

TRUTH WIZARDS CAN DETECT LIES



The clues aren't as obvious as Pinocchio's nose, but there's a small group of individuals who can detect the subtle signs that people reveal when they lie, an academic told a

medical conference recently. The vast majority of people don't notice those flickers of falsehood, but psychology Professor Maureen O'Sullivan has found a few that can find the fibbers nearly every time. Of 13,000 people tested for the ability to detect deception, "We found 31, who we call wizards, who are usually able to tell whether the person is lying, whether the lie is about an opinion, how someone is feeling or about a theft," she said. Professor O'Sullivan, who teaches at the University of San Francisco, discussed her findings recently at the American Medical Association's 23rd Annual Science Reporters Conference.

Professor O'Sullivan conducts seminars for police officers and others on how to detect lying, and said observing the wizards helps researchers direct further study. "We hope that by studying our wizards, we'll learn more about the kinds of behaviors and ways of thinking and talking that can betray a liar to an experienced interviewer," she said. Asked if the wizards could be used in real-life situations, she said that has been suggested, but there are no formal programs to use them currently. And, she cautioned that even the best of them is not 100 per cent accurate. There are two categories of clues to a lie, thinking clues and emotional ones, she said.

"Basic emotions are hard to conceal completely," Professor O'Sullivan said. People may be afraid of being caught or happy that they are putting something over on another person, so some inappropriate emotion may flicker across their face. Professor O'Sullivan calls these microexpressions – changes that last less than a second – and the people best at catching liars are able to notice them.

The thinking clues occur because it's harder to lie than tell the truth, she said. To lie, people have to make something up. This can lead to hesitations in speech, slips of the tongue, lack of detail in what they are saying. A group known as "superliars" is aware of those problems, she said, but may overcompensate by talking too fast.

"Anxiety by itself is not a sign of deception," she said, "there are other things you have to look for ... things that are inconsistent with what they're saying." Look for shrugs: "is someone telling you something very positive and shrugs in the middle," she said. Watch body posture, hand gestures, eye flutters.

So, who is good at detecting these various clues and sorting out the liars? Men and women are about equal among the 31 wizards, she said, and they are scattered across the country. The thing they have in common is "they are motivated and want to get it right," she said, they practice it, like athletes.

Some 20 per cent to 30 per cent reported some sort of childhood trauma, such as alcoholism in the family or a highly emotional mother, perhaps leading them to screen for emotional clues from childhood. A similar number didn't

notice their ability until mid-life and then began working on it, she said. All of the wizards are intelligent, but their education ranges from high school diplomas to doctorates. The elite group contains a number of lawyers – people sensitive to how people use words – and hunters, who have to be aware of clues in their environment.

Professor O'Sullivan said FBI and CIA agents were only about average in lie-detecting ability, but a strong performing group was Secret Service agents who guard politicians and spend a lot of their time scanning crowds for nonverbal clues. She does her research by showing subjects videotapes of people being questioned in a variety of situations. Police officers tend to be above average in cases involving crimes but not in emotional situations, she said, while therapists were just the opposite.

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