

Unraveling the Nuanced Nature of Secrets: Psychological Implications of Concealment and Disclosure

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Abstract:- Many factors come into play when one decides to delve deep into the intriguing network of secrets and their potential impact on us. A major element is the nature of secrets which can be classified as having negative or positive valence, being harmful or harmless, leading to debilitation or not, among other classifications. What determines how to handle secrets - whether to conceal or reveal them- is also based on social contexts, psychological states, mental awareness, personal reimbursements, the ratio of benefits to costs, and the degree of intimacy between the sharer and receiver as well as the repercussions of this sharing on both. However, studies have shown many drawbacks of keeping secrets that cannot be ignored if one cares about well-being.

Keywords:- *Secrets; Concealment; Disclosure; Intimacy; Mental Health; Catharsis.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Even though keeping secrets is a ubiquitous phenomenon, studying it scientifically and empirically has only recently started. Review of the related literature reveals that keeping secrets takes a terrible toll on mental health and reduces feelings of authenticity, disrupts intimacy in interpersonal relations leading to discord and, perhaps, ending in dissolution, while openness promotes intimacy, passion, satisfaction, and justice. The intentional act of concealing secrets is also associated with both suppression and obsession, the two components of obsessive preoccupation.

Studies have also shown that keeping secrets drains emotional and cognitive resources, leads to social isolation, motivational conflict and fatigue, undermines persistence and performance, interferes with social goals, and is associated with higher level of unpleasant emotions, identity concealment, mind-wandering, coping efforts and health issues. Diverse psychological theories and studies support these findings. Many questions then arise: Does uncovering secrets have a healing power? Does it alleviate guilt and anxiety? Or does it end up with more vulnerability and stress? Will it generate empathy and tolerance? Or does it backfire with rejection and alienation? Should secrets be revealed from the start? Exploring the intricate tapestry of the

mysterious life of secrets and discovering their psychic dynamics is certainly a thrilling scientific endeavor demystified hereafter.

II. DECIPHERING THE ENIGMA: UNDERSTANDING SECRETS

Defining secrecy has developed throughout time as a function of active research around the topic. Starting from Pennebaker's (1989) definition of secrecy as "active inhibition of disclosure" to Lane's and Wegner's (1995) definition "something one can do alone in a room" and "intentional deception via an act of omission", to Kelly's (2003) "deliberately hiding information from other people" (p.3). Secrecy can be also seen as a phenomenon having three aspects: social: happening among people, conscious: involving purpose and intent, and effortful: requiring active engagement in secret-keeping behaviors (Frijns, 2005, p.3).

Later, Slepian et al. (2017) have conducted a series of studies and thereafter presented a broader definition saying that secrecy is "an *intention* to conceal information from one or more individuals even when [they are] not physically present". However, across the 10 studies they have conducted on 50, 000 participants, they verified that people "catch their minds wandering to secrets outside of concealment settings far more frequently than they encounter social interactions that necessitate concealing them, and that the former is more damaging than the latter". The negative aftermath of mind-wandering results from its nature. Mind-wandering refers to a state of disengagement from the task at hand by diverting the locus of attention and information processing from the current goal towards secrets. This occurs at irrelevant settings and due to the presence of either internal or external cues, resulting in more harmful repercussions.

According to Slepian and his colleagues, this conclusion renders the previous understanding of secrecy and its effects inadequate and in need of re-evaluation. A new theory of secrecy was thus born, where mind-wandering to the concealed secrets, ruminating about the distressing accompanying event, worrying about the risk of revealing these secrets, or even being preoccupied with the mere fact that one is keeping secrets, along with the emotional and mental toll on well-being and physical health are key

elements in outlining the new theory. One explanation of rumination is in personality structure: “Neuroticism is a classic personality trait that is associated with ruminating upon mistakes, and being constantly worried. That is one thing that makes people think about their secrets more.” (Slepian, 2017, as cited in Stieg, 2017)

Later on, Slepian (2021) introduced a model of secrecy (Figure 1) based on two situations: the need of concealment during social interactions, and the absence of such a need away from social interactions. Thus, two pathways follow the intention to secrecy depending on the social context, each

resulting with its consequences on cognitive processes and well-being. Indeed, the theory of selective attention explains why a person with an intention to have secrets can easily find internal and external cues to the secret, thus forming a confirmation bias. In the non-concealment context, the person may move on or end up having proactive planning that mitigates harms and improves well-being; whereas, in the concealment context, when a person chooses to hide a secret, they may alter the topic of conversation or tell a lie, escape questions, disclose some information without revealing the secret, all of which may end up in feelings of guilt, shame or feelings of inauthenticity and deception (Slepian, 2021).

