

When keeping secrets could brighten your day

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Though people often want to share good news as soon as they learn it, a study published by the American Psychological Association has found that keeping good news a secret before telling someone else could make

people feel more energized and alive.

"Decades of research on secrecy suggest it is bad for our well-being, but this work has only examined keeping secrets that have negative implications for our lives. Is secrecy inherently bad for our well-being or do the negative effects of secrecy tend to stem from keeping negative secrets?" asked lead author Michael Slepian, Ph.D., an associate professor of business at Columbia University.

"While negative secrets are far more common than positive secrets, some of life's most joyful occasions begin as secrets, including secret marriage proposals, pregnancies, surprise gifts and exciting [news](#)."

The research, "The Bright Side of Secrecy: The Energizing Effect of Positive Secrets," [was published](#) in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

A pre-study survey of 500 people found that 76% said the first thing they would do upon learning good news is share it with someone. But there are many positive life events that people may choose to keep secret, such as a marriage proposal, a desired pregnancy or splurging on a luxury purchase.

Researchers conducted five experiments with more than 2,500 participants to understand what motivates people to keep positive secrets, and how keeping a positive secret may affect someone compared with a secret they keep because they consider it to be unpleasant or embarrassing.

In one experiment, participants were shown a list of nearly 40 common types of good news, which included items such as saving up money, buying a gift for oneself or reducing a debt. The participants then indicated which pieces of good news they currently had and which they

had kept secret. Some participants were asked to reflect on the good news they kept secret, while others reflected on good news that was not secret, and then rated how energized the news made them feel and whether they intended to share the news with someone else.

The researchers found that people held on average 14 to 15 pieces of good news, with an average of five to six that were kept secret. The participants who reflected on their positive secrets reported feeling more energized than the participants who thought about their good news that was not secret. People who reported that they intended to share their news with others also reported feeling more energized, whether the news was secret or not.

"Positive secrets that people choose to keep should make them feel good, and positive emotion is a known predictor of feeling energized," said Slepian. But the researchers found across four follow-up studies that positive secrets make people feel energized for another reason too.

One of those experiments showed participants the list of common types of good news and asked them to select the piece of news that was most likely to happen to them in the near future. One group of participants then imagined that they kept the good news secret until they told their partner later that day while another group imagined that they were currently unable to reach their partner and so were not able to tell them until later in the day.

When participants imagined wanting to hold the information back to make the revelation surprising, they were more energized than when they were unable to reveal the information.

Another experiment asked participants to recall a current positive secret (a secret they felt good about), a current negative secret (a secret they felt bad about) or simply a current secret. The researchers found that

people keep positive secrets in particular for internal or personal reasons, rather than because they felt forced by outside pressures to keep the information secret.

In contrast to negative or embarrassing secrets, which are often governed by external pressures or fears, positive secrets made people feel enlivened when they could choose to keep the information secret, according to Slepian.

"People will often keep positive secrets for their own enjoyment, or to make a surprise more exciting. Rather than based in external pressures, positive secrets are more often chosen due to personal desires and internal motives," he said. "When we feel that our actions arise from our own desires rather than [external pressures](#), we also feel ready to take on whatever lies ahead."

The researchers also found that keeping good news a secret can make people feel energized and alive, regardless of whether they intend to share that information later with someone or not.

"People sometimes go to great lengths to orchestrate revealing a positive [secret](#) to make it all the more exciting. This kind of surprise can be intensely enjoyable, but surprise is the most fleeting of our emotions," Slepian said. "Having extra time—days, weeks or even longer—to imagine the joyful surprise on another person's face allows us more time with this exciting moment, even if only in our own minds."

More information: Michael Slepian et al, The Bright Side of Secrecy: The Energizing Effect of Positive Secrets, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1037/pspa0000352](https://doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000352)

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