Are Your Secrets Slowly Killing You?

Taking a secret to your grave could actually hasten your arrival at the cemetery. So stop holding it in—unburden yourself to boost your health and well-being

BY BRYAN SMITH, PHOTOGRAPHY BY TRAVIS RATHBONE *September 29, 2014*

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Technically, he hadn't cheated on her.

Jason had seen Stephanie only a few times, and even then, the "dates" were more like nights out with a good friend, sometimes ending with a kiss on the cheek, other times a hug, and occasionally, feeling silly, a high five. During this period, an old girlfriend came to town one weekend and Jason slept with her. How could he have known that Stephanie would wind up being the love of his life, the mother of his children, the person he would never dream of keeping secrets from?

"I felt horribly guilty about it," says Jason, 42, who was 27 at the time. "Especially when it seemed like we had a future together."

He wanted—and needed—to tell Steph about that weekend, but first it felt too soon and then it felt too late. "I built it up in my mind as the worst thing ever, and the longer I waited, the harder it became to tell her." The torment he experienced was more than mental. He felt physically awful, teeth always on edge, a low dull ache behind the eyes. "This went way beyond the usual Jewish guilt that I felt 24 hours a day," he says. "This was like a hole eating through my stomach."

We'll let you in on a little secret: Vowing to keep certain things in your life hidden—harmful lies you've told and never copped to, hurt that you've caused others and haven't acknowledged, embarrassing or traumatic experiences buried in your brain—may eat away at you in ways and to a degree you never realized.

"Unless you're a sociopath, keeping negative secrets absolutely impacts your health," says Reef Karim, M.D., an assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at the UCLA Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior.

"No question," agrees James Pennebaker, Ph.D., a psychologist at the University of Texas. "Each year brings fresh evidence about the health risks of keeping dark secrets."

Researchers have discovered, for instance, that harboring secrets can set off a chronic surge of stress hormones, specifically cortisol, that can lead to all types of nasty health issues, including gastrointestinal problems, a weakened immune system, high blood pressure, and memory loss. Your brain must struggle to perform normal functions while diverting the resources necessary to maintain the secret, explains neurosurgeon Gopal Chopra, M.D., an adjunct associate professor at Duke University.

"To manage a mismatch between reality and the world around you requires the additional use of the prefrontal cortex and amygdala," Dr. Chopra says. "When your brain is working at cross-purposes, the conflict creates stress."

Not only does stress erode your physical health, but it also takes an emotional toll that can affect all of your relationships.

"That's because we are holding on to something that's a lie, that's misleading, or that elicits negative energy," says Dr. Karim. "Our internal sense of guilt, feelings for the person we are keeping the secret from, or feelings about ourselves will cause us to feel disconnected in some way. Often, we don't realize this is happening, but it eventually catches up to us."

The notion of secrets as toxic roaches back to the days of sandal-wearing thinkers in ancient plazas. The third-century A.D. scholar and theologian Origen considered secrets to be poison—literally—and insisted the only way to suck out the toxins was to draw them into the open. Early Christian literature refers to confession as medicine for the soul, and the priest as a physician for the soul. And in the 1930s, a predecessor of Alcoholics Anonymous, the Oxford Group, turned the notion of confession as healing into one of its most enduring slogans and the very key to recovery: "You're only as sick as your secrets."

We all have our skeletons. In fact, according to researchers at the University of Iowa, about 95 percent of people are hiding at least a few femurs in their closets.

I'm not harboring anything remotely scandalous (and if I were, I wouldn't confess it to 13 million *Men's Health* readers). But based on how I've suffered from keeping even a small secret, I can only imagine what a doozy would do to a guy.

On Black Friday last year, my wife and I went shopping to prepare for visits from a dozen family members for a three-day Christmas extravaganza. We snagged some great deals but still dropped a lot of cash. To my shame, while my wife was off hunting for hangers and a cute knickknack, a cashier was sliding my credit card for a new GoPro video camera that was on sale. Knowing how much my wife hates when I buy electronic gadgets, I slipped it into the backseat of the car without saying anything.

I let a few days pass without mentioning the purchase, hiding the camera until I could work up the nerve. After two weeks of stomachaches and guilt-induced anxiety, I finally came clean. She was only mildly miffed (and would have been less so, she said, if I'd told her up front). I, on the other hand, felt like I could finally take a deep breath. What's more, I was at last able to use the damn thing and filmed a family Christmas movie that became the hit of the weekend.

When I shared this with Dale Larson, Ph.D., a psychologist who has spent much of his career delving into the impact of self-concealment and secrets, his reaction made me wince a little.

"This is a classic example of the kind of secret that can be harmful," Larson, a professor at Santa Clara University, told me. "The obsession over it leads to shame and rumination, and then, when the secret is eventually revealed, it can undermine trust in the romantic relationship."