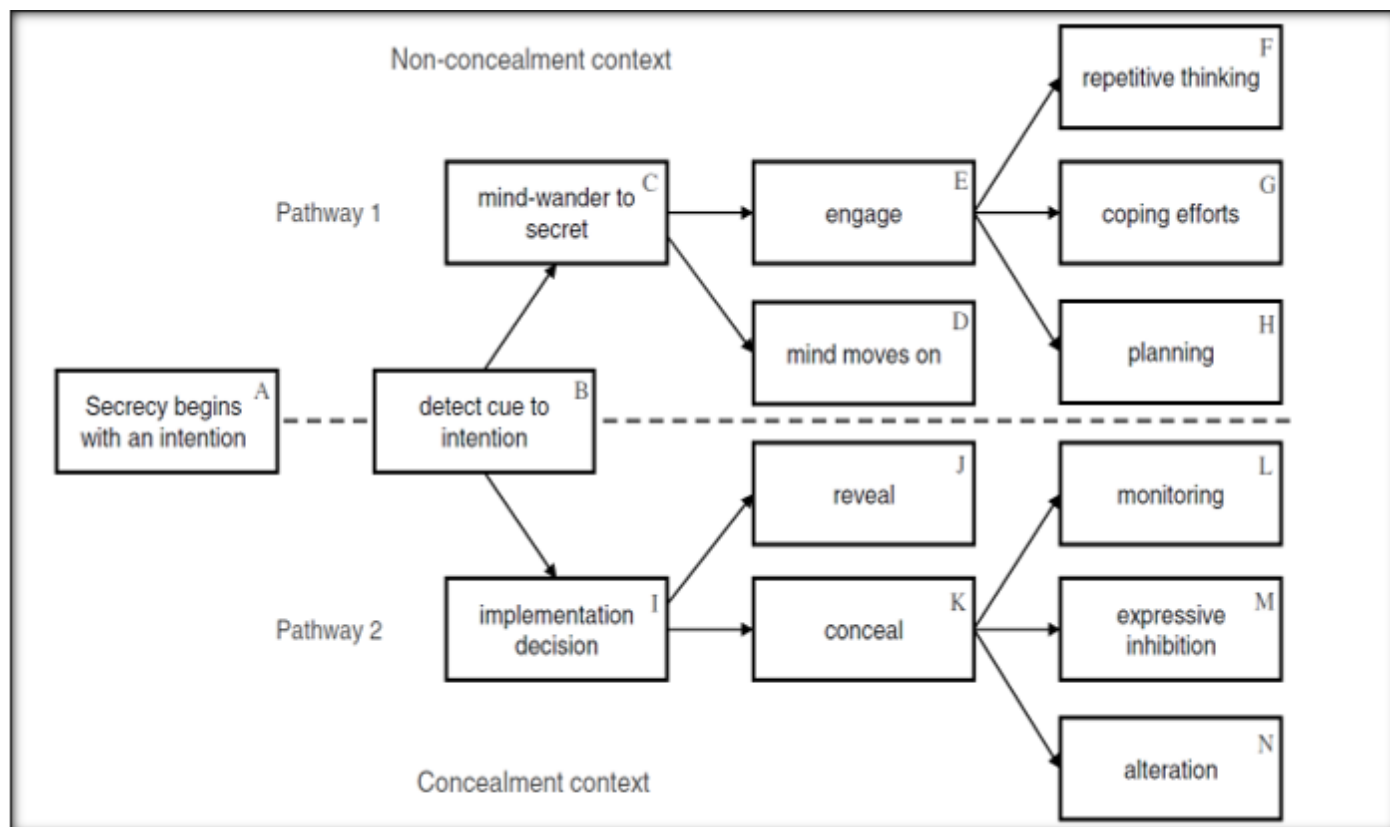


Fig. 1: Slepian's Model of Having and Keeping Secrets (Slepian, 2021)

