

Secrets: Blessing or Curse?

By Pamela Thompson, Psy.D.
Psychologist and Professional Life Coach
www.novemgroup.com
drthompson@novemgroup.com

As a psychologist, I live in a world of secrets. One thing I have learned for sure is that secrets have the potential to wield great power over its carriers. That power can engage some more fully in relationships or condemn others to loneliness, despair, and endless self-persecution. Hence, secrets have the capacity to be a blessing or a curse.

The secret of the surprise party, the special gift, or the surprising visit of a loved one are all motivated by loving thoughtfulness and a desire to make someone's heart smile because the delightfully unexpected has occurred. The secrets shared between husband and wife can become the foundation of intimacy that knits two souls together. Marital secrets may also shield children, giving them an opportunity to live an unburdened childhood, free from worries meant for adults only. The secrets of childhood friends blossom into legendary tales that produce laughter, reflection, and celebration over the triumph of past adversity and uncertainty. A warm sense of belonging and camaraderie is the result of such secrets in addition to gratefulness for the trust born out of the fruitful risk of confiding.

Problems arise when secrets are allowed to rule your life, insatiably demanding concealment at all costs, particularly when you try to keep a secret even from yourself. In other words, when you become crafty in convincing yourself that a certain character flaw within the self does not exist, or a certain shameful thing never happened, or a certain relationship was not harmful—then secrets become emotionally taxing, costly in time and energy, and even disease-provoking.

Secrets from those in your most intimate circle build walls and create irrational tensions/behavior. Years ago, I saw a woman confess her secret on national television regarding her escalating irritability in the presence of her husband and daughter. The father-daughter relationship provoked intense jealousy within the mother whose father had died while she was in her mother's womb. She'd never missed her father until she saw what it was like to have one. Her husband appeared tearfully relieved as he finally had answers to questions that had plagued him about his wife's odd behavior. The veil was lifted that day and the secret exposed, giving the sense that the family was on the brink of a refreshing change because the debilitating power of the secret was no more.

Secrets about your environment may provoke disconnection from others. Who hasn't seen the images of the clutter and trash-filled homes of those suffering from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) whose anxiety prevents them from discarding anything. It's pretty obvious these are not individuals getting to know their neighbors by hosting BBQ's. They're not engaging more intimately in their children's lives by hosting sleep-overs or birthday parties. They're living in shameful isolation because of the dirty little secret their environment imposes, which severely limits the capacity for home-centered, joyful connection.



I have found in my clinical experiences that the destructive power of secrets is usually tied to some issue of unforgiving one's self. Following the wisdom of Beverly Flanigan in her book *Forgiving Yourself*, four simple steps can begin the process of self-forgiveness and healing. They include: a) confronting yourself with the facts, just the facts, concerning the event that gave birth to the secret; b) making those facts more personal by holding yourself responsible for contributions to the event or at least your reaction to the event as an adult; c) confessing the secret to a trusted other, a therapist, a clergy person, or the one negatively impacted by the secret only if the motivation is to heal and not hurt; and d) participating in transforming activity through volunteer work that helps to redeem oneself in a specific area of transgression (e.g., the murderous drunk driver who gives speeches encouraging sobriety).

Confession is indeed good for the soul when one chooses to take the time to consider the motivation for the confession as well as the right confidant. As Steve Arterburn of the nationally syndicated radio show *New Life Live* says, "Millions of people choose to stay in the despair and the anguish that have become their constant daily companions. You don't have to be like them because healing is a choice." When you make the choice to rule over your secrets, carefully managing their release and deflation of power, others draw near and a flourishing, more self-assured life blossoms.



For more helpful articles, visit www.Mobile-Medicine.net and subscribe to "Healthy Living On the Go"