

Honesty

Bonnie M. Le

University of Rochester

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Abstract

Honesty is characterized by sharing the truth while also refraining from distorting facts, lying, or withholding information. While honesty is a characteristic that is highly valued in others across societies, the importance we place on honesty does not always translate into whether we engage in honest expressions or not. This is often due to the perception that honesty may do more harm than good, either for the individual sharing and the recipient receiving the truth. Despite this belief, research has largely indicated that honesty benefits optimal individual and relationship functioning for the self and other. These benefits are most likely to be accrued when individuals engage in self-regulation when being honest, by communicating in ways that maximize the truth shared while also doing so in sensitive ways. Overall, while there can be very real costs to being honest—including experiencing negative emotions, stress, or at times straining a relationship—the evidence overall suggests that honesty tends to benefit individuals, relationships, and organizations in the longer-term.

Keywords: honesty, truth, health, well-being

Honesty

Honesty is characterized by sharing the truth while also refraining from distorting facts, lying, or withholding information (Miller, 2021; Reynolds et al., 2025). Honesty can be understood as a disposition, with some individuals being more or less honest than others. Additionally, expressions of honesty can depend on the context, with individuals varying in how honest they are across different situations or with different people. Thus, factors within and external to the individual can shape whether or not individuals express themselves honestly.

While honesty is widely valued across societies and within our relationships, it is often difficult to enact. For example, while people are generally honest, dishonesty and lying is fairly common in daily life, in large part because people are often concerned that sharing the truth may hurt others or strain their relationships (see review by Shalvi et al., 2025). The daily lies that people tell are typically benign in nature and are commonly relationally-motivated, such as sharing a white lie under the assumption that doing so will spare a partner's feelings.

In a wide ranging review on honesty, Shalvi and colleagues (2025) identified several factors that encourage or undermine honesty. In addition to the relational motivations reviewed above, people also have egocentric concerns that shape whether they are honest or not. For example, people are more likely to be honest when they may personally gain or benefit from doing so. Consistent with this, people are less likely to be honest when their self-image is at stake.

While there are many factors that push individuals toward, or pull them away from, being honest, the act of being expressing oneself truthfully has important implications for psychological and physical functioning. In the sections below, the outcomes of honesty for health and well-being in personal, relational, and organizational contexts are described.

Honesty and Optimal Individual Functioning

Recent reviews of honesty have detailed how it can both support and hinder well-being at the individual, relational, and group level. For example, Le and colleagues (2022) found in their review that while there are costs and benefits to honesty, most of the empirical literature indicates that honesty by in large supports health and well-being. At times, being honest can elicit stress, increase negative feelings, or undermine hedonic well-being (i.e., feelings of satisfaction with life and happiness); that is, being honest can be difficult and does not always feel good. However, despite these costs, being dispositionally (chronically) honest facilitates a deep sense of eudaimonic well-being. Specifically, the empirical literature has documented that those who are on average higher than others in honesty tend to experience greater feelings of mastery, personal growth, and meaning in life.

In addition to the subjective benefits to being honest, one important study by Weziak-Bialowolska and colleagues (2021) documented the health benefits of honesty over time. In their study, they found that older adults who were higher, relative to lower, in honesty were at lower risk of depression, lower risk of lung cancer, and had less difficulty with mobility and daily activities over a four year period. Researchers have theorized that the health benefits of honesty are accrued through lower engagement in problematic behaviors, such as substance abuse and stress reactivity. Overall, honesty can support optimal individual functioning through subjective eudaimonic well-being and healthy physical functioning.

Honesty and Optimal Relationship Functioning

Much of the work that has documented the personal costs and benefits of honesty has focused on the consequences related to being an honest individual. However, in recent years, theoretical work has emphasized that honesty is an interpersonal communication process

between two individuals (Cooper et al., 2023). These new models emphasize that we must move beyond an understanding of honesty as simply sharing the truth; to fully understand honesty, we must understand consider its personal *and* interpersonal nature. That is, we must consider whether individuals seek truthful information themselves and, when communicating the truth to others, aim to foster a full understanding of the truth in those they are communicating with.

When individuals are honest in their relationships, it provides the opportunity to create intimacy and allows individuals to come to know one another at a deeper level. Indeed, self-disclosures are key to building closeness. Recent reviews of honesty have documented how honesty builds social connection, understanding, and supports stronger relationship quality as observed both in close and professional work relationships (Le & Chopik, 2026; Levine et al., 2025). Indeed, research has indicated that in close romantic relationships, expressing honesty and perceiving a partner to be honest results in greater personal well-being and strengthened relationships in the moment and over time; further, this is true regardless of whether peoples' perceptions are grounded in reality (Le et al., 2022; Le & Chopik, 2026). This research has documented the personal and interpersonal benefits of honesty both in relationship-threatening conversations (i.e., when asking a partner to change) as well as in relationship-building conversations (i.e., when expressing gratitude to a partner). It is important to note that honesty was found to support optimal personal and relationship functioning both as reported subjectively by the individuals in the relationship as well as when honesty, personal well-being, and relationship quality were reported by outside observers. Thus, research to date has largely indicated that honest disclosures—both in positive and negative contexts—can support optimal individual and relationship functioning.

