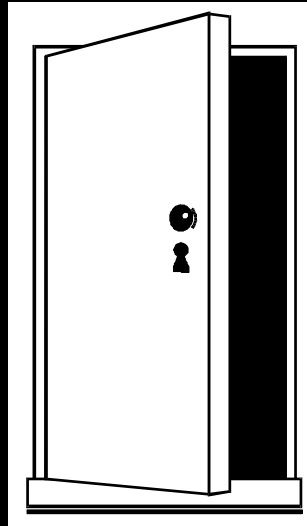


D i s c l o s i n g S E C R E T S V i t a l S t e p s T o w a r d R e c o v e r y



The honesty allows the addict to be accountable and begin recovery with a firm foundation rather than one founded in secrets.

by M. Deborah Corley, Ph.D. and Jennifer P. Schneider, M.D., Ph.D.

Addicts carry an unusually large burden of secrets and lies. Whether or not to disclose these secrets is a question that counselors are repeatedly asked. An assumption of addiction-sensitive therapy is that rigorous honesty is required if one is to remain sober and in recovery. The book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, states that those who do not recover are men and women who are, "constitutionally incapable of being honest." By eliminating the burden of long-held secrets and lies that are used to cover up the secrets, the addict may release guilt and other feelings that have been mismanaged through addictive and compulsive behaviors. The honesty allows the addict to be accountable

and begin recovery with a firm foundation rather than one founded in secrets.

The need for accountability is further encouraged by step 8: "[We] made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all." Yet many addicts try to do damage control by telling other people only what they believe the other person already knows or is bound to find out. This lying by omission is still keeping a secret. If an addict keeps one secret, it is common for the addict to begin falling back into faulty thinking. The addict believes that if he or she has been

successful in keeping one secret, it is possible to keep another and then another — the type of thinking that becomes a ticket straight to relapse while further damaging the relationship.

Telling the truth just to get rid of guilt without consideration or planning for the partner can be pretty damaging, too. Beyond fear of potential losses for the disclosure of truth, some addicts are concerned over the well being of the person to whom they need to disclose. Confusion about what to do is reinforced by Step 9: “[We] made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.”

It is true that almost all disclosure hurts the recipient in some way. Learning that we’ve been betrayed by someone we once trusted hurts no matter how it’s packaged. However, *it is important to remember — it is not the disclosure that causes the pain. It is the original addictive behavior and the lying that is the betrayal in the relationship.* Disclosure can be well thought out, planned with the support and help of a therapist or sponsor and done in a way that contributes to the healing process.

The Positive and Negative Consequences of Disclosure

The disclosure process seems even more difficult when the secret keeping involves information about sexual behavior outside the primary relationship. Fear that the truth will guarantee the spouse or partner will leave the relationship becomes the addict’s motivation for keeping secrets. However, our research on disclosure has revealed some very interesting data.

In surveying many couples that have experienced disclosure about sexual addictive behavior, we found that indeed, threats to leave were very common — 60 percent of partners made such threats after receiving the initial disclosure. However, *the threats were not usually carried out.* Only one-quarter of the threatening spouses actually left, even temporarily. Interestingly, of the partners who did not leave, half reported that both they and the addict were doing recovery work and going to therapy or 12-step meetings. The other half reported they did not leave because they were fearful of being alone.

Additionally, disclosure was described as positive for the majority of addict and partners that participated in the research. Addicts reported that they felt positive about being honest and ending the denial. They reported having hope for the future of the relationship and looked forward to a new start. The event also provided a chance for the partner to get to know the addict better, no matter what happened with the relationship. The positive outcomes for the partners included having a new clarity about the situation and about recent events in the relationship. The best thing for many was validation that they were not crazy. Many partners sited having hope for the future of the relationship and finally having the information necessary to decide about one’s future.

There were negative outcomes — especially early after disclosure. Disclosure of secrets is a traumatic experience for both addict and partner. *Knowing you have been lied to is bound to cause pain; knowing you have lied repeatedly to the person you love causes guilt and shame.* When the secret activities have been sexual, the pain and the sense of betrayal are more acute. If there is a chance of having contracted a potentially lethal sexually transmitted disease, the anger or resentment that the partner feels can be insurmountable.

Among the adverse consequences partners can expect: a worsening of the couple relationship, depression and even suicidal thoughts, attempts to compensate for the pain with acting-out behaviors such as drug use and sex, loss of self-esteem, decreased ability to concentrate or function at work, feelings of shame and guilt, distrust of everyone, anger and rage, fear of abandonment, physical illness and lack of sexual desire.

