

THE SECRET LIFE OF “SECRET KEEPERS

By Ginger E. Blume, Ph.D.

What is a “secret?” Theoretically, secrets come in many shapes and forms: dangerous secrets, devastating secrets, small secrets, innocent secrets, etc. By their very nature, secrets are those things, thoughts, behaviors, beliefs, feelings, and so forth that we want to keep hidden from others. According to psychologists, secrets are sometimes even hidden from ourselves through various mental defense mechanisms such as denial (information that is purposefully kept from conscious awareness), compartmentalization (information that is separated from certain areas of our mind), and dissociation (information that we disown as belonging to ourselves).

Secrets act like poison

It is no mystery why people keep secrets. None of us want others to negatively judge us or to judge the deeds we’ve done. Secrets are initially designed to protect us from feeling vulnerable or ashamed. Secrets are supposed to help us feel better about ourselves by protecting our self-esteem. They’re supposed to, but they cannot. When we engage in habitual secret keeping, our secrets begin to act like a poison in our psychological system. Secrets eventually infect our entire psyche and soul. A life of secret keeping will undermine our sense of genuine goodness as a valuable human being.

Many clients in psychotherapy mistakenly assume they must protect their secrets. Some people believe no one would ever understand. Some imagine others would think less of them as a person if their secrets were revealed. Others believe their secrets will simply disappear if they just try to forget about them.

One adult client told me she had a dark secret that very few people knew. Her secret was the fact that she had been raised in various foster homes throughout most of her childhood and then, later, lived on the street from ages sixteen to seventeen. In fact, her husband of five years had no clue about her childhood. She told him that her parents had died together in a car accident when she was four and she had been raised by an aunt and uncle (who were also deceased by the time she met him). Perhaps, because he felt badly

for his wife's losses, he never asked for more information for fear of upsetting her. She wrongly assumed that his silence about her past meant that he thought it was too awful and he didn't want to know more about it.

During the course of couple's therapy, this client finally decided to risk telling her husband the truth. When she did, he was greatly relieved. "Finally," he said in a couple's session, "I understand why she has never wanted to leave the house and go on vacation. I never realized how awful it was for her to constantly be uprooted from one home to another, never feeling secure or wanted as a child." As he spoke, his wife began to realize how her attempt at self-protection had boomeranged and caused her husband to feel critical of her. He had come to negatively view her as rigid and uninterested in having fun with him whenever she refused to go on vacations that he tried to plan. Finally, her husband was able to empathize with her, and she was able to realize that her secret had built a wall between them. The more she risked sharing about her painful past, the more he understood and the more intimate they became. The very rejection that she had feared all her life had almost come true due to keeping secrets from her loved one. Her fear of being unlovable had caused her to behave that way.

Change your Pattern

Do you have a secret you believe you could never share with anyone? If so, ask yourself the following questions:

- 1) How has that secret affected your life?
- 2) Does it absorb a lot of your emotional energy keeping it behind closed doors?
- 3) Does the secret cause you to feel shame? Guilt? Anger? Mistrust?
- 4) Is the purpose of the secret to protect others? Yourself? Both?
- 5) What do you imagine is the worse thing that might happen if you shared the secret with someone you could trust?
- 6) What has happened in the past if/when you've tried to share your secret? Did your worse fears come true? In most cases, they don't, but if you had a negative outcome, ask yourself another question: Is that the way most normal people would react to my secret? Perhaps, you choose to share with an unsafe person.

Face your secrets

The only viable solution to secret keeping is to acknowledge how our secrets have impacted our internal sense of self. What we have chosen to hide from others will tell us a lot about what is most precious to our sense of well-being. For instance, if your secrets are mostly about stealing from others, you may realize that you deeply fear “not having or being enough.” You may be wrongly resting your self-worth on possessions, rather than on the value of your behavior/actions toward others (i.e. whether you treat others with kindness and compassion). In other words, I encourage you to examine the typical type of secrets you maintain; explore what they mean to you personally; and then, begin to find a better solution for meeting those deep, inner psychological needs. If your intention is to feel worthy, then seek more effective approaches to feeling worthwhile. Soon you will experience an increase in your self-worth and the need to hide from others will become a part of the past.

Note: no particular client is described in this article. Numerous client situations and circumstances are pulled together to describe common problems and resolutions.

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