**Case Study - Why is lying wrong?**

People tend to distinguish between 'real lies' and 'white lies', which are considered less harmful. But is there really a difference? Is lying wrong all of the time, or just some of the time? Like most questions in ethics, there is no simple answer. These are examples of simple, everyday ethical issues. Why might these actions be considered wrong?

Lying is deliberately, wilfully, misrepresenting the truth. It is generally considered to be a wrong action because it shows disrespect for other people. An argument based on self-interest would point out that a serious consequence of lying is that if others discover you are a liar, they won't trust you, and this perception will hurt you in the long run. Another argument could be for self-harm - losing respect for one's self (as you are doing something you know is wrong) or even of losing track of what is true. A third argument, particularly against 'white lies' is the slippery slope theory: once you start telling lies, it will become easier and easier and soon you will be telling more lies and more serious lies.

Lying for advantage is considered wrong in most moral systems. For example, telling a lie to avoid punishment, such as who really ate the last cookie in the jar. In legal situations, lying is very serious, as it obstructs the process of justice - lying under oath is called perjury and is punishable with jail time.

But sometimes it is considered 'okay' or acceptable to tell lies. If you are planning a surprise birthday party for your dad it would be considered acceptable to lie to him to get him out of the house while the preparations were being made. The lie would be told for his benefit (assuming he likes surprises).

Similarly, in a case where your friend has been depressed because she's in hospital with a serious illness, it would be acceptable to tell her she's looking good today, even if she isn't, as you know it would cheer her up. Again, the motive is for the benefit of the person being lied to, rather than that of the liar.

The difference in these situations is the motive. Lies told to benefit you are normally considered wrong, while lies told with the motive of benefiting others (called 'altruistic lies'), are often considered acceptable.

On the other hand, perhaps lying is always wrong, period.