, it’s a personal decision. Professional caregivers face a more difficult dilemma—does this sort of falsehood violate a professional code of ethics? Does it compromise the operating philosophy and principles of care that guide service delivery in their workplace? These questions and issues are worth discussing in training, staff meetings, and service planning. Involving the family in the discussion can be helpful, as they may value the chance to sort through their own choices, as well as being involved in (and informed about) the care of their loved one.

Truth-telling and Person-Centered Care

While a lot has been written about “therapeutic lies” in dementia care, there is only one small study on how often it occurs. That study, from the UK, says as many as 96% of staff have told a lie to lessen the distress of a person with dementia.¹

Many programs and organizations that provide care to people with memory loss follow principles of person-centered care, which include valuing each person as an individual, offering choice when possible, and considering their unique and needs, preferences, and best interests in all care decisions. Putting these principles into practice requires that staff recognize the importance of relationship and learn communication skills that build trust. At times, staff need to use “creative” communication¹ that maintains a culture of respect and dignity, while validating feelings (whether those feelings are based on present day reality or not). To this end, staff need a toolbox of alternatives to prevent and avoid¹ the need to tell a lie whenever possible.

¹ see Long et al. (2023). [Aging & Mental Health](#).



What is a Lie?

Philosophers tend to agree that a lie is a message that is stated *on purpose* to deceive someone. A lie does not have to be false (it can be a partial truth). While they agree on the definition, philosophers disagree on whether a lie is ever OK. Some believe that the reason you tell a lie makes a difference. For example, is it morally acceptable to tell a “white lie” to be kind and considerate? Like telling a friend with an awful new haircut, “It looks great.” What about lying to convince them to do what you want? Is that morally wrong? What do you think?

Alternatives to Therapeutic Lying

- Reflect and validate the person's feelings. This is not always easy when someone is unable to communicate effectively.
- Redirect the person to focus on something else, such as a pleasant memory. For example, the daughter from page 1 went on to say, "Speaking of cars, remember our green station wagon? I loved being able to lie down in the back of that car! Now, kids sit in car seats. That takes up a lot of room!"
- Accept the person's reality—either say nothing or reflect what the person believes without necessarily agreeing with the belief. Instead of lying about the mother's car, the daughter might have said, "It's so upsetting to forget where the car is. I did that just the other day in the parking garage at work..."
- Tell a partial truth that avoids a potential disturbance. The daughter's "lie" was actually a partial truth, since she now uses her mother's old car, which actually was parked in the nursing home lot!

Deciding What to Say and Do

It's helpful to plan ahead before needing to respond in the moment. Staff may find it helpful to practice applying these questions in conversations with people they serve.

- What does this person need right now?
- Will my intended action show this person respect, while also giving relief and peace?
- Is the person likely to detect my lie? How likely is it that others might contradict me?
- If I tell a lie, how could it go wrong?
- What alternatives do I have, instead of telling a lie? It may be helpful to ask others' opinions about possible alternatives and outcomes, even after the moment passes.
- How will I feel about myself if I tell this lie?
- How will others feel about me if they know I told this lie, including my supervisor, this person, and the person's family?

For More Information

You can find the [Adult Day Resources pages](#) (including past issues of this newsletter) and our [Self-Care](#) resources on our website for free.

Here are the main references for this issue:

- *Bioethics* Special issue: Truthfulness and authenticity in dementia care. Nov 2021.
- Dresser, R. (2021). A tangled web: Deception in everyday dementia care. *The Journal of Law, Medicine, & Ethics*, 49, 257-262
- Long, S., Irving, K., & Murphy, C. (2023). Is therapeutic lying contradictory to person-centred care? Toward understanding the connection. *Aging & Mental Health*.
- Sperber, M. (2015). Therapeutic lying: A contradiction in terms. *Psychiatric Times*.
- Wheaton, A. (2022). Balancing honesty and benevolence in dementia care: A commentary on therapeutic lies and codes of ethics. *Journal of Nursing Management*, 30, 2241-2244.

Upcoming Caregiver Education 2023

Truth Telling & Memory Loss

October 25, 2023 1:00pm

Click [HERE](#) to register

Celebrating National Family Caregivers Month: Joy Spotting for Caregivers

November 15, 2023 1:00pm

Click [HERE](#) to register

Winter Wellness

December 13, 2023 1:00pm

Click [HERE](#) to register for April XX

For more info email Mary Catherine:
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