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# KEEPING SECRETS

*While disclosing all your deepest, darkest secrets could lead to all sorts of mayhem, spare a thought for what it's doing to your physical and mental health by keeping those skeletons firmly in the closet. MiNDFOOD lifts the lid on what happens when you hold your tongue.*

WORDS BY REBECCA DOUGLAS

**T**here are certain times when keeping a secret can be a juicy way to spice things up, a necessity or a source of tremendous guilt that eats away at your soul. You might be holding back the truth as a kindness – for example, while planning a surprise birthday party, or to spare someone's feelings when coming clean would be hurtful. On other occasions, you might be withholding information to avoid the consequences of fessing up – like infidelity or a shameful family scandal.

According to new research from the Columbia Business School in New York, keeping secrets is not only a social

minefield, it can also be harmful to your health. While developing the self-control necessary to keep a low profile is useful for self-preservation and establishing trust with others, the negative effects can include depression, anxiety and a range of physical health implications.

## KEPT UNDER YOUR HAT

On average, scientists say we keep 13 secrets, five of which we will never reveal to anyone. The most frequently kept secrets are sexual fantasies about someone other than your partner and about actually having put those thoughts into action. Other common things include poor job performance,

addiction, sexual orientation, money troubles and having an abortion. It might be your own behaviour you're concealing or it could be on behalf of someone else.

Either way, all this secrecy puts the brain in an awkward, conflicted position. The cingulate cortex in charge of emotions is predisposed to truth telling. It orders other parts of the brain to share information so it can focus on other vital functions, such as learning. When you're hiding something and blocking this ability, the cortex becomes stressed. The orbital pre-frontal cortex runs simulations of worst-case scenarios of letting the cat out of the bag, and if you



do choose to keep it, the cingulate cortex causes the body to increase production of the stress hormones, such as cortisol.

This triggers your body's 'fight or flight' response. Sustained over an extended period of time, this can lead to elevated anxiety levels, disturbed sleep, mood swings and impaired memory and learning function. Possible physical reactions include high blood pressure, a weakened immune system, gastrointestinal upset, a disrupted metabolism, and even osteoporosis and a loss of collagen in the skin.

#### WHAT'S THE GOSS?

According to social scientist Dr Lauren Rosewarne, withholding crucial information runs contrary to our evolutionary instincts. It's part of our make-up to spread gossip and disclose secrets as a form of communicating. "It's actually human instinct to reveal secrets," she says. "Humans have done this from time immemorial. Before there were printed newspapers or the internet, we passed on news from person to person. There have been plenty of studies that show the vast majority of our dialogue between each other is about other people."

By withholding information we're instinctively predisposed to divulge, there are consequences for our relationships. "If you're fearing that you might accidentally reveal a secret, it could involve you isolating yourself from loved ones because you don't want to spill or because you might feel like you're someone who doesn't have a good poker face and therefore might not be able to conceal it," says Rosewarne.

Psychotherapist Dan Auerbach agrees that it can damage relationships, including leaving us with a feeling of paranoia towards others. "When we do anything that we think may harm someone else, including keeping a secret, that act is loaded with a degree of aggressive energy," he says. "Psychologically, if we don't process that aggression, we can develop a fear of retribution or revenge. We may start to fear that others are lying to us or are untrustworthy."

#### BEARING THE BURDEN

Secrets alter the language we use when interacting with others. Researchers at the University of Maryland last year found that secret keepers sent 1.14 emails in a month to those they were hiding information from, compared to 0.67 emails normally. They also responded more quickly to those they were trying to deceive and used more present tense verbs and second person pronouns.

The enormity of the stress of carrying a secret can change over time, depending on whether it remains scandalous and

relevant. It's also less of a load to carry if you know the end is in sight ahead of time, such as keeping a gift under wraps until Christmas. "Some secrets lose their punch if a person dies or if their situation changes," Rosewarne explains. "Time-bound secrets are the easiest to keep."

Previously, it was thought that the weight of the secret (how big and scary it is) was the main cause of negative health implications. However, researchers at Columbia University this year concluded that it's not so much the secret's weight, but how often its keeper thinks about it that is important, even when they don't need to actively hide it.

How much the deception preys upon your mind depends on your moral compass. "Honesty is a learned behaviour that comes from our upbringing and social experiences," Auerbach says. "Some people have not been taught to feel bad about lying, and consequently can do so

*"It's actually human instinct to reveal secrets."*

— Dr Lauren Rosewarne

largely without experiencing guilt. If your social group doesn't require honesty or even promotes lying, you can get good at it without much of a consequence."

For those of us cursed with a more finely tuned conscience, it stands to reason that if we can find a way to reduce the amount of time spent ruminating on these thoughts or change our perspective on how we view them, we might be able to curtail some of the negative health effects.

#### RELIEVING THE PRESSURE

Spilling the beans with trusted confidants and even strangers can be therapeutic. Options include talking to a psychologist or priest, a family member or confessing in writing to a pen pal or on an internet forum.

Clinical psychologist Dr Samantha Clarke suggests that sharing with a confidant offers enormous benefits, whether it's a professional or a trusted friend. "Just sharing with one person can provide a sense of relief and some self-acceptance," she says. "Having someone really be present with you in that moment – seeing you and hearing you – can have a profound effect. It doesn't need to be a therapist, it can be someone who may be open-minded and empathetic."

A similar well-worn method recommended by psychologists is writing the secret somewhere anonymously or

away from prying eyes (such as a diary) to feel like you've confessed it without any harm done. This can drastically improve stress hormone and blood pressure levels, along with mental health.

Another way of safely relieving some of the onus is to talk yourself through the pros and cons of keeping the information under lock and key, effectively doing a cost-benefit analysis to reinforce whether you are doing the right thing. Take a moment to realistically evaluate how others will react – often it will not be as bad as we fear.

#### MOMENT OF TRUTH

What if, after weighing up the advantages and disadvantages, you actually decide to come clean and properly reveal your scandalous piece of information to those affected? First, Rosewarne recommends considering whether it is actually fact or fiction. Do you know firsthand that it is true or does it come from a trusted source? In extreme cases, it might even amount to slander or libel. "Is this secret actually fact? That's an important thing to think about," she says. "Just because you've heard it doesn't make it real."

Clarke cautions against wearing rose-coloured glasses when contemplating the consequences of confessing and make sure you are ready to face them. "I think deep down we want to think that confessing will lead to the happy ending, but I've seen families become estranged, couples separate and friends divide when a secret is shared." She suggests a focus on personal value systems, rather than the outcome. "If we can link the confession with our value of 'this is who I want to be' and 'I'm willing to take what comes as I am honouring my values and this person', it might be easier to cope with the consequences," she says.

A sneakier way to release the pressure valve if you're staying hush-hush for someone else is to tell a friend who's known to be a bit of a blabbermouth. That way, you're not directly responsible for airing it to all and sundry, but the information will be released nonetheless.

In the end, rather than choose between the burden of sealing your lips and the potentially hefty consequences of giving the game away, the best policy of all may be to avoid accumulating too many skeletons in your closet in the first place, whether they concern your own dark deeds or someone else's. After all, ignorance is bliss. 🙊

**VISIT** Need to get something off your chest? Learn about the project that allows you to confess anonymously at [mindfood.com/secrets](http://mindfood.com/secrets).