III. TERMINOLOGY DEMYSTIFIED

It is important to set clear lines between some terms such as secrecy, privacy, repression, and deception to avoid confusion. There is a difference between secrecy and privacy; while the former requires a social context, the latter is intrapersonal. Privacy also suggests the expectations of being free from unauthorized interference, while secrecy does not (Kelly, 2002, p. 2). Another discrepancy is that secrecy is an intention to hold specific information back, and privacy is a reflection of how much one broadcasts personal information (Slepian, 2022 as cited in Hoffnung, 2023). Privacy entails closeness to be open, while secrecy is hiding information even from our intimate partners. The more immoral a personal experience or action, the more it feels like a secret, rather than something that is merely private. In both cases, one is taking control of their personal information, but for different reasons (Slepian, 2022b).

Similarly, dissimilarity between secrecy and repression should be delineated. Secrecy involves conscious concealing of distressing or offensive information from others, while repression refers to unconscious concealing of socially unacceptable desires or painful experiences and thoughts. However, both self-concealing and repression act as coping mechanisms to avoid handling unpleasant experiences (Kelly, 2002, p. 4-7).

Secrecy is also different from deception in that the former involves intentional “act of deceptive omission” because it entails deliberate concealment of true information; whereas, the latter, deception, is an “act of commission” since it requires persuading someone of a false notion (Frijns, 2005, p.5).

➤ *The Spectrum of Secrets*

Research suggests that we all keep an average of 13 secrets at any one time—and that's likely an underestimate. The most common types are classified into 38 categories, some of which are:

- Emotional or physical harm of someone,
- Illegal drug use or legal drug abuse,
- Theft
- Lie
- Romantic desire while single
- Extra- relational thoughts while married
- Emotional infidelity
- Sexual infidelity
- Abortion
- Being in a relationship with someone and cheating on them to be with someone else
- Social discontent
- Traumatic experience
- Sexual assault
- Sexual orientation
- Finances
- Family secrets
- Mental health issues

Research has also shown that 92% of people's secrets fit into one of these 38 categories which are in turn classified into three main dimensions: immorality, insight, and connectedness (Slepian, 2022a; Frijns, 2005, p.10; Psychologists, 2024), and that secrets can range from being benign, benevolent, and non-threatening to more insidious, sinister, deceptive and shameful", all of which are either personal, relational, or professional (Brenner, 2019; Psychologists, 2024). All this begs the question: why do people hide secrets?

➤ *Uncovering the Motives Behind Secrets*

Different experts explain different reasons why people choose to be secretive. According to Schema theory, people hide every thought or act that contradicts with their perceived image about themselves as good, moral, or honest. They may even lie about any acts that are dissonant with their egos because these lies protect them from being incongruent with the cognitive frameworks that they have been molded into and that influence how they interpret future information and events. Another reason for keeping secrets is the fear of judgement and social evaluation which is mostly overestimated and 'systematically miscalibrated' (Garrison, 2024).

Basically, there are four different motives that underlie secrecy, all of which serve different functions. First, people hide secrets to protect themselves from the negative social repercussions of revelation, such as disapproval, rejection, stigmatization, social isolation, aggression or contempt or from the associated negative emotions such as shame, guilt, remorse, and embarrassment. Second, hiding secrets may take place to earn more power and strategic advantages and have a sense of control over the social environment. Thus, not only secrecy plays a defensive role to shun away from harm

and other detrimental outcomes, but it also acts as an offensive strategy to attain desired goals by means of manipulation and control. Third, it can be a tool to achieve autonomy and independence during childhood by creating boundaries with care-givers, and later in adolescence, it serves functions of self-regulation and self-determination (Frijns, 2005, pp.6-8; Jaffe, 2006; Psychologists, 2024).

Indeed, the dark triad of personality cannot be ignored when considering reasons of secrecy. People who have the traits of Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopath as well as people diagnosed with personality disorders may be more secretive than others and may keep secrets for different reasons than ordinary people do, mainly to control and manipulate others or due to lack of empathy, or simply because they do not see that harmful (Garrison, 2024).

