

# Know a secret you're burning to share? Read this first instead of becoming an 'a-hole'

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Listen, do you want to know a secret? Do you promise not to tell? Good—because if you tell, people will often think you're an "a-hole."

That's part of the conclusion drawn by Einav Hart, assistant professor of management at the Donald G. Costello College of Business at George Mason University, in a recently published paper in the [\*Journal of Experimental Social Psychology\*](#). In a series of studies, Hart finds that divulging others' secrets often makes you look bad in the eyes of observers, even when the observers say it's the "right" thing to do.

Hart's co-authors on the paper were Eric M. VanEpps of Vanderbilt University, as well as Daniel A. Yudkin and Maurice E. Schweitzer of the University of Pennsylvania.

The researchers began by gathering data from "Am I the A-hole?" ([AITA](#)), an infamous sub-forum within the highly popular online community Reddit. Here, users post about conflicts supposedly happening in their personal lives and poll their fellow users on the titular question. Hart and her co-authors identified 332 posts from the years 2020-2021 that addressed [moral dilemmas](#) around revealing secrets about someone else.

"The existence of hundreds of people asking for advice and judgment on situations involving disclosure of others' secrets itself supports our assertion that people care about how others, even strangers on the internet, will evaluate them based on their decisions to keep or disclose secrets," Hart said.

Further, the researchers found that Reddit users deemed secret-sharers to be "a-holes" if their perceived obligation to the person the secret was about outweighed their obligation to the potential audience. As an example, reporting a coworker's wrongdoing to a manager would reap less blowback than sharing highly [personal details](#) about a close friend with a random stranger.

Hart and her co-authors launched a subsequent study to determine

whether people factor this anticipated "a-hole" effect identified from Reddit into their decision-making. They surveyed 200 people on secrets they knew about others, whether they chose to disclose those secrets, and how they believed others would feel about that choice. Respondents reported being privy to [secret information](#) about everything from marital infidelity to criminal behavior. In most cases, they opted not to tell others what they knew, and the decision seemed based less upon [moral obligation](#) than their belief that others would judge them negatively for disclosing.

Further, the researchers surveyed a separate set of 200 people on their impressions of a hypothetical situation in which an employee decides either to tell their manager about a colleague leaving work early without permission, or to keep quiet about it. Interestingly, though the fictional tattletale was viewed as more moral and honest than a person who kept quiet, the tattletale was viewed more negatively overall.

Betraying someone's confidence was considered an especially moral and honest choice when there is a high obligation to tell the audience (for example, a high obligation is when a coworker is secretly shirking, and a low obligation is when a coworker is keeping their new relationship a secret). However, in general, respondents had a negative overall opinion of secret-sharers, though the degree of negativity lessened as obligation increased.

In addition, across studies, participants themselves said that if they were in the protagonist's position, they would not disclose the secret—though they believed disclosure to be a moral action.

In sum, observers tend to perceive secret-sharing as an honest and moral action, but the loyal action—keeping the secret—is the behavior that yields a more favorable overall impression and the one that participants would choose themselves.

Learning someone else's secrets can trigger difficult moral questions. But as Hart's paper shows, it also carries significant implications for impression management. Even when there are high obligations to disclose, such disclosures harm perceptions of loyalty and overall impressions.

Hart explained, "Managers should avoid asking employees to disclose secrets about each other, as such disclosures are likely to affect the work culture negatively. For instance, instead of a manager asking employees who is responsible for a missed deadline, managers should use a neutral source such as computer logs or ask employees only about the work they did on a project."

"Before asking someone to disclose another person's secret, consider that you are potentially asking them to be an 'a-hole.'"

**More information:** Einav Hart et al, The interpersonal costs of revealing others' secrets, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jesp.2023.104541](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2023.104541)

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