**Lies tend to grow and grow, researchers say**

Untruths become bolder with each fib, study finds

By Seth Borenstein

24/10/2016

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Telling little fibs leads down a slippery slope to bigger lies — and our brains adapt to escalating dishonesty, which makes deceit easier, a new study shows.

Neuroscientists at the University College London's Affective Brain Lab put 80 people in scenarios where they could repeatedly lie and get paid more based on the magnitude of their lies. They said they were the first to demonstrate empirically that people's lies grow bolder the more they fib.

The researchers then used brain scans to show that our mind's emotional hot spot — the amygdala — becomes desensitized or used to the growing dishonesty, according to a study published online this week in Nature Neuroscience.

“You can think of this as a slippery slope with what begins as small acts of dishonesty escalating to much larger ones,” said study lead author Neil Garrett, now a neuroscience researcher at Princeton University.

And during this lying, brain scans that show blood supply and activity at the amygdala decrease with increasing lies, said study co-author and lab director Tali Sharot. “The more we lie, the less likely we are to have an emotional response” — say, shame or guilt — “that accompanies it,” she said.

Garrett said he suspects similar escalation factors happen in the “real world,” which would include politics, infidelity and cheating, but he cautioned that this study was done in a controlled lab setting so more research would be needed to apply it to other situations.

Garrett, Sharot and colleagues arranged for people to go through an experiment where they would see a photo of a jar full of pennies.

The subject would advise a partner in another room — someone who was looking at a photo that was less clear — how much money they should guess was in the jar. But the more the partner overestimated the bonus, based on the subject's advice, the higher the reward. The researchers did a couple variations of the experiment.

The study found that there is a segment of people who don't lie and don't escalate lies, but Sharot and Garrett weren't able to determine how rare those honest people are. It also found that people lie more when it benefits both them and someone else than when they profit alone.

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