And boy, do we obsess. Back in the '90s, researchers at the University of Virginia found that keeping secrets, even seemingly inconsequential ones, can crowd out other thoughts to the point of "provoking psychopathology."

The word "secret" means "withdrawn", set apart, concealed, private." It should be no surprise, then, that shedding the burden of concealment can bring people together. It was precisely that metaphor, in fact—the burden of secrets—that intrigued researchers at Tufts University and three other major colleges enough to find out if people felt a literal weight from withholding information. To answer that question, the scientists crafted a set of experiments.

In the first experiment, 40 people were asked to think of either a "major" or a "small" secret and then to estimate the steepness of a hill. The result: The bigger the secret was, the steeper the hill seemed to them.

A second group of participants thought of either "meaningful" or "trivial" secrets while tossing a beanbag at a target about 9 feet away. People with the meaningful secrets overthrew, suggesting that they perceived the target as being farther away. The third test involved people who'd cheated on their partner but hadn't fessed up. Asked to guess how much effort and energy it would take to complete six tasks, the people who dwelled more often on their straying found the tasks more physically burdensome.

None of this surprises family counselor Deborah Corley, Ph.D., the coauthor of *Disclosing Secrets: When, to Whom, & How Much to Reveal*. She says she's had plenty of clients tell her they're really anxious, can't sleep, or feel depressed. "After asking more questions, I find their symptoms stem from being unable to share something they've been withholding."

If all this is true—if clinging to secrets is hurting us physically, emotionally, and spiritually—then the answer should be simple: We need to man up and cop to what we're hiding.

It *can* be that simple. In 2013, following up on their first "burden" studies, Stanford University visiting scholar Michael Slepian, Ph.D., and fellow researchers tested whether coming clean would bring relief. The answer was yes. In each case, participants felt their psychic load lifted, giving them the very real sense that an actual physical weight had also been removed.

There is, however, the danger that in unburdening yourself, you drop an emotional anvil on someone else. Take a one-time instance of marital infidelity. If you want to spill your guts just to soothe your conscience—knowing you'll never cheat again—keep your mouth (and pants) zipped, suggests Bruce Stevens, Ph.D., an associate professor of clinical psychology at the University of Canberra in Australia.

"When there is a very high likelihood of it being a final blow to the marriage, I think keeping it secret is best—if the affair is over, past tense," he says. (Of course, there are circumstances when a cheater has no choice: if you've put a partner at risk for a sexually transmitted disease, for example.)
But what about the corrosive effects of keeping quiet? Those can still be addressed if you confide in someone else, such as a therapist, who can help you work through the guilt and shame as well as address any underlying issues that may have led to cheating in the first place.

The University of Texas's Pennebaker has spent two decades experimenting with "writing to heal," a program that has participants bare their souls on paper for 15 to 20 minutes a day for four straight days. Putting the experience into language, Pennebaker says, imposes "some organization on it, some structure, something that is just very difficult to do without words.

"People sleep better after they write," he continues. "Students' grades improve. People go to the doctor less. Their immune function improves. People will tell us months afterward that it was a life-changing experience."

Jason recalls when the weightof his own secret finally became too much to bear. He and Stephanie were still in the lounging-in-bed-on-Sundays phase, deeply in love and spending almost every day and night together. There was no doubt where things were headed, and Jason couldn't have been happier about it. Still. . .there was The Secret.

It was then, tangled up in the sheets, that Stephanie looked at him and said, "I'm so glad we don't keep secrets from each other."

That was it.

"I knew it was now or never," he says. "The guilt bubbled over, and I told her. Simple as that. She wasn't exactly pleased, but the whole thing was pretty anticlimactic." His conscience now clear, he asked her to marry him soon after.
Not only that, but he's still friends with the old girlfriend—and "Stephanie really likes her."

Your Big Reveal

Finally ready to give up that secret but can't (or won't) tell the person you may have hurt? Here are some other conscience-clearing options.

Write it off

Spill your secret on paper, and you won't censor yourself as you might if sharing it with another person, says Tamara Afifi, Ph.D., a professor of communication studies at the University of Iowa. The drawback? If you don't take the risk and fess up to someone else, you limit the relief you'll feel.

Bend a buddy's ear

The upside of unloading on a bud is that not only do you trust him, but you've also heard *his* dirt. "It means a lot if you tell a close friend and he still respects you," says Afifi. But his acceptance may have limits, especially if he holds strong personal opinions about the subject of the secret.

Go to confession

God-fearing guy? "You can feel more accepted if you're communicating with a higher power through the clergy," says Dale Larson, Ph.D., a professor of counseling psychology at Santa Clara University. One danger: Your fear of disappointing a person you revere could cause you to be less open.

Unload on a pro

A therapist isn't your pal and won't tell you to say 20 Hail Marys—and that might be exactly what you need. The couch is a confidential, judgment-free zone to open up in, says Larson. What's more, you'll be encouraged to explore the root of your secret and how it's affecting your life.