Books

Are Your Deepest, Darkest Secrets Keeping You Down?

By
George Spencer
|
Oct. 18, 2022



Illustration by Len Small. Photo: Ales Munt/ Shutterstock.

In his new book *The Secret Life of Secrets*, Michael Slepian, an associate professor of leadership and ethics at Columbia Business School, argues that keeping secrets runs contrary to the human instinct to share our experiences with others and can affect our health.

What are the most common types of secrets?

My research has shown that the average person keeps around thirteen secrets. The most common have to do with past lies, finances, romantic attraction, sexual behavior, and desire for someone other than your spouse or partner. Family secrets, like abuse and mental-health problems, are high on the list too. Of course, not all of these secrets hurt the secret keeper. The question for me as a researcher is, which ones do and why?

You write in your book that there are plenty of "good" secrets to keep, like the planning of a surprise party. What are the consequences of keeping more serious secrets?

If you feel ashamed of a secret, it's going be difficult to cope with it. It may cause anxiety, depression, feelings of loneliness, and other issues. What's harmful is not necessarily the conversational gymnastics you need to use to keep the secret hidden but the sense of not feeling supported in being yourself.

If shame about a moral misdeed, your sexual preferences, or another sensitive matter is forcing you to feel entirely alone in working through a problem, you can temper those negative feelings by sharing the secret with someone you trust and talking it through. Another person's perspective, whether a friend, therapist, or spiritual adviser, is almost always going to be more positive than yours. Your mind, left to its own devices, is likely to ruminate in unhelpful ways, but when you have a simple conversation about the issue, you can start to find healthier ways to look forward.

What advice would you give to someone planning to surprise a romantic partner with a proposal?

A significant proportion of rejected marriage proposals are made by people who never discussed the matter in advance. So if you're going to propose and you've never had a conversation in which your partner has indicated an interest in marriage, you're taking a major risk and could be misjudging what the other person wants. You're better off not keeping your plan a secret, although you can still surprise your partner with the time and place of the proposal.

If you have committed a one-time indiscretion — say, marital infidelity — is it always the right decision to tell your partner?

This is one of the biggest questions people have. If the infraction was a one-time thing, you're in a better position, but if you're dealing with a repeat offense, no psychologist is going to say it's OK to keep lying.

If you believe your partner would want to know the truth, it's harder to justify keeping that secret. I have surveyed people in committed relationships and asked them, if your partner had a total lapse in judgment once, and it would never happen again, would you want to know? Three-fourths said they would.

As with other major secrets, I would advise people in this type of situation to open up and talk through the issue with someone they trust if the secret is affecting their well-being. Confessing such a secret to your partner is a potentially consequential decision and one you need not handle alone.



Michael Slepian

Some teenagers keep major secrets from their parents. Do you have any advice for parents trying to get their children to open up?

If something upsets you, don't respond in a high-intensity way. As hard as it can be in the moment, respond calmly with acceptance and an eye toward helping instead

of punishing. Children and teens should then feel more comfortable bringing something difficult to you, whether it's getting bullied, abusing drugs or alcohol, having a traumatic experience, breaking something, getting a bad grade, or admitting to a mistake. It's also helpful to model effective coping skills. If you yourself have difficulty dealing with life stressors, you're presenting a bad model for teens.

You write in your book that, as an adult, your father stunned you with a huge revelation — that you and your brother were conceived via artificial insemination from anonymous sperm donors. How did your parents go about keeping such a big secret?

Their original plan was to never tell us. When I was a teenager, my brother and I used to ask questions about which traits we had inherited from whom. My parents later told me that this made them feel awkward, but because they had been long committed to holding the secret, it was easier not to say anything. Later on, they revisited their decision and asked themselves, "Are we doing the right thing here?" So they finally told us after twenty-six years, and that brought us closer together as a family.

Read more from ***George Spencer***



Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >

Read more from ***George Spencer***