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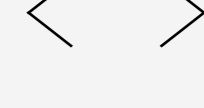


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The Quiet Thrill of Keeping a Secret

New research suggests keeping good news to yourself can be energizing.

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Francesco Ciccolella



By Catherine Pearson

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If your partner gets down on one knee to propose, or you get a call with the job offer you've been coveting, your inclination might be to shout it from the rooftops. But new research suggests that keeping positive secrets to yourself can have an “energizing” effect.

[The study](#), published in the November issue of *The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology: Attitudes and Social Cognition*, included five experiments with a total of 2,800 participants between the ages of 18 and 78.

In one experiment, participants were given a list of 38 types of positive personal news, like a new romance, an upcoming trip or being in a position to pay down some debt. On average, people reported they were experiencing about 15 things on that list, five to six of which they hadn't told anyone about.

Participants were then randomly assigned to reflect on an experience they had talked about with others or one they were currently keeping secret. Those who reflected on secret good news reported they felt much more “energized” than those who reflected on good news they had already shared.

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“It's not energy in the sense of, you know, ‘I just drank coffee,’” said Michael Slepian, an associate professor of business at Columbia University, the author of [“The Secret Life of Secrets”](#) and a lead researcher on the study. Instead, he described it as a kind of “psychological energy,” more like the feeling you get when you are deeply engaged in something.

The research nuances our understanding of the science of secrets, which so far has focused on the detrimental effects, said Andreas Wismeijer, a lecturer in psychology at Tilburg University in the Netherlands who has also studied secrets (but did not work on the new paper).

“If you keep information secret simply because you want to,” he said, “and your choice reflects your personal values and convictions, this study shows it may actually be beneficial.”

Not all secrets are created equal.

Many people hold onto secrets because they fear the negative consequences of sharing them, Dr. Wismeijer and Dr. Slepian said, and the harm seems to come from ruminating on them.

Negative secrets — like a lie you are concealing or a time when you violated someone's trust — tend to deplete us, Dr. Slepian said. In a [prior study](#), he found that people who were preoccupied with an important secret judged hills to be steeper and believed physical tasks required more effort, as if the secret were weighing them down and zapping their energy. Negative secrets have also been [linked to](#) anxiety and relationship problems.

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Positive secrets, however, don't seem to have this effect. Rather, people seem enlivened by them. One factor could be that people often have different motivations for keeping good news to themselves.

In another part of Dr. Slepian's most recent study, participants were asked to think about a secret they felt good about, a secret they felt bad about or simply a current secret. They were then asked if they were intrinsically or extrinsically motivated to keep the secret — that is, if they were compelled by personal reasons or by external forces or consequences. Those with positive secrets were much more likely to report that they were keeping quiet for internal reasons, not because they felt any outside pressures. The study noted that [“autonomous motivation”](#) is known to contribute to feelings of vitality.

“You feel really in control over positive secrets,” Dr. Slepian said, “and that may be part of what makes them feel energizing.”

‘Savoring’ is important.

Dr. Slepian said his new research shouldn't inspire people to withhold positive news indefinitely, though participants in the study said that keeping a positive secret made them feel energized regardless of whether they intended to share it. (He gave the example of a hobby or pastime that brings you delight, but that you don't necessarily want to discuss with others.)

Dr. Slepian believed the findings dovetailed nicely with research on [“savoring,”](#) which has shown that appreciating everyday pleasures — like what the [air smells like when you step out the front door](#) — can help bring joy and improve your mind-set. Taking extra time to sit with a happy secret you plan to eventually reveal — like a desired pregnancy or an exciting life change — may have similar effects.

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Dr. Slepian offered the example of giving someone a present. Sure, you can pick something without much thought and immediately hand it over. Or you can spend a bit of time mulling over what the best gift would be and envision the person's delight. You can wrap the gift to prolong the secrecy, even for just a few extra seconds, and add to the [sense of ritual](#).

“Positive events tend to sort of blend together,” Dr. Slepian said. “One way to sort of break out of that, and to leverage the positive experiences that we all have, is just to spend a little more time with them, thinking about them, reflecting on them and enjoying them.”

Keeping a positive secret, he said, “is like turning the dial up to 11 on that process.”

Catherine Pearson is a reporter for the Well section of The Times, covering families and relationships. [More about Catherine Pearson](#)

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