

# **Trauma and Lying**

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Lying is often the result of feeling too unsafe to tell the truth. For traumatised children and young people (CYP), everything comes back to the need to protect themselves – this can either be safety from external factors and also their inner shame and pain.

Lying can allow for the:

1. *Creation of fantasy.* Often when reality feels too difficult or challenging, lying can allow for an alternative reality to be created. This ‘imaginary space’ can allow for a CYP to feel as if they’re in complete control and have the autonomy to make choices and decisions that prioritise them.
2. *Self-preservation.* For a chronically traumatised CYP, it can feel less vulnerable and exposing for them to lie, rather than admitting the truth. Perhaps earlier on in their life they had been told to lie, others had lied around them or lying was ultimately normalised in their relational experiences.
3. *Alleviate the fear of consequences.* If a CYP’s early-relational experiences have been filled with punitive, abusive and shaming parenting, then some children will do whatever they can to avoid being in a situation that could trigger a similar response. Henceforth, it may be easier to make-up or fib about what’s really happened if that’s going to reduce the chances of being harmed by admitting to their faults.
4. *Empowerment.* It may feel empowering for a CYP to lie to others as it helps them to feel momentarily idealised and respected. This attention-needing strategy can also redirect from the confusing inner world to one that is desired and longed for by others. In reality, the circumstances of the CYP’s life is not in anyway lavish or attractive, but lying can make it seem that it is.
5. *Filling in the gaps.* The memory is impacted by trauma, which can lead to fragmentation and lack of clarity when recalling events. Some CYP’s may lie because they simply can’t remember what has happened or because they are trying to fill in the gaps as they’re unable to remember the full details of a scenario.

For further information on CYP and lying (see “The connection between teenage lying and unfulfilled needs”):

<https://threepeakstreatment.com/residential-treatment-for-teens/lying-manipulation/>

## ***How do we approach lying?***

Like all presentations we see in traumatised CYP, we must hold curiosity around the function of the lie, not the lie itself.

We can ask ourselves questions like ‘what was the purpose/function of this lie?’ and ‘what did telling this lie provide the CYP?’. This can then help us to gain a wider understanding of what the child’s needs are and identify what is missing in their physical/emotional safety bucket. We may also notice patterns in lies e.g. around a particular theme or scenario, which may tell us that CYP needs some support in this area. This may also demonstrate that the CYP is worrying and anxious about one particular thing.

Some useful considerations around approaching lying with traumatised CYP can be found here: <https://www.cetc.org.au/lying-as-a-trauma-based-behaviour/>