



SHHH! WHAT ARE SECRETS AND HOW DO THEY AFFECT US?

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Have you ever kept something about yourself hidden from others? Throughout our day-to-day interactions, there are times when we might choose to keep certain information to ourselves. This is called secrecy, and the information we keep hidden from others is called a secret. Secret keeping is quite common—most people do it, and you have likely kept your fair share of secrets, too. But have you ever wondered how we learn to keep secrets, what goes on in our minds when we keep them, or how they can impact how we feel? In this article, we will reveal the secrets of secret keeping and share what you need to know about this fascinating topic.

Have you ever kept something about yourself hidden from others? You likely have or know someone who has! Consider Spider-Man, the web-slinging superhero who conceals his true identity from

BURDENSOME

Difficult to carry or deal with, causing stress or worry.

PRIVACY

The right to keep certain information of your life hidden from others. It involves personal space and the control we have over our information and how it is shared.

THEORY OF MIND

The ability to understand that other people may have different thoughts, feelings, and knowledge than we do.

PERSPECTIVE

The way someone sees or understands a situation or event based on their own experiences, thoughts, and beliefs.

most people and only reveals it to a couple of his closest friends. Spider-Man's story shows us how challenging it can be to keep a secret and how much effort it can take to keep your secrets hidden. Just like superheroes, we all have our own secrets, and while they may not necessarily be negative secrets, carrying them alone can still be **burdensome**.

WHAT ARE SECRETS?

We all interact with many people every day, whether it is at home, at school, or even online. Sometimes there are things we prefer not to share with our friends or others. This is called secrecy, and the hidden bits of information we prefer not to share are our secrets. Secrets are quite common. I bet you have one or two secrets of your own right now!

People keep secrets for different reasons [1]. Sometimes we keep secrets because we do not want others to know personal things about us. For example, you might not want your friend to know you have a crush on someone in your class. You might feel embarrassed about it, or maybe you just do not feel like sharing it with anybody else. Other times, we keep secrets that friends or loved ones have shared with us. We keep these secrets to earn the trust of our friends or loved ones, and because we want to protect their personal information. Not everything we keep to ourselves is a secret. For instance, you would (hopefully) not tell a stranger where you live, right? Not sharing this type of information with others is called **privacy**, and it is different from secret keeping. We all have the right to keep some things private, just for ourselves.

Secrets come in all shapes and sizes, and they can be about good things or not-so-good things. Imagine you have a special gift for your friend's birthday, and you keep it a secret until the party to surprise them. That is a positive secret. On the other hand, a negative secret could be knowing that someone is being bullied but choosing not to tell anyone. Secrets are a part of our everyday lives, but it is important to think about the secrets we keep and who we share them with.

HOW DO WE LEARN TO KEEP SECRETS?

How do we learn to keep secrets from others? We all learn how to keep things hidden through our experiences. One way is by playing the popular game Hide and Seek. While the rules of the game are easy to understand, playing Hide and Seek is not so simple for young kids. The hider needs to think like the seeker, by using their **Theory of Mind** to take the **perspective** of the seeker, so they can imagine what the seeker can and cannot see. Theory of mind refers to the ability to understand that other people can have different thoughts, feelings,

memories, experiences, knowledge, and goals than we do [2]. Most children develop this skill by around 5 years old, although some may develop it earlier or later. Younger kids sometimes struggle with Hide and Seek because they have not yet fully developed theory of mind. For example, a 2-year-old might hide under a blanket and believe they are invisible because they think that if they cannot see you, you cannot see them. By playing Hide and Seek more and more, kids gain experience about what others might think, feel, and know, and they get better at hiding.

Learning to keep secrets works similarly. Children must be able to understand that others may not know what they know, and learn how to keep a secret hidden [1]. Just like playing Hide and Seek, the ability to keep secrets develops over time. Everyone can learn to keep some information hidden, but some people will be better at keeping secrets than others. Individual differences can affect how and when people develop the ability to keep secrets [3]. For example, children with autism tend to develop theory of mind at a different pace, which can influence their ability to keep secrets. While it is important to understand individual differences in how people experience secret keeping, there is still limited research on this topic.

WHAT HAPPENS IN OUR MINDS WHEN WE KEEP SECRETS?

Keeping secrets can affect us in different ways [4]. Some secrets may not bother us much, like eating cookies before dinner when you were not supposed to and not telling your parents. Other secrets, however, can weigh heavily on our minds, like cheating on a big test. This led psychologists to study the “science of secrets” to understand how secrets actually affect us.

Secrets can affect us in two ways [4]. The first way happens when we actively try to hide a secret while talking to others. Imagine you accidentally broke your parents’ special table lamp, but they think the cat broke it. Inside, you feel guilty and worried. To keep the secret, you must constantly watch what you say in conversations, which can be very tiring! You might even focus more on hiding the secret than on what your parents are actually saying to you. Sometimes, however, simply “not saying” is not enough; you might feel the need to tell a lie to cover up your secret when your parents ask you about the lamp. Once a lie is involved, keeping the secret can feel even more complicated and tiring.

