

# The Effects of Disclosing or Keeping Secretes on Close Relationships From the Perspective of Positive Psychology

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## **Abstract:**

The study collected data on self-representation, self-concealment, and intimacy satisfaction of 147 couples by questionnaire star and analysed it by spss software. The results showed that (1) Disclosing secrets can enhance intimacy satisfaction, and keeping secrets has no significant positive effect on enhancing intimacy satisfaction. (2) Partners are usually more willing to share personal attitudes and less willing to share privacy and interactions with the opposite sex. (3) High-satisfaction partners are more likely to share matters common to both partners in the relationship and topics related to intimacy. Low-satisfaction partners were less likely to share private topics. The study reveals the secret-sharing characteristics of high-satisfaction partners in intimate relationships.

**Keywords:** disclosing, secrets, keeping, close relationships

## **1. Introduction**

Intimate relationships are a key factor in influencing a person's physical and mental health, improving quality of life and contributing to social development. Stable and good intimate relationships are conducive to increased life satisfaction and happiness[1]. In intimate relationships, secrets play an important role. Secrets play an important role in intimate relationships. We have secrets that we don't want to tell and at the same time we want the other person not to keep them. In today's society, it is not uncommon for a relationship to suffer or even fall apart because of the exposure of a secret. This has to do not only with the loyalty people demand from their partners in intimate relationships today, but also with their own attitudes towards secrets. Sharing secrets appropriately

enhances trust in relationships and can also boost goodwill.

Disclosure is defined here as the process of revealing self-referring information, such as internal states or past events, to others[2]. Secrecy is defined as information that (at least) one person actively and consciously withholds from (at least) one other person[3]. And secrecy is the tendency to deliberately withhold personal information from others[3]. In this study, Disclosing secrets is defined as the process of revealing information about oneself to others, such as internal states or past events[2] and keeping secrets is defined as information that at least one person actively and consciously hides from at least one other person[3].

In real life, it is a relatively common psychological

phenomenon for people to intentionally conceal their personal information[5]. Previous research on secrecy has found that although most people have secrets, and sometimes they have a positive impact, many people do not like it when their lovers withhold information from them and see it as a violation of the relationship. Because intimate relationships are usually characterised by the following: trust, caring, honesty, friendship and respect[6]. Secrecy may conflict with these characteristics. Suspecting a partner of withholding information seems incompatible with having an intimate relationship and therefore may reduce marital satisfaction. Perceived partner secrecy may violate people's beliefs about intimacy, and thus the perception of suspecting a partner of withholding information is strongly negatively associated with marital satisfaction[4]. Similarly, relationship satisfaction affects a person's perception of partner secrecy. Relationship-satisfied people tend to view their partner's behaviour in a way that enhances their relationship, whereas those who are dissatisfied tend to emphasise the painful nature of their partner's behaviour. People who are dissatisfied with their marriages will also be more sceptical about their partner's secrecy. When people believe that their partner is keeping secrets from them, they are likely to reflect on why they are keeping secrets and begin to question themselves and/or their partner's commitment to the relationship. If keeping a secret is a relational violation, people may also wonder if they should mention to their partner that they know the secret, which may create uncertainty in their relationship[4].

However, Finkenauer et al.'s study also found that confidentiality should also have a positive impact on satisfaction in intimate relationships in specific relationship contexts. This was determined by the personality traits of the relationship partners and the unique relationship context they were in. This contrasts with clinical views of secrecy in relationships. These views typically view secrecy as destructive, dysfunctional, or even pathological[7]. Secrets interfere with the values of what is considered a "good" relationship. They question and shatter beliefs about relationships between partners based on honesty, trust, and/or fairness[8]. They are not a good way to make a relationship work.

Most of the previous studies on secrecy and intimacy satisfaction have been conducted abroad, while domestic related studies have dealt more with the role of secrecy in interpersonal interactions and life among adolescents and college students; secrecy has hardly been presented as an independent element in intimacy satisfaction. This study will explore the effects of disclosing and keeping secrets on intimacy satisfaction in a comprehensive and in-depth manner. From a positive psychology perspective and with the view of exploring human strengths, it will

explore the characteristics of partners with high relationship satisfaction in dealing with the issue of secrecy, their perceptions as well as their attitudes. According to the existing research we know that the deliberate concealment and retention of secrets can reduce intimacy satisfaction to varying degrees, and the conclusion of previous studies is almost that the negative effects of secret concealment and retention in intimate relationships provide help in interpreting and treating couples' problems. Therefore, in this study, we will focus on analysing the positive effects of secret sharing and retention, identifying the ways in which partners who get along well share and retain secrets, as a way of explaining and providing suggestions on the role and effects of secrets in intimate relationship satisfaction.

