

INTIMATE

*Secrets*

Which to Keep  
& Which to Tell

KAREN BLAKER, Ph. D.

*Intimate*  
SECRETS

*Which to Keep and Which to Tell*



By KAREN BLAKER, PH.D.



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*This book is dedicated  
to those who know my secrets:*



BOB  
SCOTT AND KIM  
GRETCHEN AND HARLAN

*“Too much or too little  
self-disclosure betokens  
disturbances in self and  
interpersonal relationships. . . .”*

SIDNEY M. JOURARD,  
*The Transparent Self*

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# A Secret Journey: The Beginning

**I**T was 1:05 P.M. on a cold, wintry Tuesday afternoon in a metropolitan radio studio. I put on my headset, adjusted the microphone, and awaited a cue. When the “On Air” sign turned red, I was live in the homes of those who tuned in to hear my call-in advice program. The topic that day was secrets.

I gave out my telephone number and invited the listeners to pick up their phones and talk to me about things they had never been able to tell another living soul.

The lights on the control panel began to blink. I pressed one of the flashing buttons and welcomed the first caller to “Ask Dr. Blaker.”

Within seconds I heard a low, tense voice say, “I’ve never told this to anyone.”

After a moment’s hesitation, he continued. “It’s this habit I’ve had ever since I was a kid. I’m so embarrassed by it. That’s why I couldn’t even tell my therapist and I saw him twice a week for seven years.”

The man paused nervously and then broke his own silence. “Nobody would believe I could do this. They’d think I was crazy. You see, I’m fifty-eight years old and a vice president of a Fortune 500 Company.”

His comments stopped abruptly, and I recognized from years of

speaking with people on the air about their psychological problems that this was a crucial time for him. He had begun to weigh the pros and cons of speaking further. Like so many who hear my daily program, he had chosen the anonymity it affords to deal with a personal crisis. But even in anonymity, he seemed frightened to reveal this long-kept secret.

"You sound like you want to talk about this," I said, supporting his desire to continue, and feeling he was fighting with a deeply rooted fear that he would be destroyed if anyone knew what he was concealing.

With enormous effort and a rush of words, he blurted out, "I've always sucked my thumb before I go to sleep."

It was as if the line had gone dead. Only I could hear his shallow breathing and sense his impulse to slam down the receiver. I said nothing, played with the second, and risked his hanging up. I wanted the full impact of what he had said as well as done, which was to tell his secret, to fill his consciousness.

Moments later I asked, "Does thumb-sucking help you relax?"

From his reaction, I knew he hadn't expected this kind of response. Laughter perhaps, a reprimand maybe, or a disconnect in disgust, but not a question that put his nightly ritual in perspective and encouraged him to look at his need for being so secretive.

"Yes, sucking my thumb does relax me," he replied in a surprised tone.

When we began to discuss how other people relieved tension he remarked, "I've never smoked and I've always drunk in moderation. I'm very proud of that." The revelation calmed him and he started to see his behavior as less threatening. "Compared to other habits," he reasoned, "thumb-sucking isn't that awful. Come to think of it, now that I'm not as ashamed maybe I won't do it as much."

I agreed with him. Since he no longer felt so mortified about his habit, he would be less anxious at night and more able to fall asleep without sucking his thumb.

Then he hung up before I could ask him if he was secretive by nature. Often people who have one secret have many others. They find it difficult to discuss with anyone what they have hidden. This type of closed behavior can lead to serious problems.

Whenever you isolate yourself with a secret, you are in danger of falling victim to powerful nonverbal logic. You think to yourself: "I



am hiding something about me. I wouldn't hide it unless it was bad. Therefore, I must be bad." Of course, this reasoning is inaccurate but you don't realize that, because you haven't talked about it to see how others will react. Eventually, this train of thought undermines your self-image and makes you feel negative about yourself. If you allow the silent thinking to go on indefinitely, you can begin to experience a wide range of emotional problems, from free-floating anxiety to severe depression.

By allowing his secret to grow and fester in the darkness, the businessman gave it the power to weaken his self-confidence. If he had talked about his thumb-sucking with a close friend, spouse, clergyman or therapist he would not have blown his habit out of proportion or suffered such undue stress.

As I finished discussing my reactions to the corporate executive's problem, I received another call. A woman came on the line and said, "I never have trouble sharing secrets. I can't keep anything from anybody."

I listened as Marge, a sixty-four-year-old widow who lived alone, told me that her dilemma had nothing to do with handling secrets. She phoned because she wanted to know why she didn't have any friends.