The second way secrets can affect us is that they can fill up our minds so that we think of them even when we are not around the people or things involved. For example, when you pass a restaurant with colorful lights, it can remind you of the special table lamp, making you feel guilty and ashamed again. In these cases, everything seems

RUMINATION

The process of continuously thinking about a particular thought or topic, often leading to negative feelings.

PHYSICAL

Related to the body and things we can touch or see, such as muscles, bones, and other parts of the body.

PSYCHOLOGICAL

Related to the mind and emotions, including how we think, feel, and behave.

to bring back the secret, and our minds keep thinking about it over and over again. These two ways that secrets can affect us can create a loop of negative thoughts and feelings. This is what psychologists call **rumination**. You can think of rumination like having a song stuck in your head, but instead of the song giving you a good feeling, this “song” is full of thoughts and feelings about your secret, making you feel uncomfortable.

HOW DOES SECRET KEEPING AFFECT US?

Keeping a secret from others and worrying about accidentally revealing the secret can be really stressful. It might make us feel like we cannot be our true selves around other people anymore, which can make us feel lonely, isolated, or sad. Just like worrying about a test or presentation can make us feel tired, moody, or give us an upset stomach, keeping a secret can make us feel nervous, anxious, and even give us **physical** and **psychological** problems [5].

However, there is another side to secrets. Keeping a shared secret with someone else can actually strengthen the bond with that person and make us feel more connected to them. If we have been keeping a difficult secret, sharing it with someone we trust can bring relief. Afterward, we might even feel closer to the person we opened up to. For example, imagine you decide to tell someone you trust that you—not the cat—broke your parents’ lamp. That person will likely be happy that you told them the truth. They might offer their help and support, and in the end, you might feel better! Keeping a secret can make both adults and kids feel the same emotions, but kids handle these feelings differently because they are still learning to manage their emotions. For instance, a young child might cry when feeling guilty, while an adult might just become quiet and withdrawn. [Figure 1](#) takes a closer look at the many emotions and feelings that can accompany the secrets we keep. Can you relate to any of them?

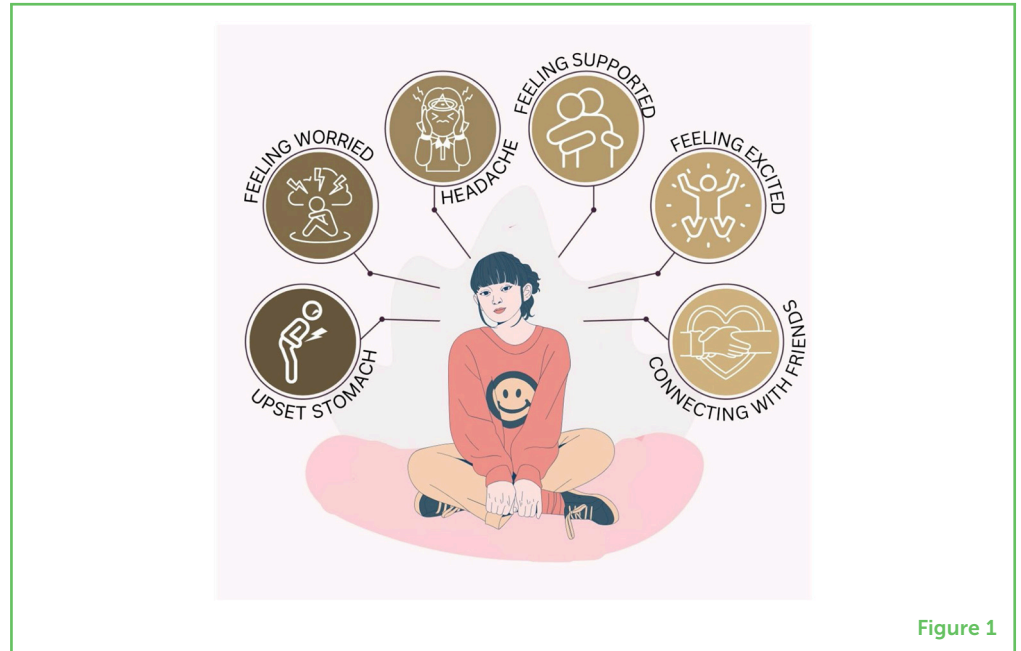
SHOULD I SHARE OR KEEP MY SECRET?

Deciding whether to share a secret or keep it hidden can be tough. Imagine having feelings for someone. You might want to tell your friends and ask them for advice, but you are worried they might tease you or spread the news. So, how do you decide?

If a secret is making you feel bad and you cannot stop thinking about it, it is usually good to do something about it. Sharing the secret with someone you trust and getting their thoughts and ideas can make you feel better [5]. Sometimes keeping a secret can be harmful—not just for you but for others, too. For instance, if you know a friend is being bullied and neither of you has told anyone, it is important to tell a trusted adult who can help.

