

Don't judge, don't tell: Revealing secrets and the response of the confidant

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Abstract

Decisions to reveal secrets are strongly influenced by the anticipated response of the confidant. In a scenario study, individuals reported being more likely to reveal a secret and to feel better after revealing if the confidant was described as nonjudgmental and discreet. In addition, significant interactions suggested that as long as confidants were discreet, participants did not seem to care whether they were judgmental; alternatively, when confidants were nonjudgmental, participants were not influenced by whether they were discreet.

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To tell or not to tell, that is the question. Have you ever had a secret, and wondered whether you should reveal it to anyone? Most people have had a secret at some point in their life. Pennebaker and others (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp, 1990; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988) have suggested that it may be physically as well as psychologically beneficial to talk about your problems and secrets. Keeping a secret may cause anxiety, depression, and somatic complaints.

While the benefits of revealing secrets have been well-documented, only recently have the potential drawbacks of such revelations been discussed (Kelly and McKillop, 1996). For example, one's confidant might provide inappropriate or judgmental feedback, or reveal one's secret to others. In this way, revealing the secret could lead to lowered feelings of self-worth, damage one's relationship with the confidant, disrupt other important relationships, and generally leave one feeling worse for having revealed the secret (Kelly and McKillop, 1996).

Prior research investigating the effects of revealing secrets has failed to take into account the role of the confidant. Kelly and McKillop (1996) suggest that the characteristics of the confidant are critical in determining whether one should reveal a secret and the outcome of such revelations. They argue that one should reveal, and will benefit from revealing, only if there is a discreet and nonjudgmental confidant available.

In this experiment, participants were asked to imagine that they were keeping a troubling secret and the nature of the available confidant was manipulated. We

predicted that participants would report being more likely to reveal to a discreet confidant than to a nondiscreet confidant. Additionally, we predicted that participants would be more likely to reveal to a nonjudgmental confidant than to a confidant who would judge them.

Method

Participants consisted of 81 (51 female and 30 male) undergraduate students who received partial course credit for a general psychology course. Participants entered the laboratory in groups of 2-6 and were given a packet of experimental materials. The instructions explained to students that they would be asked to imagine themselves in a situation which involved the keeping of a secret, and then they would be asked questions about how they would respond to that situation. Participants were then asked to read six different scenarios and to imagine that they had kept the content of each scenario a secret until now, but they were feeling the need to talk about it with someone.

After each scenario, participants were presented with a brief description of the available confidant. All confidants were described as close friends that the participant had known for a long time. One-fourth of the participants were asked to imagine that the confidant was discreet and judgmental; one-fourth of the participants were asked to imagine that the confidant was discreet and non-judgmental; one-fourth of the participants were asked to imagine that the confidant was nondiscreet and judgmental; and one-fourth of the participants were asked to imagine that the confidant was nondiscreet and nonjudgmental. A discreet confidant was described as one who "never tells your secrets to others," while a non-

discreet confidant was described as a person who "sometimes tells your secrets to others." A judgmental confidant was one who "usually judges you quite harshly because of the things you reveal;" a nonjudgmental confidant was described as "never judges you harshly because of the things you reveal." The design of the study was thus a 2 x 2 factorial with whether the confidant was discreet (discreet vs. nondiscreet) and whether the confidant was judgmental (judgmental vs. nonjudgmental) as between subjects factors.

Following each scenario participants completed a series of questions. Participants were asked to rate, on a nine-point scale, how likely they would be to reveal the secret to the confidant described in the scenario. They were also asked whether they would feel better or worse after revealing the secret. The participants were also asked how likely their friend would be to reveal the secret to others, and how likely their friend would be to judge them. These two manipulation checks were included to verify that the participants understood the nature of the confidant to whom they were revealing.

Upon completion of the study, participants were debriefed, thanked for their time, and given experimental credit.

Results

Manipulation Check

The manipulation of the perceived discretion of the confidant was successful. After reading about the nature of their confidant, participants were asked how likely their friend would be to reveal the secret to someone else. A 2 x 2 ANOVA showed that there was a main effect of discreet, $F(1,77)=34.85$, $p<.001$. Participants who read

that their confidant had never revealed their secrets in the past believed that their friend would be less likely to reveal this secret ($M=5.896$) than did participants who read that their friend had sometimes revealed their secrets to others in the past ($M=7.7542$).

The manipulation of the judgmental nature of the confidant was also successful. Participants were asked whether their friend would judge them if they revealed the secret. A 2 x 2 ANOVA revealed a main effect of judgmental, $F(1,77)=12.29$, $p<.001$. Those participants who were told that their confidant had never judged them harshly in the past believed that their friend would be less likely to judge them harshly if they revealed this secret ($M=5.5375$) than did those who were told that their confidant had usually judged them harshly in the past ($M=4.2647$).

Likelihood of Revealing

A 2 x 2 ANOVA showed that participants were more likely to reveal to confidants who were discreet, $F(1,77)=15.41$, $p<.001$, and nonjudgmental, $F(1,77)=19.40$, $p<.001$. These main effects were qualified by a significant interaction of discreet and judgmental, $F(1,77)=5.73$, $p<.05$. Simple effects tests revealed that participants were more likely to reveal to discreet confidants than nondiscreet confidants, but only when the confidants were judgmental. When the confidants were nonjudgmental, discretion did not matter. In addition, participants were more likely to reveal to nonjudgmental confidants than judgmental confidants, but only when the confidants were not discreet. When the confidants were discreet, whether they were judgmental did not matter (see Table 1 for means).

Feelings After Revealing

A 2 x 2 ANOVA indicated that participants felt better after revealing to confidants who were discreet, $F(1,76)=6.58$, $p<.05$, and nonjudgmental, $F(1,76)=7.99$, $p<.01$. While the interaction between discreet and judgmental only approached significance, $F(1,76)=3.00$, $p=.087$, simple effects tests showed that the data followed the same pattern as the data in the previous analysis. Participants felt better after revealing to discreet confidants than to nondiscreet confidants, but only if the confidants were judgmental. When the confidants were nonjudgmental, discretion did not matter. Furthermore, participants felt better after revealing to nonjudgmental confidants than to judgmental confidants, but only when the confidants were not discreet. When the confidants were discreet, whether they were judgmental did not matter (see Table 2 for means).

Discussion

Consistent with predictions, participants reported being more likely to reveal secrets to confidants who were discreet and nonjudgmental. Participants also reported expecting to feel better after revealing to discreet and nonjudgmental confidants. The unexpected interactions suggest that perhaps our confidants need only one of these qualities or the other, but not both. As long as confidants were discreet, participants did not seem to care whether they were judgmental; alternatively, when confidants were nonjudgmental, participants were not influenced by whether they were discreet.

References

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Table 1

Mean likelihood of revealing the secret

Discreet	<u>Judge</u>	
	No	Yes
No	4.31a	6.68b
Yes	3.78a	4.48a

Note. Lower numbers indicate greater likelihood of revealing the secret. Means with a different subscript differ significantly, $p < .05$.

Table 2

Mean rating of whether participants would feel better or worse after revealing the secret

Discreet	<u>Judge</u>	
	No	Yes
No	4.38a	5.84b
Yes	4.12a	4.47a

Note. The lower the number the better participants reported they would feel after revealing. Means with a different subscript differ significantly, $p < .05$.