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# The costs of not disclosing

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Although choosing to disclose self-relevant information can expose personal vulnerabilities, choosing not to disclose information poses risks of its own. In this article, we detail both intrapersonal and interpersonal costs of not disclosing. Ironically, some of these costs reflect the very ones concealers were hoping to avoid by not revealing their secrets. We then consider why secret keeping is so common if it is indeed so costly. Both misestimations of the costs and a blindness to less-daunting means of disclosure may lead concealment to persist. It is important for future research not merely to help correct errors in concealers' prospective cost-benefit analyses of revealing, but also to identify the means of disclosure that maximize benefits and minimize costs.

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Communication naturally involves disclosure. Decisions of whether to disclose become personal when they involve decisions of what to reveal about the self. Individuals pick and choose both *what* information they share and with *whom* they share it. By certain estimates, roughly 30% of communication is devoted to informing others of one's personal experiences [1], in part because it is often intrinsically rewarding [2]. In contrast, certain personal qualities — for example, hidden disabilities whose full impact on one's life it is hard for others to appreciate [3] — may remain intentionally hidden from others.

Choosing not to disclose takes a variety of forms. Heads of household who keep their financial woes private, job applicants who elect to 'decline' requests for personal information from prospective employers, and politicians who respond to tough debate prompts by shifting the conversation to more friendly territory all avoid

disclosing. They do so by avoiding topics that make one look unfavorable [4], explicitly declining to answer [5], or artfully dodging a question [6]. All reflect a decision not to accept the vulnerabilities of making one's private experience common knowledge. After all, disclosure can carry costs. Few career coaches advise answering the classic 'What is your biggest weakness?' question honestly.

In this article we consider the costs of *not* disclosing. And through that lens, we suggest that the prevalence of non-disclosure is puzzling. Ninety-seven percent of people admit to keeping secrets from others, with the average person keeping five secrets that they have never disclosed to anyone [7]. Presumably some of the remaining three percent are keeping them from the experimenter. Although the risks and vulnerabilities that disclosure entails can be salient, the full costs of living with one's secrets may not be naturally appreciated.

In what follows, we review research that highlights intrapersonal and interpersonal costs of non-disclosure. We discuss the negative consequences that come from withholding information from others as well as having information withheld from the self. Our review pays particular attention to the ironic consequences of non-disclosure, highlighting how a desire to avoid the discomfort and vulnerabilities associated with disclosure can make one susceptible (or even more susceptible) to similar costs. We close by considering this paradox of non-disclosure — why people continue to guard their secrets even at net personal cost.

## Intrapersonal costs of not disclosing

Although the decision of whether to disclose may itself be a fundamentally social decision, many of the consequences of non-disclosure are intrapersonal in nature. To begin, we think differently about that which we keep secret. One's own precarious financial position, secret romantic infatuation, or unrealized professional ambitions might seem more perplexing, frustrating, or even frightening, when confined to one's own mind. Disclosure can be the first step in eliciting new insights and perspectives from others, facilitating a shared reality that allows previously privileged information to be viewed through a new lens [8,9].

Furthermore, not disclosing information can amplify the salience of that information. Consider how this can unintentionally occur and have undesirable effects. Successfully concealing information from others requires both identification of external triggers that might elicit such

information, as well as active monitoring and altering of one's own thoughts and behavior [10<sup>\*</sup>]. A proactive attunement to such triggers requires keeping the taboo content top-of-mind or close to it. Monitoring one's speech or behavior so as not to reveal privileged information itself heightens the accessibility of that information [11–13], making it more likely to slip out in conversation [13–15]. Secrets live large in the mind even when disclosure is not imminent. Slepian *et al.* found people spontaneously mind-wander to their secrets even more than they actively conceal them: Such preoccupying secrets were also those deemed most destructive to well-being [7<sup>\*</sup>].

