

3 Takeaways Podcast Transcript
Lynn Thoman
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Ep. 131: Liespotting — An Expert Reveals How To Know When You're Being Deceived. Honestly.

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INTRO male voice: Welcome to the 3 Takeaways podcast, which features short, memorable conversations with the world's best thinkers, business leaders, writers, politicians, scientists, and other newsmakers. Each episode ends with the three key takeaways that person has learned over their lives and their careers. And now, your host and board member of schools at Harvard, Princeton, and Columbia, Lynn Thoman.

Lynn Thoman: Hi, everyone. It's Lynn Thoman. Welcome to another 3 Takeaways episode. Today I'm excited to be with Pamela Meyer, who's one of the world's foremost experts on lying. Pam has an MBA from Harvard and has trained interrogators around the world. She's also the author of *Liespotting: Proven Techniques to Detect Deception*. The average person is lied to many times each day by colleagues, by strangers, and even by spouses. The most contagious lies, Pam says, are the ones Facebook and Twitter can't catch. I'm excited to learn the best tools and insights so we can all better spot lies. Welcome Pam, and thanks so much for our conversation today.

Pamela Meyer: Thank you so much for having me. I'm thrilled to be here.

LT: It is my pleasure, Pam. How often are people lied to and who lies?

PM: Well, we don't know how often people are lied to because, of course, people lie about whether or not they're lying when they're polled. There's a kind of cyclical event that goes on, but the range is anywhere from two to twenty times a day, and we average it out at about ten times a day. That's a lot, it's a lot of lying. And everyone lies. It's part of the human condition. We all lie. We would probably kill ourselves and not have a democratic society or civil society if we didn't lie.

LT: Why is lying so common?

PM: It's common. We don't lie necessarily because we're bad people. To accuse someone of lying is really considered dangerous in our culture and in most cultures, but we lie for lots of different reasons. We may lie for offensive reasons, for example, or defensive reasons. So we could lie to obtain a reward that's not otherwise easily attainable. We could lie to gain advantage over another person. We could lie, and this is really very common, just to create a positive impression and win the admiration of others. Or we could lie to exercise some power over somebody by controlling information. That's what we call an offensive lie. But we also lie very commonly in defensive ways as well. We lie to avoid being punished, very commonly to avoid embarrassment. We lie to protect other people from being punished. We lie to protect ourselves from threats, whether it's physical or emotional harm. We lie most often to get out of awkward situations. We lie to get out of social situations we don't want to be in. And in our culture today, especially, we lie to maintain privacy. So not all lies are necessarily bad. I constantly tell people we have to look at the muddy middle, and the muddy middle is where the human condition lives.

LT: I'm going to play for you Bill Clinton's famous recording. And then if you can listen to this recording and explain what the tip-offs were that he was lying.

PM: Absolutely.

Recording of Bill Clinton: I want you to listen to me. I'm gonna say this again. I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Ms. Lewinsky. I never told anybody to lie. Not a single time. Never. These allegations are false. And I need to go back to work for the American people. Thank you.

PM: A lot of lie detectors will focus on body language when they looked at how he was sweating or shaking or twitching or whatever when he said this. But I think the verbal tells are more interesting. First, he used what we call a non-contracted denial. Did not versus didn't. Could not versus couldn't. Liars often will formalize their language, and this data point goes around the world, when they're in the middle of trying to fabricate or change your view of your perception of them. And so he said, I did not have sexual relations with that woman. He also used a euphemism, sexual relations. We always see that liars often soften the language a bit when they're trying to get around talking about what we call the main event. So oftentimes a rapist will say, I didn't touch her, not I didn't rape her.

PM: There was qualifying language as well. And the most interesting thing I think he does is he uses distancing language. And this is something, we call this kind of a weak signal, but it speaks volumes. He said, I didn't have sex with that woman, Ms. Lewinsky. He's kind of unconsciously distancing himself from the subject using his language. And then finally, what is also very interesting about this comment is that Bill Clinton could not say, "Hey, I never had sex outside my marriage in my life." A categorical denial. He narrows the field of his denial substantially he says, "I didn't have sex with that woman, Ms. Lewinsky." He's narrowing it. If someone is exfiltrating data or stealing money from a company, they're not going to necessarily say, I never stole anything in my life. They're going to say, I didn't take money from that drawer. So oftentimes what a liar will do, because they really want to present themselves as being honest, they will unconsciously narrow the field of their denial so they can appear more authentic.

LT: So interesting. And how about his closing sentence about how he has to get back to work for the American people? Does that tell you anything?

