

Spill the BEANS

WHEN KEEPING
A SECRET IMPACTS
ON YOUR HEALTH
AND HAPPINESS,
IT'S TIME TO 'FESS
UP. ELLI JACOBS
FINDS OUT HOW
TO SPEAK UP WHILE
MINIMISING THE
REPERCUSSIONS

'First consider why you need to keep a secret'

“Deciding what to do with a secret is always a hard task involving lots of ‘Should I or shouldn’t I?’” says Noosha Anzab, psychologist at Lysn Health. “First and foremost, consider why you need to keep a secret.”

Ask yourself, why are you keeping it? To protect yourself or someone else? Or is it because you were asked to?

“Secondly, consider the ramifications of what would happen if the secret is revealed,” she continues.

Will someone else get hurt? Will it dramatically affect your or someone else’s life in a negative way?

“Getting to the core of why you need to keep a secret helps you consider whether it’s a healthy thing to do or not,” explains Noosha.

“Take for instance a surprise birthday party – that’s a good secret to keep as the intention is a positive one.” It’s when secrets feel like a burden that they can become detrimental to your

health. Imagine being among friends and family constantly thinking, ‘I can’t slip up and let them know’.

“This is considered a ‘goal’ in our brains, which means we keep revisiting the idea of not telling the secret over and over in our minds,” says Noosha.

“In this way a secret can become stressful and all-consuming, decreasing our sense of happiness and authenticity.”

A 2017 research paper, *The Experience of Secrecy*, from Columbia Business School, looked at the physical and psychological consequences of this internal struggle. It found our common tendency to mentally revisit past transgressions leads to a lower sense of wellbeing.

So, why keep a secret?

“Most of the time we don’t have a safe space or anyone we trust, so we keep them to ourselves,” says Noosha.

“Furthermore, risking being judged, people’s changing perception of us and fear of the reaction around it keeps our secret bottled up.

“On the flip side, sharing your secret can have a cathartic effect, like a weight has been lifted off you.”

Safe options include sharing your secret anonymously online in a forum, talking with a therapist, or writing an unsent letter. But

communicating it with those the secret most relates to is in most cases the most empowering option.

Here we look at relevant scenarios and how we can reveal our secrets for the best possible outcome.

‘A SECRET CAN BECOME STRESSFUL AND ALL-CONSUMING, DECREASING OUR SENSE OF HAPPINESS’

WITH YOUR PARTNER

“Many secrets begin as we try to protect the other person – or our self-interest – and to manipulate how the person we’re lying to thinks of us,” says Dr Lori Whatley, marriage and family therapist.

But this can end up harming the relationship. Picture hiding a huge secret from your past, and after 10 years, it comes out. “Not telling your partner early on violates their right to make a choice about whether they find your behaviour acceptable and their feelings about it, including their chance to support you,” explains Dr Whatley.

New research published in

the *Journal of Experimental and Social Psychology* shows confiding in someone can help you feel better and may even increase intimacy, mostly when the recipient uses what you’ve told them to help you problem-solve.

How you disclose your secret also depends on your personality and the topic, adds Noosha. If it involves trauma you may need to be more careful as to when, who and where you share. Explain why you’ve kept the secret and why you’re at a stage of disclosing it now. “Be honest without making the other person feel they’re being blamed.” »

With colleagues

"With workplace secrets it's difficult to know who to trust, so it's best to keep the information to yourself unless you have a colleague you consider a best friend," says Noosha.

"It's also best not to engage in workplace gossip; become known as the person who's chatty but doesn't disseminate rumours," suggests Renee Mill, clinical psychologist and corporate coach at Anxiety Solutions. "This way you won't be privy to information and won't have to carry the burden of knowing," adds Renee.

"But if you're asked to keep a secret that keeps you up at night worrying, see a workplace counsellor. If it's serious, like knowledge of illegal practices, go through due processes and bring them to light," she says. "Overall, evaluate the implications not only for your mental health but also for your job performance and seek out the right

support. It may take courage to do so but you're investing in your wellbeing."

With your best friend

Part of the joy of having a BFF is knowing you can tell them anything and they'll understand. But what if your friend is in a relationship you consider unhealthy? Or you see her partner with another woman? Do you say something or keep quiet so you don't risk your own relationship?

"What you do with difficult information really depends on the quality of your relationship," says Noosha. "If it's one where you can openly talk about anything, then absolutely. Would it not be better for your friend to know rather than find out you've been sitting on this information for months?" she says.

If you're concerned about what's going on in her love life, "Letting them know your perspective is something you want to express with caution," suggests Noosha. "Begin by saying, 'I'm a little bit worried about the quality of your relationship and how nurturing it is for you.' And then let her know that you're open to discuss this with her."

**'IF YOU'RE
ASKED TO KEEP
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COUNSELLOR'**

WITH YOUR FAMILY

Not wanting to leave things unsaid and find closure as parents age is natural. But, weighing up a secret prior with a therapist may be a better option.

"Often when you work through a childhood hurt with a therapist you may find resolution or reach the conclusion that it's not worth disclosing," says Noosha.

Dr Whatley says it's important to contemplate how the conversation will affect the relationship. "Will it make a difference or is there a possibility it'll jeopardise the relationship?"

If you decide to say your piece, make sure your

motivation is not a selfish one. "If it's just to get it off your chest or give them pain to carry, then you'll just shatter their world and damage the relationship. And if your parents are quite elderly, you may not have the time to right another wrong," explains Noosha.

"It's also important to let them know how you feel without using the word 'you', which may potentially create more distance," adds Dr Whatley.

"Therefore, to ensure your feelings aren't further invalidated and to avoid making them feel guilty, use sentences like, 'I feel sad because I was mistreated' or 'I feel angry because I was never heard.' This allows you to speak your truth and own your emotions," says Noosha.