

Hush, Hush Sweet Secrets

By Lynn Butler, Capital Region

Are you the keeper of your care recipient's secrets? Have you been sworn not to tell anyone about increasing health issues, a new and difficult diagnosis, where important legal papers are kept, or perhaps that none exist? Do you have to pretend that everything is business as usual, when it's not?

Not all personal matters need to be shared, and certainly not broadly. But there may come a time when for practical health or legal reasons it is important that certain facts be communicated to specific people. Keeping important information from others who should know because of a promise, can be stressful.

Many caregivers are not only the keepers of secrets but also of the anxiety that can come along with them. Caregivers may feel guilty that other family members, friends, or health care providers do not know how ill a person is or how difficult the care required at home has become. Caregivers may be worried that they will be blamed if there is a health crisis.

Some secret-keepers may live in fear that if they disclose information, they may be written out of the Will or removed as Substitute Decision Maker or Power-of-Attorney. The care recipient could decide to cut the caregiver out of future medical appointments, leaving the caregiver completely out of the loop. Keep in mind that many caregivers leave their paid work to give care to their loved one, so their position is risky if they are cut off financially or are asked to leave the home.

In my experience, keeping secrets can destroy relationships and cause suspicion and resentment among family members, potentially resulting in permanent damage to family relationships. But above all, keeping secrets can cause *you* to become ill.

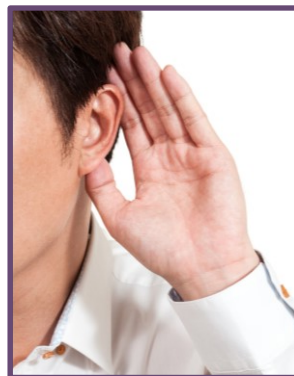
The stress associated with keeping important information from others can lead to your own

poor health and can negatively affect your wellness. Elevated stress levels may contribute to high blood pressure, depression, anxiety, and a host of other physical and mental ailments.

You need to know that there may come a time when you need to share certain information in order to maintain your own sanity and put proper medical or legal plans in place for your care recipient. It won't be easy, but it may become a necessity.

How can one press the restart button and turn things around? Initially, you can try discussing the situation with your care recipient, a little at a time. Explain how keeping certain information from others is affecting you, how it makes you feel anxious or dishonest. Try to get your loved one to understand the importance of opening up about information that is causing you stress and putting their own health at risk. It might be advisable to ask a professional to help with this conversation: your family doctor, an elder mediator, clergy, lawyer, or mental health clinician may be able to offer assistance.

When asked to keep a secret, be honest and tell the person that you will guard this information as long as it is possible and safe to do so. Should there be a time, however, when it needs to be told, you may have to do just that. The only way to avoid this situation is to never make a promise to keep secrets no matter what the circumstances. You may feel honoured that you are the one your care recipient trusts enough to share information with, but it can very quickly become a burden.



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