## 2. Research Methodology

### 2.1 Subjects of study

The population of this study was recruited online, and the study was conducted on partners aged 18-55 years old who had been together for more than three months. In May 2024, it was released through WeChat, QQ microblogging and other social media using Questionnaire Star. A total of 189 questionnaires were received, and 147 valid questionnaires were returned after excluding questionnaires that did not match age, no relationship experience, incomplete answers to the questionnaire, and too short a period of time. The effective recovery rate of the questionnaires was 77.77%.

### 2.2 Research tools

This study used a questionnaire which was divided into four parts. The first part is demographic information and the second, third and fourth parts are adapted scales.

#### 2.2.1 Relationship Satisfaction Scale

The scale consists of 6 questions adapted from the Satisfaction level of Investment Model Scale developed by Rusbult (1998) et al. and is based on a 5-point scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" (1 point) to "Strongly Agree" (5 points). The 5-point scale ranges from "Strongly Disagree" (1 point) to "Strongly Agree" (5 points). Lower scores indicate lower intimacy satisfaction and higher scores indicate higher intimacy satisfaction. The Cronbach's reliability coefficient of the relationship satisfaction scale in this study is 0.723, and the KMO validity coefficient is 0.89, which has good reliability and validity.

#### 2.2.2 Self-concealment scale

The scale consists of 4 questions adapted from the Self-Concealment Scale developed by Larson & Chastain

(1990), and is based on a 5-point scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” (1 point) to “Strongly Agree” (5). Lower scores indicate lower levels of concealment and higher scores indicate higher levels of concealment. The Cronbach’s reliability coefficient of the self-concealment scale in this study is 0.804, and the KMO validity coefficient is 0.782, which has good reliability and validity.

### 2.2.3 Self-expression scale

The scale consists of 20 questions adapted from the Jourard Self-Disclosure Questionnaire developed by Miller, Berg, & Archer (1983). Each question has five scoring points, with A indicating that one lied or incorrectly expressed oneself to one’s partner; B indicating that one purposely hid or avoided the topic from one’s partner; C indicating that one did not address the topic or said nothing at all; D indicating that one said something; and E indicating that one told one’s partner in great detail. Scores of 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 were recorded. Lower scores indicate lower levels of disclosure and higher scores indicate higher levels of disclosure. The Cronbach’s reliability coefficient of the self-expression scale in this study was 0.936, and the KMO validity coefficient was 0.901, which has good reliability and validity.

## 2.3 Research procedures

The questionnaire summarises the three scales together and is distributed in the form of a questionnaire star through the WeChat circle of friends, WeChat groups, QQ, microblogs, and the schools in which they are located. The questionnaire stated the reason for administering the test in the beginning part, and clarified the principle of confidentiality and made a promise of confidentiality. The questionnaires were collected, screened and organised after the subjects had completed them. The study was conducted using SPSS 27.0 statistical analysis software.

## 3. Findings

### 3.1 Correlation analysis

#### 3.1.1 Correlation Analysis between Intimacy Satisfaction, Self-Concealment and Self-Representation

Kendall’s correlation coefficient analysis was used to process the correlation analysis of intimacy satisfaction, self-concealment, and self-representation, and the results are shown in the table below.

**Table 1 Correlation analysis between satisfaction with intimacy, self-concealment, and self-representation**

sports event	Intimate relationship satisfaction	Degree of self-concealment	self-expression
Intimate relationship satisfaction	1		
Degree of self-concealment	<0.001, r=-0.335	1	
self-expression	<0.001, r=0.397	<0.001, r=-0.331	1

There is a significant correlation between intimacy satisfaction, self-concealment and self-expression, where self-concealment is negatively correlated with intimacy satisfaction and self-expression is positively correlated with intimacy satisfaction. It shows that when self-con-

cealment is lower and self-expression is higher, intimacy satisfaction is higher.

#### 3.1.2 Correlation analysis between some of the problems and intimacy satisfaction

**Table 2 Correlation analysis between selected issues and relationship satisfaction**

	title	p	r	relevance
Perception of concealment from partner	I think my mate is hiding something from me.	<0.001	-0.403	negative correlation
Attitude towards secrecy	I don’t think there should be any secrets between partners when it comes to the sexes.	0.026	0.145	positive correlation
	I don’t think partners should have secrets about anything.	0.025	0.144	positive correlation

As shown in the table, the perception of hiding from one’s partner is significantly and negatively related to intimacy satisfaction. It indicates that the more one perceives that their partner is hiding something from them, the more it affects intimacy satisfaction. In contrast, the more one believes that a partner should not have secrets, the higher intimacy satisfaction is when it comes to attitudes about secrets. This is consistent with previous findings of Finke-  
 nauer et al. that “relationship satisfaction also influences one’s perception of partner secrecy”. Relationship satisfied people tend to view their partner’s behaviour in a way

that enhances their relationship.

