

CHOICES

Scenario 16

A useful lie

You are not one to listen to lots of gossip.

But one day you hear something that is irresistible.

"I heard something about Sally," says Emma in a whisper. "Maria said that she thought she saw her cheating on her Math exam. How disgraceful."

Sally is your great rival. She is good at her work. And she's pretty. And she's nice. A little Miss Goody Two Shoes.

Everyone likes her. She's the teacher's pet.

If truth be known, you are a little bit jealous of her.

"I'm sure she didn't do it," you say. "She's good at Math."

"Maybe she's not as perfect as everyone thinks," says Emma. She winks. "You never know, do you? But don't tell anyone will you? Maria might just have been causing trouble."

You think about this. Sally's really good at Math. Why would she cheat? Maria is surely being nasty.

And yet ...

You *could* pass it on like this, "I'm sure it's *not* true - but someone said Sally was cheating on that test! Don't tell anyone, will you?"

You're not accusing her. In fact you're defending her.

Your hands are clean.

Then you could wait to see what happens.

What should you do?

A You pass on the gossip. And you watch Sally to see if anything happens.

What next?

The next day, after class, the teacher calls Sally out.

“I’d like to see Sally after class!”

She has a grim look on her face.

Sally has gone pale. She looks around, flustered.

Could the story have got to the teacher?

Later, you’re sitting in the yard when Sally comes out. She has been crying.

“Look at her,” whispers Emma. “Suffer!”

You realise what has happened. Someone has told someone, who has told someone else. The story has now gone all the way to the top.

And it was always a lie. You may not like Sally – but this is horrible.

“I’ve got to go see the teacher,” you say.

“You’re not going to tell on us – are you?”

“Someone needs to tell the truth.”

Think about it

Lies are all around us. One survey concluded that amongst 9 to 12 year olds, 57% tell up to five lies a day (*Psychology Now*, Vol 2, 2022). Only 13-17 year olds tell more lies (74%).

The trouble is that while some lies are for ‘good’ reasons (not wanting to hurt someone’s feelings), there are also some which are malicious (nasty lies). A malicious lie can be very destructive. If, as in this situation, it damages a person’s reputation or life experience, it is a form of deliberate hurt. It is a close cousin of bullying.

Correcting the record, overturning the lie – is a moral choice. It may be uncomfortable, but it is a good choice.

The famous writer Mark Twain said: “A lie can travel half way round the world while the truth is getting its shoes on.”

The truth doesn’t cost anything. A lie could cost everything.

Do you want to look at another scenario involving lying? (Go to 23)

Do you want to try the scenario again? (Go to 16)

B You say, “That’s completely wrong! I don’t like Sally. But there’s no way she’d do that. Maria is being mean and horrible.”

What next?

A day later, Sally comes over to you in the playground.

You bristle. She’s not your friend. She might be about to fight with you.

But Sally smiles.

“I heard what Maria said.”

“What’s that?”

“About the test.”

You brace yourself for a scolding. But no ...

“I want to thank you. Of course I didn’t cheat. She was just trying to get at me.”

You relax.

“That’s the trouble with gossip. And mean girls. They make everyone miserable.”

She’s not a Miss Goody Two Shoes. She’s a nice girl.

And you remember the moment when you were tempted to pass on Maria’s false story. Thank goodness you didn’t.

"Let's go to lunch," she says.

And the two of you go off together.

Think about it

The choice between hurting someone else (ruining Sally's reputation) and saving it, is the choice between cruelty and kindness. It is all about compassion.

Maria and Emma's little scheme to get at Sally has been exposed for the vicious thing it was.

Sally's acknowledgement that you have done the right thing is a wonderful compliment for your little bit of true courage.

The Dalai Lama said, "Our challenge as humans is to convince people of the value of truth, honesty, compassion and a concern for others."

Do you want to look at another scenario about being cruel? (Go to 5)

Do you want to try the scenario again? (Go to 16)