Figure 1

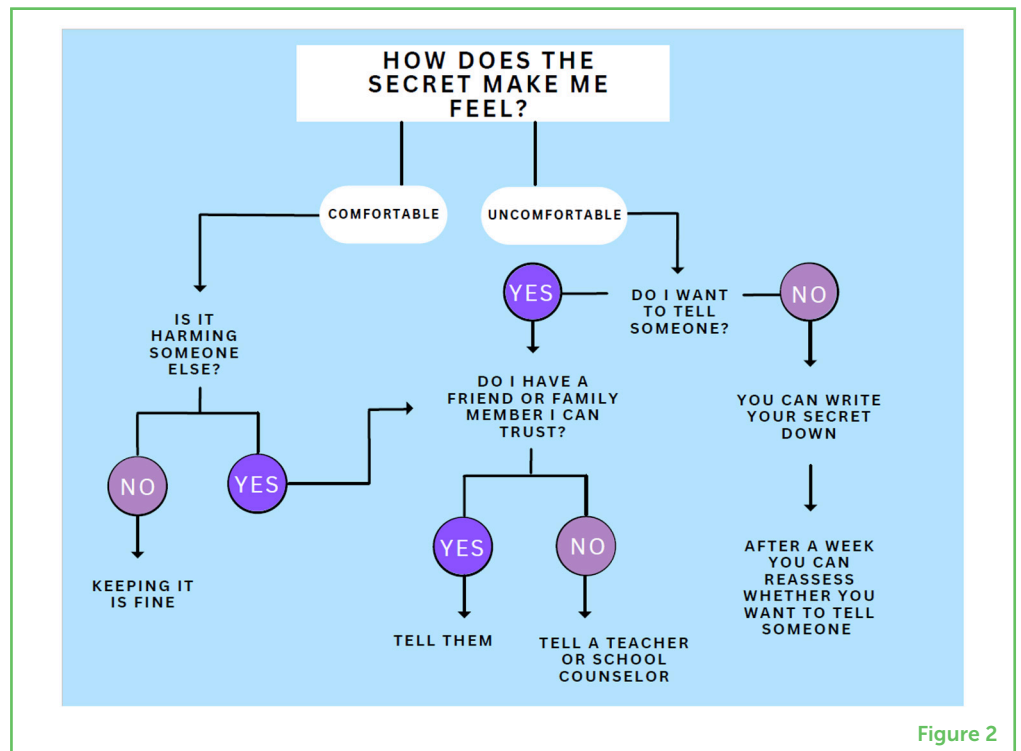
Lots of feelings and emotions can be connected to the secrets we hold, both positive and negative.

**Figure 1**

However, having a secret is not always bad, and not all secrets are burdensome! If a secret does not make you or anybody else feel bad, it is probably okay to keep it. Sometimes knowing that a secret is safe with us can make us feel better. There is no rule on when to keep or share a secret. It is your choice. Check out [Figure 2](#) for help!

Figure 2

Should you share your secret or keep it to yourself? This chart helps you navigate the choices you face when you have a secret. Follow the paths to discover whether it is best to open up or to keep your secret to yourself. Remember, every secret is unique, but this tool can help you make the right decision for you!

**Figure 2**

SECRETS UNVEILED

In conclusion, secrets can be part of our lives, and it is generally okay to have a secret or two. Secret keeping is something we learn as we grow and learn to understand how others think and feel. Secrets can be good or bad, big or small, and they can affect how we feel. While small and harmless secrets may not be a problem, bigger ones can make us feel bad and even cause problems for us. When we feel this way, it is important to talk to someone we trust. But not all secrets are bad. Some secrets can make us feel happy and excited, and it is okay to keep those to ourselves. Just like Spider-Man, we have the power to choose when to share or keep a secret. So, remember, it is okay to have secrets, but make sure to share your secrets with the people you trust when you feel you need to.

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SUBMITTED: 23 May 2023; **ACCEPTED:** 19 August 2024;

PUBLISHED ONLINE: 02 September 2024.

EDITOR: Mubarak H. Syed, University of New Mexico, United States

SCIENCE MENTORS: Caroline Lea-Carnall and Won Chan Oh

CITATION: Blomqvist LP, Csizmazia IÉ, Schnitzler KP, Weiss CE, Franzen M and Van der Hallen R (2024) Shhh! What Are Secrets and How Do They Affect Us? *Front. Young Minds* 12:1227676. doi: 10.3389/frym.2024.1227676

CONFLICT OF INTEREST: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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YOUNG REVIEWERS

ALEX, AGE: 13

I like to play baseball and tennis. I like to go fishing anywhere, especially in FL. I also fly fish and like camping in the Rocky Mountains. Math and Science are my favorite subjects.



DISLEY PRIMARY SCHOOL SCIENCE CLUB, AGES: 10–11

The Year 6 Science Club at Disley Primary School took the opportunity to learn about neuroscience and psychology by accepting the challenge of reviewing an article for *Frontiers for Young Minds*. We loved being a part of the scientific process and learning about what secret-keeping does to our minds and bodies.

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Laura Blomqvist works as a psychological practitioner in the UK. She completed her master's degree in clinical psychology at Erasmus University Rotterdam in the Netherlands. In her free time, she likes to stay active and enjoys being in nature and spending time with friends and animals.



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