

Keeping secrets can make you sick

December 13 2022, by George Spencer



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Feeling low? It might be because your secrets are weighing you down.

"Our secrets can hurt us. But the hard part of having them isn't that we have to hide them; it's that we have to live with them in our thoughts," says Michael Slepian, AG14, the author of the new book "The Secret Life of Secrets" and an associate professor of leadership and ethics at Columbia Business School.

For the past 10 years, Slepian has conducted hundreds of studies on secrets. After asking 50,000 people to open up about what they keep hidden, he has found that when people keep secrets, they can suffer physical and emotional harm. People who keep more secrets report that their health is worse, they get less pleasure out of life, and their relationships are weaker than people who have fewer skeletons in their closets.

Most people believe they are moral and good, according to Slepian, and when they behave at odds with that image, they hide their wrongdoing from others. "We are more than happy to share the good in ourselves with others. That's how we become liked," Slepian writes. "The more immoral you judge your secret to be, the more it will evoke shame, a particularly painful punishment that people inflict on themselves. Secrets can cause people to feel isolated and to isolate themselves from others."

The most common secrets are about lying, sexual behavior, desires, and family. One out of every three people surveyed by Slepian admitted to infidelity, though not necessarily in a current relationship. One-third of that number said they would always keep their misdeed hidden. Another third said they shared it with a third party. The remainder confessed to their partner.

Slepian is often asked if telling a partner about such an indiscretion is the best approach. "If it was a one-time thing, you're in a better position than if you have been unfaithful many times," he says. "The issue is—do you think your partner would want to know what happened?"

To find the answer, he surveyed people in committed relationships and asked if they would want to know the truth if their partner was unfaithful only once and if they were sure it would never happen again. Three-fourths wanted full disclosure.

Slepian's advice? "If any sort of secret is affecting your well-being, I would advise you to at least talk it through with someone you trust."

Some people's secrets make them feel guilty and believe that they have wrongfully escaped punishment, Slepian says. As a result, they punish themselves to atone, often by denying themselves pleasure.

People in this situation might take on slightly unpleasant tasks like doing intense house cleaning or physical exercise, he says. "That might make them feel okay, but the problem is that so long as their secret remains secret, they will feel that they are continuing to escape justice, and so the cycle of self-punishment never ends."

Others ruminate over their secrets, caught up in persistently negative repetitive thoughts about them. "Like shadows, our secrets can follow us wherever we go. Part of the problem is that we are traveling with them alone," Slepian writes.

His studies have found that most people want to share their hidden woe with someone who would be compassionate. They also want the listener to offer advice and push them to do what needs to be done.

"It's really easy to find unhelpful ways of thinking about something on your own, but it's also easy to find a helpful way of thinking about it when you are in conversation with another person," says Slepian. "They have a different perspective. They typically will welcome your vulnerability because it offers the chance to deepen the intimacy of the relationship."

Most of the time, opening up turns out well because people tend to pick their confidants carefully, Slepian says. But choose someone who will not be scandalized. According to his studies, someone who will be morally outraged is more likely to gossip as a way of punishing the secret

keeper.

It's also important to distinguish between secrets that are harmful and those that aren't, Slepian says. If you're carrying a secret that isn't hurting anyone, he recommends reminding yourself that it happened in the past, and the past can't be changed. Consider giving yourself permission to forgive yourself and go forward with your life. "Instead of being ashamed of your past self, recognize the improvements you've made and the ways you've grown," he says.

Slepian credits his advisor at Tufts, the late Nalini Ambady, with playing a pivotal role in his research. "She was always helpful when it came to designing studies. She taught me creative ways of looking at questions," he says. Ambady was an associate professor of psychology at Tufts who continued to advise Slepian after she joined Stanford's faculty.

Slepian knows from [personal experience](#) about the good that can come when people disclose deep secrets. For 26 years, his parents kept hidden from him and his younger brother the knowledge that they were conceived through donor insemination.

His parents had planned to never tell their sons. As a teen, Slepian got vague answers when he asked his parents which of their traits they thought he had inherited. Meanwhile his grandparents and aunts and uncles knew the truth.

Finally, his mother and father reconsidered their decision.

"When I learned what it was like to keep this [secret](#), it changed my understanding of secrecy. But not until writing my book did I begin to ask more questions about it. We obtain insights into our secrets when we discuss them with others, and we learn about ourselves too," says Slepian. "We may not want our secrets to be known, but we do want

ourselves to be known."

Provided by Tufts University

Citation: Keeping secrets can make you sick (2022, December 13) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-12-secrets-sick.html>

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