

Why We Lie to Our Doctors

Let's suppose you're having transmission trouble with your car. You take it to a mechanic, but instead of explaining about the transmission, you tell him the brakes are squishy.

Would you lie to the mechanic about the problem with your automobile?

Not if you're in your right mind. You want your transmission repaired.

So why do so many of us lie to our doctors?

My doctor is a personal friend and a good man. During my annual physical Dr. R often talks at length with me about everything from education to politics. I have no idea how he finds so much time to chat, but he does.

Near the end of our conversations, he inevitably asks, "So how are the bad habits?"

"Still there," I say. He asks more questions, and I respond. Tobacco? Check. Alcohol? Yep. Exercise? Not enough.

I relay the exact data to him with the shame of a penitent in a confessional. Once Dr. R stopped me in mid-sentence and said, "Let me tell you a story."

He then described a patient in his seventies who for years had struggled with his weight. He had tried all sorts of diet and exercise programs, but lacked the willpower to stick to them. At a recent check-up, Dr. R told the man, "Look, Joe, you're 75 years old. Why not just enjoy those sausage biscuits and sweet iced teas?"

According to Dr. R, the man became agitated, telling him, "You're my doctor. You're not supposed to say things like that."

"My point is, if you're going to continue the bad habits, at least drop the guilt and enjoy yourself," Dr. R said. That's good advice that's probably rare from a physician.

And my point is this: I don't lie to my doctor.

In another conversation, I asked Dr. R to estimate how many patients lied to him about some aspect of their health care. "I'd say about 80 percent" was his reply.

Some who might think that an overestimate should read Dennis Thompson's "[Most Americans Lie to Their Doctors](#)." Thompson cites a study revealing that 60 to 80 percent of Americans "admit they avoid telling their doctor details that could be relevant to their well-being."

Shame and fear, Thompson found, are at the root of this concealment. People who disagree with a physician's recommended treatment say nothing, but then never take the prescribed medication. Embarrassment causes many to hide their poor diets and bad habits. Some don't tell the doctor they are taking another person's medication. When asked if they understand the doctor's instructions, patients will say yes, afraid that a negative reply might make them look ignorant.

In his poem "Marmion," Sir Walter Scott wrote, "Oh, what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive." His words apply to patients visiting their physicians. Guilt or mortification may give birth to that deception, but we might pay for our tangled web with poor health and even an unnecessary death.

Here are some tips that might alleviate our propensity to lie to our doctor.

- Build a relationship with your physician. Be friendly. Ask him about the picture of his family on the wall. Mention your own family circumstances. Engage him. Make him an ally, not an enemy.

- If you disagree with a treatment, express your apprehensions. It's you and your body that will be undergoing surgery or starting a long session of prescriptions. It's your wallet that will be absorbing the costs.
- Ask questions, even if you're afraid of looking dumb. Ignorance trumps stupidity any day of the week. Don't be stupid.
- Take a relative or a friend with you when you visit a physician, especially if that visit is more than a routine physical. You are diagnosed with some disease, and your mind is swirling. Ask someone to accompany you to your next appointment, a confidant who isn't afraid or embarrassed to ask questions, and who can approach the situation in a cool, calm manner.
- Stop the lying and dissembling. Telling the truth hurts. Not telling the truth can kill you.

When I told my sister, a nurse, I was writing this article, she laughed.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

"It's an old joke with doctors and nurses," she said. "When patients tell you they drink three or four glasses of wine a night, the care provider just doubles the number."

Next time the doc opens the hood and looks at your engine, tell him straight out that it's the transmission.

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