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Lying Prompts Need to Wash Mouth Out



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Parents who punished their fibbing children by washing their mouths out with soap may have been onto something.

Researchers at the [University of Michigan](#) found that people who lie have the urge to wash their "dirty" mouths afterwards, apparently in an effort to wipe themselves clean of their bad behavior.

"Not only do people want to clean after a dirty deed, they want to clean the specific body part involved," study author Norbert

Schwarz, a psychologist at the university's Institute for Social Research, [said in a statement](#).

Schwarz and co-author Spike W.S. Lee asked 87 students to pretend they were lawyers who were competing with an imaginary coworker, "Chris," for a promotion. They were told to picture finding an important document Chris had misplaced. If they gave it back to him, it would help his career and harm theirs.

Participants were instructed to send Chris an e-mail or leave him a voicemail message in which they either told him the truth -- that they'd discovered the lost report -- or lied to him, saying they couldn't find the missing paper.

The subjects then had to rate how much they wanted certain products, including mouthwash and hand sanitizer, and what they were willing to pay for them. They were told the items were the focus of a market research survey.

The students who had lied on the phone felt a stronger desire for mouthwash and were willing to pay more for it than those who hadn't told the truth over e-mail, the authors said. But those who lied over e-mail had a greater wish for hand sanitizer and were willing to pay more for it than those who'd fibbed on the phone, according to the research.

Those who had been truthful had less of an urge to buy either product.

In other words, the scientists concluded, verbal lies compelled the liars to want to buy mouthwash; lying with their hands by typing an untruthful e-mail made them more drawn to hand sanitizer.

"The references to 'dirty hands' or 'dirty mouths' in everyday language suggest that people think about abstract issues of moral purity in terms of more concrete experiences with physical purity," Lee, a Michigan doctoral candidate in psychology, said in a statement.

University of Pennsylvania psychiatrist Dr. Christos Ballas told AOL Health that the compulsion to buy hand sanitizer may have been for another reason entirely.

"The preference for hand sanitizer may well be related to the fact that they were typing on someone else's computer keyboard," he joked.

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He said the scientists should have examined whether the the cleaning products had any impact on the liars' future behavior.

"An even better study to conduct would be whether the availability of mouthwash/sanitizer reduces 'guilt' feelings, or makes it more likely they'll lie the next time," Ballas said.

In the end, he believes the findings, which appear in the October issue of [Psychological Science](#), tell us more about the relationship between language and our subconscious than they do about the desire to wash ourselves clean of our sins.

"We interpret this as 'lies make you feel dirty.' And so the resultant mouthwash makes sense," said Ballas. "But this is a purely semantic relationship. What if lies made you feel ... small? Would you reach for platform shoes? Thus, the real insight here wouldn't be that lies make us feel dirty, but that our unconscious is entirely dependent on our language."

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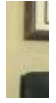
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