PM: I think he really was very, very motivated to get back to work. He wanted to exit the scene as fast as he could. And we see this in the body language all the time. Like somebody will kind of lean towards an exit, put their feet towards the exit. All of a sudden, as fast as they can get out, they will try. And so he was doing that, but in an incredibly artful and inspiring way.

LT: What are some myths about lies and liars?

PM: We have a lot of myths about lying. I mean, first of all, we think liars won't look you in the eyes, when in fact, the average amount of time an honest person will look you in the eyes is only about 60%. We think liars fidget all the time, but actually they freeze up their upper bodies often when they are being deceptive. We think that lie detection is going to kill trust in the workplace when in fact studies show that fairness actually breeds trust. Most of us don't have expectations of complete transparency in the workplace. But when disgruntlement emerges, that's usually when we

feel the playing field is not fair. And so it turns out that when you call out deception and you signal to everybody that this world is going to be an honest one, you end up creating more trust in the workplace. We also think that liars want to cover up their lies, but oftentimes they need so much relief that unconsciously they very badly want to get caught because they just want it over with. They know they've lied and they're feeling incredibly guilty. And oftentimes they will give you clues just to get themselves caught unconsciously.

PM: So we see that often. When we train people, we give them a long series of questions that they can ask to give someone essentially an off-ramp so that they can feel comfortable admitting whatever it is they have done and move forward.

LT: So interesting. What are some of the main ways to tell if someone is lying?

PM: This is a very important question because there are no foolproof cues and it is unfortunate and disappointing for people who want a shortcut and want to think they can just point the finger and say, "liar, liar, pants on fire". It turns out that people who are really good at detecting lies are really good at preparing well for interviews. And then they employ a technique that involves finding clusters of deceptive indicators and not just individual deceptive indicators. And so first of all, the thing to understand is that lie spotting is essentially an exercise in raising the cognitive load on your subject and then watching what indicators leak out. So when we're bluffing or when we're lying, we're trying to think what to say, act composed, appear spontaneous. And when we do that, we actually leak verbal and nonverbal indicators of deceit. And so a good interrogator will very, very subtly at the right time in an interview, after they have enormous rapport with somebody and a really good connection, start to raise the cognitive load.

LT: And what are some of the words and language that are tells that somebody is lying?

PM: First of all, you have to baseline somebody. You've got to know their norm. So how are you? How was your weekend? Did you go shopping? How are the kids? When an FBI interrogator doesn't really care, they're baselining you, they're trying to get a reliable reference point for measuring changes later. And so, before they even look for these cues that you're referring to, they are first observing blink rate, postural norms, hand gestures, leg gestures, vocal cadence, vocal tone, the style and duration of someone's laugh. They're studying them because they're trying to get a reliable reference point for asking those questions later to see what will shift. Then once they have a sense of someone's baseline, they can ask some open-ended questions, hey, what happened? Try to just get someone talking and they can start to study the clusters. And on the verbal side, we were talking about Bill Clinton, but you will hear, for example, qualifying language, you know, to tell you the truth in all honesty. You may hear bolstering statements. I certainly did not do that. Or somebody may repeat the question to stall for time, or they may repeat the question verbatim. What you also may hear is an inappropriate amount of detail. Liars often want to appear really authentic, so they just pad their story with all kinds.

PM: I mean, if you have a teenager, you certainly know this. They'll pad their story with all kinds of inappropriate details so they sound honest. But in fact, we call this the "lie sandwich". Oftentimes, in the middle, is the moment where they actually are lying. You may hear religious references. I swear to God on my mother's grave. And oftentimes you may also hear what we call protesting or whining, protest statements. That's a ridiculous question to ask. How long is this interview going to take? Or you may get a kind of uncooperative or dismissive attitude. On the non-

verbal side, and we call this body language, it's the same thing. You're going to ask a question, that's your stimulus, and then you're looking for a few clusters. That's your response. You're looking for two or three clusters on the verbal side and two or three clusters on the non-verbal side, the body language side. And so what you might see on the non-verbal side when you ask those hard questions, and again, you have to be very careful 'cause you're looking for clusters, but you'll see grooming gestures. Somebody may be dusting lint off their shoulders or twirling their hair, rubbing the eyes, touching below the eyes.

PM: We see this with women in particular, hand-wringing. Somebody may stiffen up their upper body. You might see pursed lips.

LT: Many people watch TV shows such as Law & Order. Does the aggressiveness work? What does a trained interrogator do?