Despite the benefits of honesty for relationships, people nonetheless can be reluctant to be honest for understandable reasons. As mentioned at the outset, communicating honestly poses very real challenges. As Levine and colleagues (2025) outline in their novel Experience-Outcome Model of Honesty Conversation, the tension between the experience and anticipated outcomes of being honest in a difficult conversation can shape whether people decide to share their thoughts and feelings truthfully with others. Specifically, self-regulatory conflict can occur when the experience of a conversation conflicts with the anticipated outcomes (Levine et al., 2025). That is, while a communicator may believe that sharing the truth may benefit another individual, they may be motivated to avoid being honest, or having the conversation at all, if they believe the experience of the conversation will be negative. However, engaging in self-regulatory strategies that mitigate these concerns may facilitate individuals in sharing the truth when it may support positive outcomes. The self-regulatory strategies people can enact can include precommitting to sharing the truth, writing out the truthful message one plans to share, and reframing the discomfort of sharing the truth as an opportunity for growth. By increasing individuals' abilities to share the truth in these ways, the personal and relationship benefits of honesty can be maximized through facilitating individual and partner growth as well as enhanced relationship intimacy (Levine et al., 2025). The Experience-Outcome Model can be applied across the full range of interpersonal relationships in which difficult conversations occur, including between parents and children, close relationship partners, individuals of different races and political orientations, and colleagues in the workplace.

Honesty and Optimal Group Functioning

While maintaining and strengthening our relationships is a focal factor in driving the outcomes of honesty, group contexts present new and different forces that shape both the

willingness to share the truth and the outcomes of doing so. For instance, within organizations where leadership, intellect, and status are valued, people may avoid being honest if they believe doing so will undermine their reputation or create discomfort within a team (see review by Le & Chopik, 2026). For example, whistleblowers are often penalized for disclosing information that others desire to be kept secret; further, they often experience worse health and well-being outcomes when they ultimately share that information. In healthcare settings, medical professionals have reported that they have at times not shared assessments or challenged a senior colleague even when they had truthful information that may affect a procedure or patient outcome. These hesitations to share truthful information often arise out a concern of creating tension in a medical team or compromising another practitioner's perceived or felt competence. Thus, within organizations, there are concerns—both perceived and grounded in reality—that sharing honest information that colleagues, senior professionals, or a team at large does not want to hear or does not want shared can have a negative impact on the honest individual. These negative outcomes can include compromised well-being (i.e., stress and negative emotions related to sharing the truth), status in the organization, and tension or conflict within a team.

While there are real personal concerns about expressions of honesty within groups, there are key benefits that honesty can promote in broader organizations (see review by Le & Chopik, 2026). These benefits include greater commitment, greater citizenship behavior, and the reduction of counterproductive behaviors within organizations where honesty tends to be high. Recent reviews have also shown that at a larger scale, honesty generally promotes positive outcomes within broader society. For example, children tend to experience better mental health when they perceive more honesty within their community. Nationally, honest disclosures to institutions (i.e., on taxes and when claiming benefits) is associated with greater happiness and

life satisfaction for the honest individual, with this being particularly true in countries where civic virtues are valued. Thus, research suggests that honesty can promote optimal well-being within broader communities and nations.

Conclusion

Honesty is a trait we value across societies and within our relationships, and yet, the value we place on honesty does not always translate into honest expressions and behaviors. While individuals are largely honest, we often shy away from expressing the truth if we think it will undermine our personal or relationship outcomes. Despite our trepidations to be honest, the research on honesty has largely revealed that honesty benefits the self, relationship partner, and at times, broader organizations and nations.

Honesty contributes to optimal psychological functioning—including greater meaning, growth, and well-being—as well as greater physical functioning—through greater health over the longer-term. Similarly, honesty strengthens our interpersonal relationships by building intimacy, connection, and satisfaction, and this is true when we share both relationship-supportive and relationship-threatening information. At the same time, we are often fearful of sharing truthful information to close others—especially if we think sharing this information will feel negative or hurt a recipient. However, engaging in self-regulatory strategies that commit individuals to sharing the truth and doing so sensitively can help maximize the benefits of honesty to support optimal health in our interpersonal relationships.

Perhaps the domain in which research has documented the most costs to honesty includes being truthful in organizations, when sharing the truth may have real drawbacks when it compromises the individual's competence or conflicts with others' desires for non-disclosure. While understanding the costs of honesty in organizations is not yet fully understood, it may be

that lower levels of interdependence and shared goals among individuals in an organization—as opposed to within a close relationship—can make the benefits of honesty more diffuse.

Nonetheless, honesty can optimize community and national functioning when it fosters a sense of community, commitment, and discourages counterproductive or immoral behaviors.

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