Last but not least, many disorders, behaviors, and medical conditions are considered potentially stigmatizing in the society. This fact pushes people who have these stigmas to resort to a common strategy which is keeping such personal information about them to themselves to avoid judgement and social questioning. However, as they conceal such information to escape negative social evaluation, they may "bring the conflict into their own minds and thus become preoccupied with covering up what no one can see." Thus, they suffer from the repercussions of concealing secrets as described by Preoccupation Model of Secrecy (Smart and Wegner, 1999). All this brings up the issue of the impact of concealing secrets.

➤ *The Dual Impact: Mental and Physical Consequences of Secret-Keeping*

Lane and Wegner's Preoccupation Model of Secrecy (1995) highlights the ironic mental processes that contribute to the negative consequences of keeping secrets. The model posits that keeping secrets encompasses mental control and suppression of thoughts, which paradoxically invites intrusive thoughts about the secret, and each attempt to suppress the intrusive thought ironically produces more ones, which leads to being caught in a vicious circle of disturbing preoccupation of the secret, eventually leading to psychopathology and psychological distress (Frijns, 2005, p. 12).

This phenomenon - also known as thought rebound - is a dilemma that endangers successful future suppression attempts. The simultaneous and continuous efforts to suppress the thoughts of the secret and to actively think about what should not let slipped is an unbearable dual endeavor that secret-keepers virtually fail to do. This obsessive preoccupation with unwanted thoughts is a heavy cognitive load that acts as a key reason that jeopardizes peoples' ability to keep their secrets (Lane & Wegner, 2013, pp. 74-75).

What makes this 'rebound effect' more frequent is what Wegner calls 'negative cuing', which refers to the pairing up condition between all surrounding items and the unwanted thought. A person develops this latent bond during their desperate trials to find a replacement for the bothering content

of their secrets in their environment, a trial which ends up rendering the surrounding items act as reminders of the held-back thoughts (Jaffe, 2006).

Additionally, secrecy can diminish psychological well-being, while openness can escalate satisfaction. That's because keeping secrets in a relationship leads to low levels of responsiveness and hence hinders intimacy (Brenner, 2019). Pennebaker's Inhibition Theory explains this result. Active suppression of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors leaves its toll on both the physiological level since, on the short term, it calls for continuous bodily arousal, and on the long run, it acts as cumulative stressor that leads to ailments such as heart diseases, cancers, ulcers, and poor immune system and other related stress-related physical and psychological problems. On another level, active inhibition of thoughts and feelings related to an event is correlated with deleterious impact on information processing, and that is because forced holding of information undermines its processing, eventually increasing the probability of its re-appearance in the form of rumination, obsessive thinking and their related cognitive symptoms (Frijns, 2005, pp. 11-12; Jaffe, 2006).

According to the findings concluded from the seven studies that Slepian and his colleagues performed, keeping secrets drains one's emotional and cognitive resources, and that is due to the motivational conflict that arises from the fear of consequences of opening up and the desire to have social connections. This vigilance over what to disclose or not consumes a lot of the emotional and cognitive assets leading to a residue of negative feelings, sense of guilt, restrained social relations and social isolation, in extreme cases, all ending up in overwhelming fatigue due to the huge effort of keeping the secret information to oneself even when one has a good reason to conceal it. It was also found how keeping secrets makes the person preoccupied with them, leading to a feeling of inauthenticity, dissatisfaction and reduced level of well-being, negative health outcomes, depression, and anxiety (Slepian et al., 2017).

Indeed, keeping secrets interferes with the person's perspective to their environment due to the burdensome load they hold. They act according to their subjective vision of reality, which may not be accurate at all. But what matters more is not how "big" or "small" a secret is, which is a subjective vague moral measure; rather, what makes a difference is how much preoccupied the keeper is about their secret (Burdick, 2017)

Indeed, the affective model of fatigue also explains why people thinking continuously about their secrets have a persistent sense of fatigue even in the absence of the depletion of mental resources. This model is different from the resource model of fatigue, which considers fatigue as decline in energy subsequent to resource-consuming tasks. Rather, the affective model proposes that subjective feelings of fatigue can happen without any concrete depletion of energy, often as a result of inward conflicts resulting from the need to keep the secret to avoid its negative costs and the inability to pursue emotional support or advice about it (Slepian et al., 2018).

