



HUMAN TEMPLE

Mind, Body & Spirit

Can we talk?

The Psychology of Secrets
by Victoria Wilcox

Monica, I know you've had some real-life lessons in the psychology of secrets, but I'm glad you're here. Scientists have learned a lot that can help your secrets stay secret. They can explain why you told Linda Tripp about your affair with Bill, why she betrayed you, and how to know whom to trust in the future.

"Confidants spread secrets at alarmingly high rates. They might reject you if they disapprove of your secret; they might avoid you if your secret bothers them."

The last time we spoke, you kept asking, "Why did I tell Linda?" Don't blame yourself. Keeping a secret is tough. When people try to keep a personal experience secret, they have to keep thinking about it to guard against revealing it. Often they become preoccupied with it. If you hadn't told your friends about you and Bill, you might have become even more obsessed with him.

When you disclose a secret, your confidant often returns the favor. Over time, this give-and-take can create a closer bond, as it did when you and Linda commiserated over your weight. Of course, divulging secrets can backfire. Confidants spread secrets at alarmingly high rates. They might reject you if they disapprove of your secret; they might avoid you if your secret bothers them. Remember when Linda told you to "share this sick situation with one of your friends"?

You may be afraid to trust anyone again, but there are times you should consider it. If you are obsessed about a problem or experience, if you suffer from physical symptoms that could be caused by the stress of keeping the secret, or if you are depressed or anxious, confiding could help. Monica, you couldn't stop thinking about Bill. You were upset because you had few opportunities to be alone with him. You fretted that he forgot about you when you were away and that he no longer liked you. You hoped Linda could help you win him back. You needed to talk.

How do you find a good confidant? First, find someone you know well enough

to predict how that person would react. Stay away from acquaintances who don't understand you or who chat nonstop about other people. Linda listened to you at all hours of the night and showed interest in your experiences. She gossiped about Bill's womanizing, though, making her a risky confidant for your secret.

Second, find someone who won't be judgmental. Like you, Linda had been evicted from the White House, so she was unlikely to blame you for your transfer. She reassured you that your relationship with Bill was meaningful and even helped you write notes to him. Unfortunately, Linda sometimes belittled you. Let's listen to the tape a moment. There, she's saying the creep wasn't "attracted to you because you use big words." She ridiculed you for sending him your ideas on education reform. Her snide comments were clues that she wasn't the sympathetic friend you needed.

Third, find someone who can offer new insights. You valued Linda's perspective because she knew the man you loved. She was considerably older and like a mother to you. People who have faced problems like yours may also give useful advice. Perhaps you know other women in a similar predicament.

Fourth, ask yourself whether your confidant has motives for revealing your secret. When people learn a distressing secret, they often need to discuss it with others. Linda thought Bill was getting away with emotionally abusing you. She hated the way Bill's cronies treated people who got in the way. She felt threatened when you suggested you would deny everything under oath. Also, knowing a secret can give a confidant power. It enabled Linda to jeopardize Bill's career and pursue a book deal.

The upshot of all this, Monica, is before you confide, weigh the risks and benefits. The benefits you got from Linda were that she listened to you for hours, sometimes gave good advice, and reassured you. I don't need to tell you what the risks were: You lost your privacy and what you thought was a friendship.

You have other options that don't require trusting anyone. One is to write about your experiences and feelings - in a journal, perhaps. Or you could talk into a tape recorder. Oh. That's out, huh? I understand. Anyway, writing can clarify your feelings, help you solve problems, and improve your health. Your best bet is to keep what you write to yourself; knowing that others will see what you write might inhibit your thinking.

Monica, I hope this lesson helps you. Sorry to cut this short, but I've got to go to Washington. Ken Starr's people want to learn about the psychology of secrets. After that, I'll meet with the First Lady, and then...

Victoria Wilcox, a health psychologist and gerontologist who has studied how friends and family help their loved ones in hard times, is a visiting scholar at Brown University's Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women