

# Shameful secrets bother us more than guilty secrets

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Everyone has secrets, but what causes someone to think about them over and over again? People who feel shame about a secret, as opposed to guilt, are more likely to be consumed by thoughts of what they are hiding, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

"Almost everyone keeps secrets, and they may be harmful to our well-being, our relationships and our health," said Michael L. Slepian, Ph.D., of Columbia University and lead author of the study. "How secrecy brings such harm, however, is highly understudied."

The study was published in the journal *Emotion*.

Slepian and his colleagues surveyed 1,000 [participants](#) asking a series of questions about secrets they had and how much [shame](#) and [guilt](#) they associated with those secrets. Participants were asked questions designed to measure shame (e.g., "I am worthless and small") and guilt (e.g., "I feel remorse and regret about something I have done"). Participants also reported the number of

times they thought about their secret and concealed it each day during the prior month.

"We examined shame and guilt, the two most highly studied self-conscious emotions," Slepian said. "Unlike basic emotions, such as anger and fear, which refer to something outside of oneself, shame and guilt center on the self."

People who reported feeling shame thought about their secrets significantly more often than people who reported feeling guilty or those who felt no shame or guilt about their secret. The authors also found that neither guilt nor shame predicted concealment of secrets.

"Hiding a secret is largely driven by how often a person is having a conversation related to the secret with the person whom he or she is hiding it from, not how he or she feels about the secret," Slepian said.

When a person felt shame about the secret, he or she felt small, worthless or powerless, while guilt made an individual feel remorse, tension or regret. Secrets about one's [mental health](#), a prior traumatic experience or unhappiness with one's [physical appearance](#) tended to evoke more shame, according to Slepian, whereas hurting another person, lying to someone or violating someone's trust induced more guilt.

Feeling regret did not cause a person to think repeatedly about a secret in the same way that feeling powerless did, Slepian concluded.

People should not be so hard on themselves when thinking about their secrets, the researchers said.

"If the [secret](#) feels burdensome, try not to take it personally but recognize instead that it reflects on your behavior, and you can change that," Slepian said. "Guilt focuses people on what to do next and so shifting away from shame toward guilt should

help people better cope with their secrets and move forward."

**More information:** "Shame, Guilt, and Secrets on the Mind," by Michael L. Slepian, PhD, Columbia University; James N. Kirby, PhD, The University of Queensland, Elise K. Kalokerinos, PhD, The University of Newcastle. *Emotion*, published Feb. 11, 2019.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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