Bottom of Form

Understanding Compulsive Liars

Both Stephen Glass and Jayson Blair, journalists at prestigious publications, fabricated their stories. Their lying was more than laziness. This type of lying may fill a need to be someone else due to a low self-esteem.

By [Chris Jozefowicz](http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/authors/chris-jozefowicz), published on October 01, 2003 - last reviewed on June 30, 2005

In Shattered Glass, Chloë Sevigny plays another patsy -- but this time her betrayer is a prevaricating journalist. Caitlin Avey, Sevigny's character, is a Washington, D.C., magazine writer who is tricked by friend and fellow scribe Stephen Glass. The movie is based on the story of real-life fraud Stephen Glass, who was a hot young property on the 1990s magazine scene until his editors at The New Republic realized in 1998 that many of his stories were in fact elaborately constructed, imaginative fakes. He was publicly denounced, pundits fretted about the state of journalism -- and Glass bounced back with a book deal soon after.

[Lying](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/deception) is the cardinal [sin](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/morality) of journalism. Yet, as the uproar over errant New York Times reporter Jayson Blair demonstrated, it may also be alarmingly common. For both Glass and Blair, lying was more than laziness and corner-cutting. It was a way of life. Glass also worked hard at his fabrications, creating faux Web sites and enlisting his brother to fool fact-checkers. So why did they do it?

Bottom of Form

Robert Reich, M.D., a New York City psychiatrist and expert in psychopathology, says compulsive lying has no official diagnosis. Instead, intentional dissimulation -- not the kind associated with [dementia](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/dementia) or [brain](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/neuroscience" \o "Psychology Today looks at Neuroscience)injury -- is associated with a range of diagnoses, such as antisocial, borderline and narcissistic [personality disorders](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/personality-disorders). When it comes to compulsive liars, says Charles Ford, a professor of [psychiatry](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/psychiatry) at the University of Alabama Birmingham, "words seem to flow out of their mouths without them thinking about it." Ford, the author of Lies! Lies!! Lies!!! The Psychology of Deceit, says that pathological liars may slide easily from the notion that something could have happened to the conviction that it did. When pressed, many will admit what they are saying isn't true.

To understand the mind of a fake, Reich suggests considering what lying does for the liar. Deceit as a means to an end -- like lying to get a job -- is easy to comprehend. Much harder to spot, he says, is lying "for primary gains": deceptions that create a different sense of self without any immediate benefit. "It has to do with [self-esteem](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/self-esteem)," Reich says. "You want to be like someone else because you aren't very happy with yourself." Glass may be one of these "primary" liars. Former colleagues describe him as desperate for approval; in his novel, The Fabulist, the "Stephen Glass" character says his lies are driven by his need to be seen as infallible, as interesting, as perfect. (The flesh-and-blood Glass had nothing to do with the bio-pic).

Perhaps Glass's fantastic stories were accepted because they satisfied readers' (and editors') longings for a stranger and more exciting world. But if he's just another lonely journalist wanting to be loved, why are we so fascinated by him? Since most of us feel constrained by rules, regulations and propriety, Glass's flamboyant fabrications provide a vicarious thrill. "At some level we are fascinated by people who do whatever they want,"  Reich says. "We kind of [envy](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/jealousy) them.”

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