In another series of studies that examined 11,000 secrets, Slepian et al. (2020b) found that people tend to think only about significant secrets and ignore insignificant ones even though this thinking may not yield positive outcomes. Paradoxically, Slepian found that trying to suppress a secret does not lead to thinking more about it as the theory of ironic process suggests. According to him, it is where the focus of attention is directed that determines how much coping with a secret a person has. In other words, if a person chooses to ruminate about the past secrets and his mind wanders frequently towards them, their well-being will pay the toll.

Slepian et al. (2020b) concluded that people do not only pursue to suppress thoughts of secrets, but to get involved with them, mainly when they are related to something substantial. Suppression of secrets did not really predict an increased likelihood to think about the secret; however, trying to engage with thoughts of a secret predicted two contradictory results:

- On one hand, being actively engaged with a secret through rumination on the past is associated with poorer well-being. That's because active thinking about secrets end up in self-destructing behaviors, poor decision-making, increased feelings of guilt, shame, and anxiety, which will end up in being caught in a cycle of overthinking, making the thoughts intrusive and the individual preoccupied.
- On the other hand, thinking about secrets with not as much of focus on the past is related to increased well-being since rumination and maladaptive thoughts will be replaced by problem-solving strategies and self-regulation techniques.

So, secret suppression, according to Slepian, is not the solution; it is the method of dealing with the secret that makes it either extinguish or backfire.

Along this vein, Slepian et al. (2020a) conducted four studies that included 1,000 participants keeping more than 6,000 secrets to study the impact of how the emotional appraisals of shame and guilt would influence the way of dealing with secret. Participants were asked to recall secrets that are deliberately concealed from partners. In the shame condition, identified secrets should make them feel small, worthless, or powerless. In the guilt condition, secrets should make them feel remorse, tension, or regret. Results demonstrated that shame was associated with increased mind-wandering to the secret; guilt, in contrast, was correlated with reduced mind wandering to the secret.

This result may be interpreted in the light of definition of each of these emotions. Lewis's theory of shame and guilt defines each in terms of how it relates to whether the focus is on the behavior or the self. "Shame involves negative feelings about the self, whereas guilt deals with negative feelings about an action. In other words, when an individual feels shame, they would question and judge their entirety, but when someone feels guilt, they would only self-criticize their behavior." From an anthropological perspective, shame requires a social and public context, whereas guilt occurs in private (Sadeghein, 2019, p8).

It was also found that secrecy is positively correlated with fear, sadness, hostility, shame, embarrassment and guilt. The more unacceptable the secret is, the greater the loneliness and the greater the exhaustion are (Brenner, 2019). Moreover, the more a secret is considered to be wicked, social, and business or goal-oriented, the further that secret is described to arouse feelings of shame, social connectedness, and insight into the secret, respectively (Slepian & Koch, 2021). This naturally leads to the question about the potential benefits of secret disclosing.

➤ *Unveiling the Gains: Why Sharing Secrets Matters*

When secrets are shared between two people or within a group or family, a sense of relatedness, trust and intimacy is created among them, and that makes them a unique entity characterized by strong bonds and cohesion. Such feelings of intimacy resulting from self-disclosure supersedes any other type of revelation since it requires reciprocal trust and maintaining mutual benefits (Frijns, 2005, p.9).

Not only does Pennebaker's theory of Inhibition explain the drawbacks of secret keeping, but it also explains the benefits of secret sharing. Trusting others for one's own inhibited secrets acts on two levels: in the short run, it counteracts the physiological arousal, and immediately diminishes it, which leads to lower stress levels, and thus, to getting rid of the accompanying ailments, in the long run. Likewise, confiding promotes assimilation of the secret and boosts cognitive integration of the newly perceived perspectives into the cognitive framework of the secret keeper, resulting in a new mental image, which brings the whole process into closure. Moreover, research has repetitively proven that talking or writing about secrets was correlated with better immune function, improved physical health, reduced stress, and better psychological well-being (Frijns, 2005, pp. 12-13).

Indeed, Pennebaker's earlier studies in the 1970's found that people who kept their earliest traumatic experiences, including sexual traumas and abuse, were prone to different poor health conditions that ranged from influenza, to hypertension and even cancer. While those who divulged their secrets and the associated emotions, either verbally or even by writing them on papers and then burning them out, gained tangible health improvements; their blood tests showed enhanced immune systems and the electroencephalogram that measures brain waves reported better communication between the two brain hemispheres. What interprets this powerful effect of disclosing secrets are many mechanisms, among which are a better understanding of the features of a secret, re-organizing it, releasing the person from worry and rumination, and unblocking the social impediments that block social communication, making it normal to confront. These results were later substantiated through Kelly's experiments, the author of *The Psychology of Secrets*, who proved, that breast cancer patients who revealed their secrets and their accompanying emotions lived twice as longer than those who did not disclose them. This was one of many experiments done on other people suffering from the drawbacks of secrets in different ways (Jaffe, 2006).