PM: They do the opposite. The aggressiveness works really well for entertainment value. It doesn't work at all, particularly in the workplace. It does depend on the setting. I mean, if you're a detective and you want to bait somebody and you've got real evidence, that's a different setting. But for the most part, in the world of work and in the world of personal relationships, you do not need to flaunt to the person across the table from you that you've got them and that you've got evidence on them. In fact, what we find over and over and over again is that the more you connect with somebody and the more subtly you do that, the more points of connection you find with them, the warmer you are towards them, the more likely they are just to share information with you in a casual way, which is really what you're trying to do. And so a real interrogation is incredibly boring. It can go on over two hours. It stops. It starts. You come back a week later. You do more research. There are long pauses. You go out of the room. You come back into the room. They don't make for good TV, but they do make for good, as we say, pursuing of the facts rather than pursuing people.

LT: What are the most contagious lies and why can't Facebook and Twitter spot them?

PM: I would not say that they cannot spot them. I would say that we're in the presence of an arms race where the better we get at lying, the better technology gets at detecting it. And the better the technology gets, the better we will get at lying. And so there's a complete arms race going on out there with respect to deception. What's really going on with our deception epidemic, and it's really quite serious now, is that we're kind of losing our sense for what's real altogether, due somewhat in part to the fact that there are deep fakes that are very easy. There are scores of employees out there on LinkedIn that are actually fake employees, and you can kind of spot them by looking at their eyes being centered and other telltale signs. There are influencers out there in the world that are actually robots. They're not real influencers, and we think they're real. And the platforms out there are incentivized to love them no matter what, because they sell products and they have 6 million followers a piece, so there's no incentive system to find them necessarily. The moral bar is low as well. And the era of disinformation, which used to be, which we know during the COVID era, the era of disinformation had to do with alternative facts and hoaxes, but that era of disinformation has really turned deadly now, and we're seeing state-sponsored trolling at scale.

PM: So vast resources in the hands of foreign adversaries now has really weaponized deception. And we're starting to see real danger, really serious consequences globally, where there are state-sponsored trolls that can blur the line permanently between a popular uprising and falsely created Twitter storm.

LT: Pam, before I ask for the three takeaways that you'd like to leave the audience with today, is there anything else you'd like to mention? What should I have asked you that I did not?

PM: The only other thing I'd like to say is that if you're interested in deception, get into it for the right reason. I find that the people that are really good at detecting deception are the people who go deep on it. Are curious about human nature, that go beyond the lie and really try to get to the truth, because the truth is really interesting. And so just 'cause someone's lying, just remember that that doesn't mean you know the truth at all. That's one question that I think is important for people to keep in mind.

LT: Pam, actually another question that I'm very curious about. You say that people lie to their spouses on a daily basis. Why do they do that? Why do they lie to the person closest to them?

PM: Everyone lies for a different reason. I mean, I could not answer that for a global reason, but I will say that the marriage contract and the knowledge that you are going to be with someone you know intimately well, hopefully for the rest of your life, does necessitate finding the path to harmony. And oftentimes that path involves a series of white lies.

LT: And is it only white lies that people on average tell to their spouses?

PM: No, not at all. I mean, for example, some of the research has shown that those who are married lie less than those who cohabit and are unmarried. But that's where we throw the data out, because when you look deeper at the research, what you find is that those of us that are married save the whoppers for our spouses. And so there's kind of a quality quantity issue in the data. So you can have a low frequency of lies, but they can be about really, really important high stakes issues. And so we certainly do lie to our spouses about high stakes issues as well.

LT: Pam, what are the three takeaways you'd like to leave the audience with today?

PM: The first takeaway is that data matters. Not to take shortcuts and point your finger at others based on hunches or the smirk on someone's face. You really need to do your homework and prepare carefully for hard conversations and confirm your facts with more data. It makes a difference, particularly when it comes to something as serious as accusing somebody of being deceptive. My second takeaway is that it's important to think about this broadly. I like to encourage people to keep their eyes out for weak signals. Weak signals are essentially kind of unstructured pieces of information that feel at first like background noise, but they can fall into patterns that are enormously informative about how somebody might act or how a market might be disrupted. And in retrospect, we look at weak signals all the time and we see that we could have seen them with Pearl Harbor or the subprime crisis, or perhaps Sam Bankman-Fried's empty promises now, or your online date's actual marital status, but we ignore them because they're small unstructured pieces of data. And so if you want to be good at detecting deception, keep your situational awareness high for those weak signals.

PM: And then the final takeaway is, as the Buddhists say, the pain is in the resistance. And so if you've been lied to, it's important to lean into it, accept it, and let it kind of grip you until you're transformed by it. Don't view it as a mortal wound 'cause it's enormously human to lie, but instead just get very curious about the truth and really try to learn from it.

LT: Pam, thank you. This has been wonderful and I really enjoyed your book, Liespotting.

PM: Oh, thank you. I've had a whole lot of fun with you. Thank you so much.

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