"I cannot tell a lie." I Health benefits of telling the truth
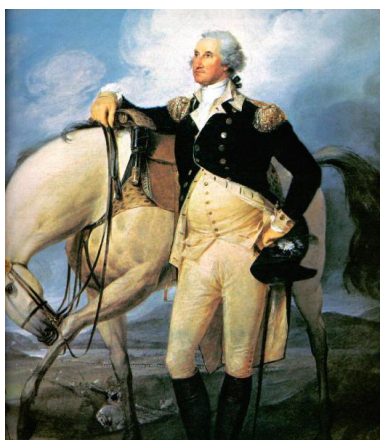
by Howard Belkin, M.D., Beaumont psychiatrist

Washington's famous statement regarding his inability to tell a lie is probably one of the most enduring American political myths. There are, however, many physical and psychological reasons to tell the truth. Believe it our not, truth tellers seem to live healthier, happier, more stress-free lives.

What happens when we are being untruthful? First of all, our feelings of worry, anxiety, and guilt all come into play. Our minds have to, first of all, make up a lie and then remember it for consistency. That takes a lot of mental energy away from our other activities of the day. When we lie, we naturally have feelings of guilt.

These guilty feelings added to the anxiety of having to make sure we don't forget the lie we have just told, can easily cause us to experience the physical symptoms of anxiety. Our hearts will race, we can get shaky and sweaty, blood pressure can increase and even headaches may occur. Add all of these together and we feel physically unwell. Physical symptoms such as exhaustion or insomnia can also develop. Depending upon the seriousness of our untruths, even our close relationships can suffer.

Additional symptoms can also occur. Chronic lying can lead to chronic depression and anxiety. Chronic anxiety and depression oftentimes lead to symptoms such as weight loss, inability to sleep and multiple other somatic complaints. As you can see, it is always best to tell the truth. Honest.