In addition, disclosing secrets may alleviate worry, drop anguish when suffering from intrusive thoughts, upsurge self-esteem and well-being, and decrease distress and tension (Jaffe, & Douneva, 2020).

When one feels overwhelmed, stressed, or upset about their secrets, it may be a signal that they should share their secrets with somebody. Research proves that when people share their secrets with a confidential person, they feel comforted because they are heard and they have the chance to get introduced to a new perspective (Pajer, 2023).

In addition, it was shown that increased mind-wandering mediated the relation between secrets and negative health outcomes (Slepian et al. 2017). However, disclosing a secret predicts higher well-being through perceived coping efficacy, which results in less mind-wandering to the secret. Research also shows that when confiding a secret, people feel they gain social support and become more capable in handling it, and that is proven in both correlational and experimental studies. Furthermore, confiding predicts higher well-being through changing the way people think about their secret (Slepian & Moulton-Tetlock, 2019).

It should also be noted that disclosing secrets has to be seen also from the receiver's standpoint and how sharing secrets with both positive and negative valence affects the social distance between them. Social distance refers to the degree of intimacy between the sharer and the receiver. It is proven that social distance is an antecedent of disclosing secrets, which means the closer the social ties are, the more probable the degree of sharing is. In addition, psychological proximity, compassion and assertiveness predict secret disclosure. The relation between psychological proximity and disclosing secrets is not necessarily one-sided; on the contrary, it has been proven that it is also bidirectional (Jaffe, & Douneva, 2020).

The basis of this assumption lies in the Social Penetration Theory, which explains how interpersonal relationships develop. The theory postulates that layers of personal information are gradually uncovered over time as a function of increasing exposure and that this self-disclosure increases intimacy and familiarity to a certain extent. Such social penetration occurs in different contexts of people's lives. A perfect metaphor used in the theory is the "onion model" which refers to how people peel back others' layers of personal information starting from the visible superficial layer, to the middle, then the inner, ending with the core personality and self where the most secretive details are kept. These social interactions are governed by the norm of reciprocity which implies that mutual disclosure of secrets of the same level of intimacy takes place. However, the existence of relational stressors and interpersonal conflicts reduces disclosure, signaling relationship disintegration and dissolution (Carpenter & Greene, 2015).

That is why Kelly calls for disclosing secrets with caution, taking the person's circumstances into consideration since sometimes revelation unfolds harmful effects on the person more than healing ones. If the secret does not cause

mental or physical stress, it should be kept, to avoid unnecessary social encounter. If it causes agony, the secret-holder need to look for a worthy confidant to work toward a cathartic and therapeutic insight; otherwise, they should write down their thoughts and feelings (Jaffe, 2006). Caughlin et al. (2005) research confirm this recommendation based on the results of their studies that people are generally good at predicting how others will react to the revelation of their secrets, which makes them more or less conservative. When they do share, the feedbacks are often more positive than estimated, and they are unlikely to regret their decision to expose their secrets.

IV. CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, as Dr. Gail Saltz puts it so bluntly that secrets are so abundant to the extent that we may not really know the people whom we are living with since we can never be certain about what really goes on inside another's head and heart: the stores of secrets (Saltz, 2006). Now, after unraveling some of the subtle secrets of secrets, and their drawbacks on mental and physical health as well as on social distance, the decision is left to the secret-keeper to evaluate the pros and cons of concealment and disclosure. One should also learn how to identify others' delicate behaviors and clues to know how to safely stop the potentially treacherous secrets that others, even the person themselves, might be hiding from the world. After all, a complex and enigmatic fabric of elements constitute the intricate tapestry of this psychological side of human's life. What is crystal clear is that catharsis not catastrophe should be the end result of secret-sharing. However, the best and safest for anyone is to hold a pure heart, a beautiful mind, and a transparent and empathetic personality that conceals no black spots within.

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