



COLORADO LAWYER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Why Keeping Secrets Can Compromise Your Health

“There are two kinds of secrets. The ones we keep from others and the ones we keep from ourselves.” ~Frank Warren

Lawyers make their living communicating with clients, colleagues, judges, juries, witnesses, and in briefs, motions, and written transactions. And yet lawyers keep secrets, many of which can change the outcome of a case and the course of one or more lives. Lawyers are duty bound to protect privileged communication and information. Our legal system could not operate without the attorney-client privilege. The majority of the time, keeping information confidential is simple because it is part of the job. Sometimes it can create short term stress that is manageable. But sometimes, when a lawyer is juggling necessary professional secrets AND keeping personal secrets in his or her life, it can result in neurophysiological changes that can compromise all aspects of health.

Good lawyers make good story tellers. But what happens when you are telling so many stories that reality becomes blurred? In order to zealously represent clients, lawyers are expected to put aside their personal belief system, tell stories, and engage in persuasive or deceptive communication on a daily basis. How often do you find yourself telling half-truths or avoiding the question all together? In the legal profession, this is considered not only an art form, but often necessary in representing clients. Much like a character actor who becomes immersed in habits, movements, facial expressions, or the accent of the character they are playing, lawyers too are required to put on a façade of sorts. Over time, that façade can become difficult to shed or even recognize, and can damage not only a lawyer’s mental and physical health, but also their personal relationships.

Keeping secrets compromises our mental, emotional, and even physical health. You’ve probably heard euphemisms regarding secrets such as, you are “carrying a burden” or are “weighed down” by a secret. University studies conducted by faculty at Tufts, Columbia, Wake Forest, and Stanford suggest that there may be a good reason we use language that euphemizes secrets as physical burdens. Individuals who conceal meaningful information and keep personal secrets bear psychological burdens that translate into physical exhaustion and stress. The concept of “secrets” is truly a complicated one. Like stress, there are good secrets and there are bad secrets.

Waiting to see your spouse, partner or best friend in person before you tell them you just got a promotion is a good secret. Hiding the fact that you are concerned that your current anxiety or stress is negatively impacting your work is a bad secret. The difference

lies in the potential outcome of the secret being revealed. How risky do you perceive its protection? Will people be hurt, angry, or even violent if the secret is revealed? Do you believe you could lose a relationship if you speak the truth? The more negative the consequences (or perceived consequences) of the secret being revealed, the more psychological and physiological damage you will do to yourself by keeping it. To make matters worse, there are also secrets that might qualify in categories such as self-deception, “little white lies,” concealment, exaggeration, equivocation, half-truths, misdirection, or pretense. It takes much more energy for the body and the brain to keep a secret than for us to appropriately express what is going on. There are, of course, some topics that warrant privacy and discretion, depending on the situation.

In the “Age of Oversharing and Social Media,” where is the line between actually having some privacy and keeping a secret that will compromise your health or relationships? The phenomena of social media and reality TV have created a relatively new social norm: tell EVERYONE in the world EVERYTHING about you. If you don’t disclose all of your thoughts, opinions, and daily experiences, you are off the grid and invisible. Relationships can adopt this model as well. There are individuals who believe that you are being secretive if you do not share every detail of your experience with them. Depending on the situation, telling private secrets to judgmental, non-trustworthy individuals can make the situation much worse. They could berate or shame you about things that are already upsetting you, causing you to withdraw further, or cause irreparable harm to the relationship. They could use your secret against you as ammunition in future disagreements or as gossip. The goal is to find trustworthy confidants that you respect, are unbiased and do not project their person opinion onto your life, your choices, your thoughts, or your beliefs.

Dr. Anita Kelly’s book *The Psychology of Secrets* explains that one reason we keep secrets is because we feel shame or are fearful of other people’s reactions. The problem is that we don’t know for sure how someone else will react to us. Instead, we project how we imagine someone else will react and, imagining the worst, keep the secret rather than unburdening ourselves. This challenges and distorts our perception of reality because it takes a tremendous amount of physiological energy to keep secrets. The mental and emotional exertion it takes to continually hide truths from others affects brain functioning. For example, individuals who knowingly lie often perceive others as being dishonest. In addition, frankly discussing or disclosing information comes across less negative than if the individual conceals information that is later discovered. In fact, research suggests that we need to discuss and process traumatic situations after they happen. If we do not discuss or process them, secret experiences will become a source of guilt, shame, or anxiety. The guilt, shame, and anxiety will ultimately become more traumatic and damaging to us than the

original experience. In other words, it is not what happens, but rather how we mentally and emotionally process events that matters in the long run.

The emotional burden of keeping secrets becomes a physiological issue over time. Part of our brain, the cingulate cortex, is wired to tell the truth. If we override its natural functioning, the brain and the body will become immersed in a stress response that impairs memory, learning, and even weaken the immune system over time. Finding appropriate ways to express yourself safely is a challenge for every lawyer. Whether you are in court, with clients, with partners, or at home with family or friends, it is a daily practice. Lawyers must learn to balance and compartmentalize the duty of confidentiality under the Rules of Professional Conduct with the need to be honest in their personal relationships. It's not about sharing your confidential work life in your personal life, but rather learning how and when to put down the lawyer persona. You shouldn't have to be secretive or deceptive or persuasive with those in your personal life. It is the ultimate balancing act and is made even more complicated by the fact that for everyone, the concept of secrets can be illusive.

Secrets aren't always obvious, even to the keeper. People hold back certain thoughts or needs for many reasons. We don't want to hurt or offend others, we feel there may be negative consequences for sharing. We might believe we are protecting people by not sharing the truth with them. Sometimes we are so afraid of what other people will say or think that we go to the opposite extreme and blurt out information that isn't really the whole truth in demanding, insensitive, and even cruel ways. Depending on our past experiences with expressing our thoughts or feelings, we may believe that other people cannot "deal" with us or will let us down. Over time we become so used to asking other people what they need or think that we forget to look at our own desires. Or we unconsciously want to push other people away because we'd rather "hurt them before they hurt us." Honest and authentic communication is a not just an interpersonal skill, it is also an intrapersonal skill. Communicating authentically means to be honest and say what we really mean. Lawyers are innately skilled in specialized forms of communication that are necessary for the practice of law, but that doesn't mean they are always skilled at the styles of communication that benefit personal relationships.

Are you aware of your own needs and feelings? Lawyers spend their time helping and taking care of the needs of many other people. Take some time to examine your own well-being. Are you aware of how many times in a day you keep secrets or are deceptive in your communication with others? Make a list of your secrets. Examine each and decide which ones are worthy of discretion, and which are burdening you unnecessarily. There are outlets for communicating these in appropriate ways and with appropriate people. If you are

struggling, knowing there are resources available to help you isn't enough. You have to take the first step and reach out for assistance so you can avoid the stress of "living in secret."

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