Not disclosing information can also alter cognition more generally. In a series of experiments, Critcher and Ferguson illustrated that merely monitoring speech to inhibit disclosure negatively hinders an individual's subsequent executive functioning [10<sup>\*</sup>]. For example, participants asked to conceal their sexual orientation from an interaction partner performed worse on a subsequent test of spatial reasoning than participants who did not try to conceal. This finding buttresses other empirical and theoretical work that paints concealment as effortful [13,16] and depleting [11,17].

Concealment can also negatively affect mental and physical well-being. Keeping information from others is associated with poorer physical health [7<sup>\*</sup>], stunted psychosocial development [18], and increased alcohol consumption [19]. Consider how concealing may be particularly damaging for those with conditions that would benefit from treatment. Seeking help requires a disclosure — even an implicit one — of one's situation. As such, a discomfort with having other people know can keep people from having those complications addressed. Multiple sclerosis patients who conceal their diagnosis from others were also particularly likely to delay doctor visits [19], and those who attempt to conceal their STI are less likely to seek treatment [20]. In an effort to avoid realizing the stigma of one's problems, those very sources of stigma can linger.

### Interpersonal costs of not disclosing

Withholding information from others has negative interpersonal consequences as well. This harmful dynamic can take two, symmetric forms. The first is that withholding information negatively alters how others perceive the self. John *et al.* showed that individuals who withhold (as opposed to reveal) personal information when directly asked to supply it appear less trustworthy and are subsequently evaluated more negatively [5<sup>\*</sup>]. This effect persisted even when the information withheld was negative (e.g. that one stole an item worth more than \$100). In this way, John *et al.* demonstrate how non-disclosure in the face of direct questioning can be interpersonally costly. We refer to this type of non-disclosure (i.e. obfuscation in the face of solicitation)

as *active non-disclosure*, and distinguish it from *passive non-disclosure*. Passive non-disclosure is the concealment of information in the absence of direct inquiry. Consider a couple on date. Passive non-disclosure occurs when one diner decides to avoid certain topics (e.g. not initiating a conversation about one's experimentation with drugs), whereas active non-disclosure describes explicit concealment (*'I'd prefer not to disclose that'*) in the face of direct questioning (*'Have you ever tried cocaine?'*).

To avoid such awkward exchanges, passive non-disclosure may seem alluring. It may seem best to simply keep conversation away from unsettling topics. Passive non-disclosures, although more subtle, can also be socially costly. Concealment necessitates that one forgo many of the benefits of revealing personal information to others. Unsolicited disclosures are particularly strong signals of relational closeness; they can both signal and engender trust [21], intimacy [22], and affection [23]. Even the mere perception (independent of reality) that one's partner is withholding information can harm marital satisfaction [24]. Furthermore, the knowledge that one is alone with information can make that information more likely to pop back into one's mind, thereby fostering feelings of fatigue and social isolation [25]. In short, quietly keeping information from others can have its own negative consequences.

The second, complementary component of this dynamic is that not disclosing can have consequences for how the self perceives others. When one withholds information from another, the withholder sustains an information asymmetry. Given such asymmetries need not be permanent, better-informed parties may consider how those presently in the dark would make use of such knowledge [26]. For example, a member of a hiring committee might wonder how other committee members would evaluate a candidate if they too had knowledge of that candidate's extramarital affairs. In an unpublished manuscript, Baum and Critcher find evidence of a *privileged information effect*: Information is forecast to carry more weight in others' judgments if it has yet to be (versus already has been) disclosed to them [27]. For this reason, the hiring committee member may go to unnecessary lengths to keep this information secret about a candidate they prefer; they may also be disappointed to learn that revealing this information is less likely than they thought to sink a disfavored applicant. These findings are compatible with work that shows that *secretive* knowledge — classified, nonpublic information — is presumed to be of higher informational quality than common knowledge [28].

### The paradox of (non-)disclosure

Thus far, our account has detailed the ways, in which withholding information from others can be costly. Nevertheless, secret-keeping and concealment are ubiquitous

aspects of interpersonal life [7\*]. Our final section seeks to help resolve this tension: We suggest that individuals routinely misperceive the consequences of (not) disclosing.