Addicts who disclose their secret life to their partners can expect to experience some of the following:

- **worsening of the couple relationship,**
- **guilt and shame,**
- **anger at the partner,**
- **loss of trust by the partner,**
- **cutting off of the sexual relationship,**
- **damage to other relationships such as with children or friends,**
- **legal consequences and**
- **sometimes a loss of job.**

Addicts and Partners Recommend Disclosure Despite the Negative Consequences

Given the negative consequences, it may seem surprising that people would actually recommend disclosure. In our research, we found that shortly after disclosure, more partners than addicts believed that disclosure had been useful. However, with the passage of time and additional healing, the vast majority of *both addicts (96 percent) and partners (93 percent) felt that disclosure was the right thing to do and recommend it to other couples* (Schneider, Corley, & Irons, 1998). Over and over again, couples told us that the honesty and open discussion engendered by the disclosure was the gateway to healing for the individual and the relationship. Most addicts reported that they could not have remained in recovery had they not disclosed.

How Much to Tell

Many addicts, fearful of the consequences of disclosure, attempt “damage control” by initially disclosing only what they think the partner already knows, or by revealing only part of their acting out while withholding the most damaging or hurtful behaviors. Other addicts, on the contrary, find so much relief in ending the lies that they spill their guts, revealing all the “gory” details of their acting out. Our research showed us that neither of these courses is advisable. When the initial disclosure is incomplete, it is likely that the rest of the acting out will eventually be revealed, resulting in a destructive pattern we term



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staggered disclosure. What happens in such cases is that just when the partner is finally beginning to believe that trust is possible and that things can be worked out, they are hit with additional information that sets them back to square one. At this point, many partners find it extremely difficult to trust the addict again.

In our book, *Disclosing Secrets: When, To Whom and How Much to Reveal*, we recommend that the initial disclosure include all the major elements of the acting out while avoiding those “gory” details. Having a willingness to answer all questions is helpful for partners to gain a sense of trust — but, initially, the partner wants to know more in hopes that she or he can control the situation if the right information is known.

Partners need to understand that they did not *cause the problem, can't control it, and can't cure it*, no matter how much information they have. At the same time, partners of addicts have been repeatedly lied to, had information withheld from them and been told that someone else knows what's best for them. Being able to ask questions and get answers is very empowering for partners. If a partner wants to “know everything,” we recommend asking the partner to write a list of all questions. We suggest that the therapist obtain agreement from the addict to answer all the questions, but at a later date, perhaps a couple of months later. Meanwhile the therapist holds onto the questions. At the later date, the partner has an opportunity to review the questions and see which ones still seem relevant. At that point, the addict answers them.

with sexual acting out. The spouse was then left to process this information with no support.

- A young man appeared on a TV show about “secret crushes” without really knowing the agenda of the show. Only in the midst of the show was the disclosure made to him — that one of his male friends, who also appeared on the show, had a crush on him. The young man was so upset over having this revealed on the air that he then killed his friend.

- An addict left a letter to his wife, in which he confessed having a methamphetamine habit and engaging in multiple sexual encounters with other people. She opened the letter while sitting in her gynecologist's office, having just learned that she was pregnant. She was so upset that she nearly crashed her car while driving home.

After Disclosure, How Can Couples Ever Rebuild Trust?

It takes about two years for trust to cease to be a major issue. The partner may believe that the addict has good intentions, but there is little faith that the addict has the skill to fulfill his or her good intentions early in recovery. We found that several things can help the addict demonstrate the learning of such skills. **First**, the addict's willingness to disclose fully (but see above regarding “gory” details) despite the risks and to answer the partner's questions signal to the spouse that he or she is committed to the relationship. **Second**, the addict's involvement in recovery work signals a sincere commitment to change. Attending 12-step meetings and/or going to therapy are ways that addicts can learn how to maintain their recovery. **Third**, ongoing honesty by the addict in the small things — day after day, week after week — will eventually persuade the partner that the addict will be honest in the big things as well. This means disclosing slips and relapses immediately. Finally, partners who become involved in their own recovery work develop increased self-esteem, less enmeshment with the addict and a greater ability to trust their own judgment and discern problems in the relationship. These skills permit them to risk trusting again.

The process of disclosure is complicated. Despite the despair, disclosure also brings a renewed sense of hope and a better chance for recovery. ▼

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Disclosure is a Process, Not a One-time Event

Even when the addict initially presents a full disclosure, it often turns out that other disclosures are later necessary. The most obvious example is when there is a slip or relapse, a common event in addictive disease. Also, many addicts have told so many lies and acted out in so many ways that they may genuinely have forgotten some things that are later remembered and need to be disclosed. In other cases, things may have happened for which the addict does not initially feel the need for disclosure; yet with further recovery, the addict comes to understand that this information also needs to be revealed. It is likely that other disclosures will be necessary in the future, so setting an appointed time each month to discuss the positive and negative effects of the addiction on the addict and partner or family member is a good idea. This is also a good time to do other disclosures.

Some Types of Disclosure More Damaging Than Others

Ideally, the initial disclosure would be carried out in a therapy session with an informed addiction counselor. However, in reality, many disclosures are unplanned — such as when a wife or partner discovers clear evidence of drug use, huge gambling debts or sexual acting out and immediately confronts the addict. We would recommend avoiding certain ways of disclosing. *Here are some real-life examples:*

- An addict phoned his unsuspecting wife from an inpatient treatment facility and devastated her by disclosing information about his drug use combined