I sensed that her dilemma had everything to do with handling secrets except that her problem was the opposite of the corporate executive's. Whereas he had difficulty with secrecy because he kept secrets, she had trouble with disclosure because she told too many. To follow through with my assumption, I asked Marge if she tended to be very open with people from the moment she met them.

"Oh yes," she answered. "Last week, for example, I invited my new neighbor to dinner. She was shy, so I began talking right away. I told her about my own adoption, my homosexual son's illness, and my most recent love affair. She listened, but she wouldn't tell me anything about herself.

"I saw her a few days ago in the hall and she didn't act very friendly. I asked her to tea, but she never showed up."

Marge's voice filled with hurt and she asked, "What am I doing wrong?"

"Perhaps you are telling too many of your secrets too soon," I replied. "It sounds like you are scaring people away."

I then talked with Marge about the dinner she had given and how

she had revealed a series of intimate stories. Her guest had probably been shocked and confused. Since she didn't know Marge at all, she didn't feel comfortable enough to respond in kind. She was also no doubt threatened by Marge's open nature and wondered whether *her* confessions would be safe with Marge.

Finally, Marge said that she understood more about why she lost friends. I suggested that she slow herself down when it came to disclosing private information. I encouraged her to engage in more small talk during the first several encounters with a new acquaintance.

After I said good-bye, I switched to a commercial and began thinking about Marge's open nature. Many people find it almost impossible to keep anything to themselves. Their nonverbal logic is: "I would hide something only if it was bad. I don't want you to think I am bad. Therefore, I will tell you all my secrets." This reasoning is dangerous because it motivates people to open up in an indiscriminate way without building trust first. The behavior makes others anxious and they tend to shut you out of their lives. They don't want to hear yet another one of your secret-monologues.

Open behavior can also lead to serious mental health problems such as isolation, confusion, lack of control and depression.

### SELF-IDENTIFICATION

Do you identify with the corporate vice president or with Marge? Have you ever found that your approach to secrecy or disclosure has caused problems?

If you are like most people you have some difficulties handling secrets. Your behavior directly influences your emotional well-being and your relationships.

For example, if you tend to have trouble sharing secrets with your spouse or lover, you have a closed nature. This probably makes you feel uneasy about revealing intimate details to others. You do have a right to privacy but when concealment becomes the norm, you can suffer upsetting side effects. Are you experiencing any of them?

- Do you have cycles of general discontent without knowing why?

- Do you have periods of free-floating anxiety?
- Do you have repetitive dreams that you don't understand or dreams that you can't quite remember?
- Do you find yourself frustrated or angry but discover you are unable to tie the feeling to any particular cause?
- Do you fly off the handle for no apparent reason?
- Do you think you are less trusting than you used to be?
- Do you feel distant from a person or group of people with whom you were once close?

Answering “yes” to one or more of these questions could mean that your closed personality and a secret that you are carrying alone could be affecting you in a negative way.

If you tend to disclose secrets impulsively to anyone you meet, you have an extremely open nature. You are likely to find it difficult to withhold personal information. You may even tell other people's secrets that have confidentially been entrusted to you. Although you may regret your actions later, you don't seem able to modify your behavior.

It is important to be open with others about yourself to gain their support and to increase the intimacy you share. Unfortunately, when secret-spilling is the norm, there are major repercussions. Are you feeling any of them now?

- Do you have fears that someone will misuse the information they have about you?
- Do you often feel rejected because people don't reciprocate with the same level of intimate stories that you are sharing?
- Do people hesitate to trust you with truly sensitive information?
- Do you feel angry or frustrated when you conceal anything from others?
- Do you find yourself confused when you are with people because you don't know what you have told them?
- Do you feel anxious with silences or small talk and so fill in the gaps with revelations that you later regret disclosing?

Responding “yes” to one or more of these questions could indicate that your open personality and secret-spilling could be causing you problems.

### THE POWER OF SECRECY/DISCLOSURE

Are you surprised that the way you deal with secrets can have a potent effect on your life? You are not alone. Most people have no idea what a powerful force their too open or too closed nature can be.

My initial awareness of the importance of this behavioral phenomenon came while I was in graduate school. My doctoral thesis examined the influence of secrecy and disclosure on couples who were becoming parents for the first time. I found that husbands and wives who did know when to reveal confidences and when to keep them from each other negotiated with ease the role change from being spouse to that of spouse *and* parent. I also discovered that after the birth of the first child, couples who had been closed with one another about their needs, desires, and dreams experienced a higher level of postpartum distress.

