

# Why Exceptionally Honest People Often Fail a Polygraph

**POLYGRAPHERS KNOW** that even innocent people will be nervous when asked if they are drug abusers or child molesters. And they know there is little real difference between a person's physiological reactions to fears of being falsely accused and the reactions of someone actually guilty of a serious offense. To deal with this, they have come up with a clever but ethically dubious technique that actually seeks to get the examinee to lie! The polygraph operator exhorts the examinee to answer all questions truthfully, but secretly assumes that denials to certain questions — called “control” questions — will be less than truthful, and that the resulting stress will allow for comparisons with the real questions of interest. One commonly used control question is, “Did you ever lie to get out of trouble?” The polygrapher steers the examinee into a denial, warning that anyone who would lie to get out of trouble is fundamentally untrustworthy. But secretly, it is assumed that everyone — even those truthful about the matter under investigation — has lied to get out of trouble.

The test is scored by comparing physiological reactions to these probable-lie control questions with reactions to relevant (e.g., “Did you do it?”) questions. If reactions to the “control” questions are greater, the examinee passes; if reactions to the relevant questions are greater, he/she fails. This simplistic methodology has no grounding in the scientific method and results in many innocent people being wrongly branded as liars. In fact, the more honestly one answers the control questions, and as a consequence feels less stress when answering them, the more likely one is to fail!

For more information, visit [AntiPolygraph.org](http://AntiPolygraph.org), a non-profit, public interest website dedicated to exposing and ending polygraph waste, fraud, and abuse.

**AntiPolygraph.org**