

Creative work may help unburden secret keepers

June 9 2015, by Mary Catt

Secrets. Most of us have some, and new research led by ILR School professor Jack Goncalo might help us live with them more easily.

Many employees choose not to disclose [personal information](#), such as disability, illness or [sexual identity](#); keeping a secret can impact one's work by drawing energy and creating anxiety, he said. It follows that freeing a worker from this weight could result in better work.

Studies detailed in the paper are the first to show that [creative work](#) can be an outlet for the burden of keeping secrets, Goncalo said, and that unburdening has huge implications for the workplace.

In three studies, 348 participants were asked by ILR researchers to recall either a big or small secret. After thinking of a secret, they were asked to brainstorm ideas. Some participants were told to be "creative" while working on this task, while others were told to be "practical."

After working on the task, participants were asked to do things that measure how physically and psychologically burdened they felt. People burdened by secrets tended to overestimate the weight of objects.

Results showed that for people who are actively suppressing a big secret, the opportunity to be creative while working on a task literally can feel so liberating that it can lift the burden of secrecy.

That lifting can make people more willing, for example, to help someone

move books that they might have thought were too heavy had they not had a creative outlet, Goncalo said.

The idea that creative work can be an "outlet" for psychological burdens is a major departure from existing research, according to the researchers.

Most research on creativity during the past 30 years, Goncalo said, has been based on the assumption that creative ideas are inherently valuable and potentially profitable. As a result, enormous attention focused on understanding how to encourage the expression of [creative ideas](#) at work.

This study reverses that equation and looks at creativity not as an endpoint, but as a work process that can, in and of itself, have positive consequences for an individual's happiness and well-being.

The study's implications for the workplace, Goncalo said, show that creative work might boost employee morale, even if the ideas themselves are not necessarily profitable in a literal sense.

Findings also suggest that people might choose jobs that demand creativity as a way of dealing with underlying psychological burdens; managers who supervise creative professionals might want to anticipate that possibility, he said.

More information: "The liberating consequences of creative work: How a creative outlet lifts the physical burden of secrecy," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Volume 59, July 2015, Pages 32-39, ISSN 0022-1031, [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2015.03.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2015.03.004)

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