### INSTINCTIVE VS. LEARNED RESPONSE

The ability to use secrets appropriately is not innate. It is something that we all need to learn. I was no exception. Let me tell you a personal story.

Twenty years ago, a married graduate student with a new baby, I took two blouses from a large department store in Los Angeles. I was caught and charged with shoplifting. It was the first illegal thing I had ever done. I was devastated.

I told my father, but the two of us conspired to keep this “terrible deed” from my mother. It was a split-second decision and one that I regretted from the moment it was made. To this day, Father and I tell ourselves that we kept this secret so Mother would not get upset.

As I continued to hide the incident, it began to affect my relationship with my mother. I started to feel distant from her. My father also felt a little alienated because he, too, was holding something back. Still, we both remained in a secrecy pact.

Years later, while I was giving a seminar, I encouraged the participants to think about secret-keeping and secret-telling in their past behavior. As a point of departure, I began talking about the shoplifting episode. It was the first time I had discussed it with anyone since 1965. I brought the incident up because I thought it was in the past. I was wrong.

Disclosing my experience before the class, I started to realize that my having been closed about the shoplifting episode was continuing to create problems in my life. I was still anxious about making the incident known, guilty about keeping it from my mother, and concerned about involving my father in a secrecy pact.

Following the class, I made a decision. At the next family reunion, I carried out my plan. I told my mother what had happened. Her reaction was gentle and understanding. She was merely puzzled about why I had felt unable to tell her my predicament at the time when it had occurred. My father was also relieved that he no longer had to keep a secret from the woman he loved.

Of course, I felt better. By being revealed, the incident had lost its power to trigger anxiety and guilt.

After that illuminating experience with secrecy abuse I began looking at the way I treated secrets and focusing more on how people in general deal with personally sensitive information. I began considering, through thousands of hours with my private clients as an interpersonal relationship therapist, hundreds of callers asking for advice during my radio program, and thousands of letters that were addressed to my nationally syndicated newspaper column requesting help, why they tend to be open or closed.

Discovering that there was little material on the broad spectrum of interpersonal secrecy/disclosure behavior, I decided to write *Intimate Secrets*. I realized there was a real need for a book that would help people avoid the negative side effects of being either too open or too closed.

## OUR JOURNEY BEGINS

To help you take the mystery out of when to conceal and when to reveal, I would like you to travel with me deep into your self and look at how you manage private information. Initially, we will ex-

plore the basics of a too open and too closed nature and how you may be entrapped in secret-lockjaw or secret-spilling. Then we will examine your interpersonal secrecy/disclosure universe and who is privy to your innermost thoughts. What we uncover may indicate why you are having trouble in some relationships but not in others. From there, we will move on to pinpoint exactly how open or closed you are and why your secrecy/disclosure pattern may be causing you problems.

Then you and I will travel back in time. We will trace your stages of growth and development from infancy through adolescence and the effect your maturation had on shaping your open or closed nature. Knowing why you became as secretive or as nonsecretive as you did, you will be able to start modifying your behavior.

Once we have studied your past, we can delve into your present and examine the pitfalls of secrecy and disclosure in your adult life: how keeping and telling secrets inappropriately can harm your romantic relationships, family, professional life, and dying moments. After we have identified the dangers, you can learn ways of avoiding them.

Finally, we'll discuss the basic skills you can develop to make your dealings with secrets practically foolproof.

An important part of your journey will be the quizzes that you will take in the book and the many composite case studies of people with intimate secrets that you will read. These materials will give you further insight into your secretive or nonsecretive nature.

At the conclusion of our journey, you will have found the right balance for you with regard to your personal secrecy/disclosure behavior. With irrational secretiveness at one end of the spectrum and compulsive disclosure at the other, you will see that mental health falls somewhere in the middle.

Initiating this probe into your past and present reminds me of a comment by a psychologist and family researcher, Mark A. Karpel, Ph.D. He wrote: "Facing secrets involves personal responsibility for one's own actions and/or holding the other(s) responsible for theirs."

Such confrontations require courage and conviction in the face of fears and doubts about the outcome.

You have the courage, because you have picked up this book. I am convinced you will find just rewards in your search.

For example, you may decide to tell a few carefully selected people some deeply guarded secret. Or you may make a resolution to stop living such a heavily secret-laden life. It is also possible that you will come away from this experience promising yourself that you will keep more secrets and not be so open with everyone.

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