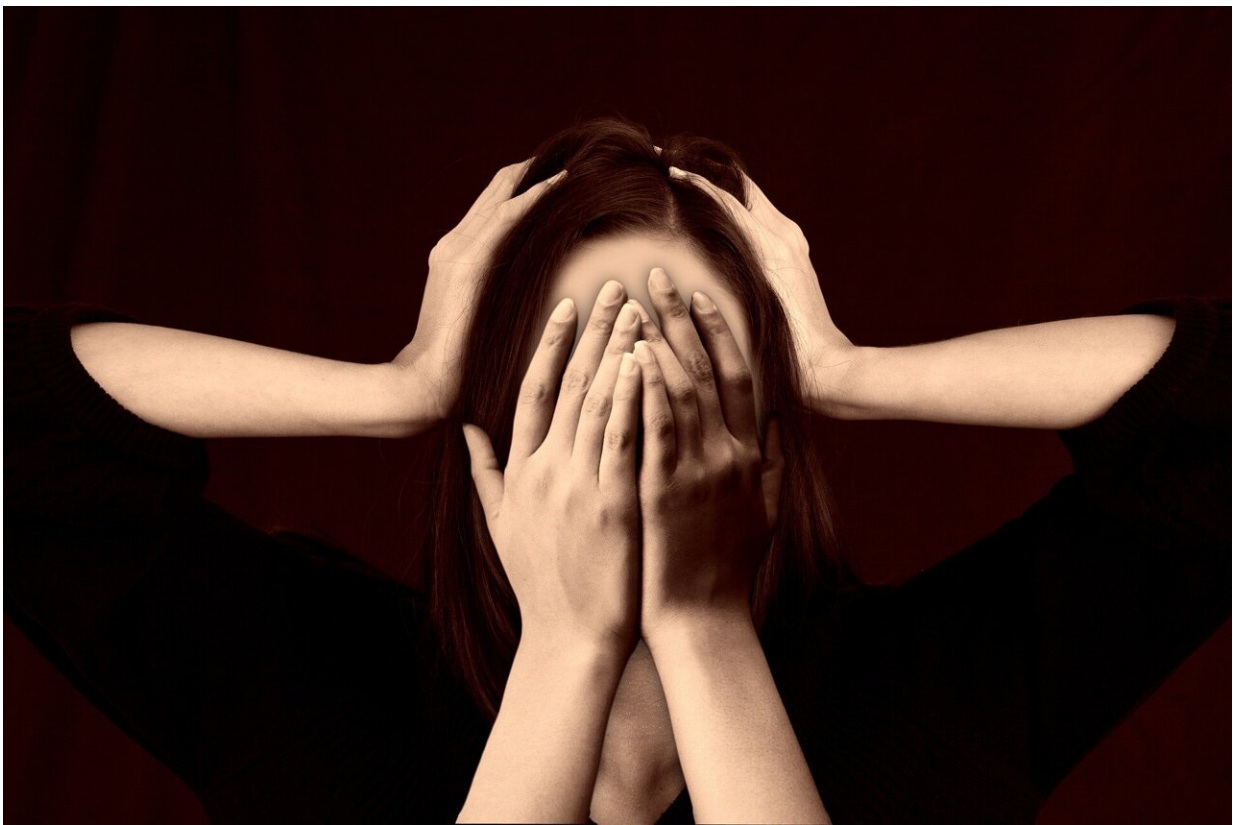


The (wrong) reason we keep secrets: Research finds fears of judgment are overblown

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In and out of the workplace, people often keep adverse information about themselves secret because they worry that others will judge them

harshly. But those fears are overblown, according to new research from the McCombs School of Business.

The work is [published](#) in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

In fact, when study participants pushed through fear to reveal a secret, those in whom they confided were significantly more charitable than they expected.

"When we're thinking about conveying negative information about ourselves, we're focused on the content of the message," said study co-author Amit Kumar, assistant professor of marketing at Texas McCombs. "But the recipients are thinking about the positive traits required to reveal this secret, such as trust, honesty, and vulnerability."

Kumar cites several key takeaways from the 12 experiments in his paper, co-authored with Michael Kardas of Oklahoma State University and Nicholas Epley of the University of Chicago.

Too-low expectations

Researchers asked several groups to imagine revealing a negative secret and to predict how another person would judge them. Then they asked each participant to reveal the secret to that person, and they gathered the recipients' responses. The expected judgment was consistently worse than the actual judgment.

Miscalibrated expectations

People were driven to reveal or conceal based on how they thought others would evaluate them. "If we believe other people will think we're

less trustworthy, that can really impact our decision to conceal information," Kumar says.

In the experiments, though, disclosure had the opposite effect. Recipients rated the revealers' honesty and trustworthiness more highly than the revealers expected.

Across relationships

Participants divulged secrets to strangers, acquaintances, close friends, [family members](#), and romantic partners—all with similar results. Says Kumar, "Their expectations were slightly more accurate for close others, but they were still systematically miscalibrated, even for the closest people in their lives."

Dark vs. light secrets

The participants revealed a wide range of negative information, from admitting they had never learned to ride a bike to confessing infidelity. They predicted that more serious secrets would generate worse judgments.

But even for darker secrets, they still overestimated the impact. "The magnitude of what you're revealing can impact people's evaluations, but it also impacts your expectations of those evaluations," Kumar says.

Honesty feels good

In one study, researchers told participants what they had learned: that people overestimate the negative impact of revelations. The news shifted participants' attitudes toward more openness.

When challenged to confess that they had told a lie, only 56% of participants did. But in another group, where participants were told they would probably not be judged harshly, 92% chose to reveal their lies.

"There's a psychological burden associated with secrecy," says Kumar. "If we can alter people's expectations to make them more in line with reality, they might be more transparent in their relationships."

Building trust with co-workers

Although none of the experiments were run in business settings, Kumar says the lessons can be applied there.

"Any comprehensive understanding of how to navigate the [workplace](#) includes a better understanding of how people think, feel, and behave," he says. "When workplace transgressions arise, people could be wise to consider that they also reveal warmth, trust, and honesty when they are open and transparent about revealing negative information."

More information: Michael Kardas et al, Let it go: How exaggerating the reputational costs of revealing negative information encourages secrecy in relationships., *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1037/pspi0000441](https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000441)

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