In prospect, disclosing privileged information can *seem* weighty and uncomfortable. Considering sharing one's worries, struggles or aspirations may evoke concerns about others responding with discomfort, scrutiny, or cynicism. But such concerns are often misplaced: Disclosure is rarely as awkward or damaging as people forecast. Opening up has been shown to proceed more smoothly than expected when revealing secrets [29], offering unvarnished feedback [30\*], or even expressing appreciation [31\*].

In the same vein, individuals routinely overestimate the extent to which others judge them harshly [32,33]. An admission that one has wet the bed, although not likely one's most endearing autobiographical detail, becomes merely one among many (likely less embarrassing) facts others learn about the self. Disclosers may become disproportionately focused on their own risky disclosure, not realizing that recipients more evenly consider the totality of what they have heard. In addition, disclosures — as voluntary acts — are themselves noteworthy displays of honesty and genuineness. Even as disclosers fret over how recipients will process the revealed content, recipients may have respect for the discloser's gutsy act [34]. In summary, disclosures are both given less weight in impressions and construed as positive acts (in their own right) more so than disclosers realize. The pervasiveness of non-disclosure may be partially grounded in these inaccurate assessments of the social consequences of revealing.

As reviewed earlier, explicitly declining to reveal information to others can foster the very negative consequences that one would hope to avoid by not disclosing. John *et al.* find this is partially driven by the (mis)perception that such active non-disclosure avoids the costs of directly revealing compromising information [5\*]. When a job applicant selects 'Choose not to answer' when asked about minor criminal offenses, they may simply be trying to avoid an in-depth discussion of a careless traffic accident they caused. Yet in so doing, they may be inviting *more* evaluative scrutiny. Non-disclosers often fail to realize that keeping one blemish out of the light creates a broader cloud of suspicion.

In reality, there are many ways to disclose information to others. We suspect that one reason disclosure can seem so daunting is that potential disclosers do not spontaneously appreciate the full array of ways in which they can disclose. That is, people's fear of disclosure may itself guide their prototypical representation of what a *disclosure* is, encouraging their minds to drift toward some of the

most daunting methods of doing so. If so, this may actually hinder people from identifying the most palatable opportunities to disclose and reap the intrapersonal and interpersonal rewards that come from doing so.

For example, a disclosure need not occur face-to-face during a private moment in one's living room or on a long car trip. Such vulnerable settings — with no polite escape routes — may be where the mind goes when contemplating a potential disclosure. But sending a private message to a friend's social media account can be a good, easier substitute [35,36]. After all, placing physical distance between oneself and a source of threat (in this case, the recipient's reaction) is a classic coping strategy [37]. Yet even those disclosures — as acts of direct revelation — may still seem daunting.

Furthermore, disclosing to one person at a time is — quite literally — painfully inefficient. The uncomfortable revelation is not something to weather once, but once per relationship. Of course, most social media platforms can be used not merely as one-to-one communication channels but as public bulletin boards. And although people are generally uncomfortable publicly posting negative high-intimacy disclosures to social media [38], they may feel more comfortable joining a public online group or community that indirectly signals the same. In summary, encouraging disclosure may not merely involve correcting false beliefs about its social costs, but steering people toward approaches that don't feel like intimidating 'disclosures' to begin with.

## Conclusion

People regularly seek to conceal personally relevant information from others. We document several ways in which this strategy can be intrapersonally and interpersonally costly. Critically, we suggest that non-disclosure has social consequences that individuals often fail to anticipate. Such misperceptions may explain why non-disclosure is both pervasive and costly. Further, we suggest that individuals' representations of what constitutes a disclosure might limit their perceived opportunities to disclose to others. Social media platforms and internet forums provide (prospective) disclosers with an outlet to share their most privileged information. Likes, comments, and subscriptions can function as veritable signals of one's self. The low barriers — real and perceived — to taking these actions may facilitate initial acts of disclosure. Future work should help identify how people can make less biased cost-benefit calculations about the true consequences of disclosure. Such efforts can ultimately be used to nudge potential disclosers toward channels that make disclosure less daunting while still allowing disclosers to best reap the intrapersonal and interpersonal rewards of disclosing.

## Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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