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Wash away your sins

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Globe and Mail Update

People try to cleanse themselves of misdeeds, study suggests

Lady Macbeth was on to something when she tried to wash the blood off her hands.

Research from the University of Michigan finds that people not only try to wash away their sins -they try to clean the specific body part with which they committed the deed.

Researchers Spike W.S. Lee and Norbert Schwarz asked 87 students to imagine finding an important document that a colleague had lost, and were told that the colleague's career depended on its return, according to a news release [http://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2010-09/uom-dhd092910.php]. Participants of the study, published in the October issue of Psychological Science [<http://www.psychologicalscience.org>], were then asked to compose a voice mail or e-mail message to their colleague, either lying that they could not find the document or telling him the truth that they found it.

Afterward, the participants were asked to participate in a supposedly unrelated marketing poll, where they rated how much they wanted a range of products including mouthwash and hand sanitizer.

Those who lied by leaving a voice-mail message were more inclined to want the mouthwash, compared with those who e-mailed a lie and those who told the truth. Meanwhile, those who lied by e-mail tended express more interest in the hand sanitizer. In comparison, those who told the truth were less likely to express as great an interest in either product.

A word of advice: Beware of colleagues who obsessively gargle mouthwash.

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