### 3.2 Analysis of differences between highly satisfied partners and other partners

The top 27 per cent of respondents (with a score of 96 or higher) were identified as “highly satisfied partners”, while the remaining respondents were called “other partners”.

#### 3.2.1 Differences between highly satisfied partners and other partners on self-representation questions.

**Table 3 Independent samples t-tests between highly satisfied partners and other partners on self-representation questions (ordered by sample effect size)**

issues	Type of partner	M	SD	t	p	Cohen’s d
38. Is there anyone of the opposite sex around me who has a crush on me or is pursuing me?	the rest	3.67	1.005	-3.063	0.003	0.986
	your (honorific)	4.23	0.931			
29. My sex life to date	the rest	4.01	1.018	-2.918	0.004	0.971
	your (honorific)	4.54	0.822			
30. Am I satisfied in my sexual relationship with my partner	the rest	4.03	0.942	-2.081	0.039	0.918
	your (honorific)	4.38	0.847			
27. My emotional history	the rest	4.09	0.943	-2.182	0.031	0.905
	your (honorific)	4.46	0.79			
31. My views on sexual morality and the behaviour I believe I should observe with my partner in matters of sexuality.	the rest	4.19	0.844	-2.548	0.012	0.796
	your (honorific)	4.56	0.641			
25. Things that have made me feel positive emotions in the past or currently	the rest	4.22	0.813	-2.169	0.032	0.781
	your (honorific)	4.54	0.682			
34. What I appreciate about my partner	the rest	4.25	0.81	-2.609	0.01	0.75
	your (honorific)	4.62	0.544			
41. My vision of future life	the rest	4.3	0.823	-2.461	0.015	0.75
	your (honorific)	4.64	0.486			
39. My attitude and views on relationships and marriage	the rest	4.34	0.775	-2.412	0.017	0.719
	your (honorific)	4.67	0.53			
32. My positive feelings at this stage of my relationship (marriage)	the rest	4.31	0.769	-2.778	0.006	0.707
	your (honorific)	4.62	0.493			
40. My study (work) aspirations and goals	the rest	4.42	0.75	-2.377	0.019	0.689
	your (honorific)	4.67	0.478			

From Tables 3.3 and 3.4 show the 11 questions among the 20 questions of the Self-Disclosure Scale in which the high-satisfaction partners are significantly different (significance  $p < 0.05$ ) from the other partners on 11 questions, and are ordered in descending order according to the value of the independent sample effect size. After analysis, it can be seen that the sharing of these questions may be a key element affecting intimacy satisfaction, as high-satis-

faction partners will disclose to each other in more detail about their sex life and whether there are people of the opposite sex around them who are attracted to them or are pursuing them. The smallest difference was found in the question “Things that have made me feel negative in the past or at present”, suggesting that this question may have a lesser impact on intimacy satisfaction. Both of them showed high levels of disclosure on the

questions “Attitudes and views on love and marriage” and “Personal aspirations and goals”, and low levels of disclosure on the questions “My privacy” and “What kind of contacts I have with the opposite sex around me”. “What members of the opposite sex I am in contact with in my neighbourhood” showed a lower level of disclosure. This suggests that subjects were generally more willing to share their personal attitudes with their partners and less willing to share their privacy and interactions with the opposite sex. This may be related to previous research on taboo topics: in Baxter and Wilmot’s (1985) interview study of taboo topics in intimate relationships, it was found that these topics (e.g., extramarital activities, relationship norms, conflict-provoking topics) were avoided because they were perceived as a threat to the relationship. For partners, taboo topics were a means of protecting the relationship and personal vulnerability. So in some cases, secrecy has a neutral or even positive effect

on the relationship. In some cases, a person’s own secrecy should be positively related to marital satisfaction, while perceived partner secrecy should be negatively related to marital satisfaction[4]. In the present study, partners with high satisfaction had higher levels of disclosure about similarly taboo topics (e.g., contact with the opposite sex, sexual life history, etc.), while other partners tended to avoid talking about these topics. It may be because such topics rather put the partners at ease when they talk about them openly, whereas intentionally concealing them can cause more anxiety, stress, and unwarranted speculation in the partner who feels concealed.

In addition, it can be learnt that highly satisfied partners are more inclined to share topics related to matters common to the two people in the relationship and related to intimacy, whereas other partners are more likely to share topics related to their personal traits and personal life.

**Table 4 Independent Sample T-Tests of Highly Satisfied Partners vs. Other Partners on Other Issues (Sorted by Sample Effect Size)**

	Type of partner	M	SD	t	p	cohen’s d
16. I have to hide things/thoughts from the TA that could have an impact on our relationship	the rest	2.83	1.242	2.837	0.005	1.234
	your (honorific)	2.18	1.211			
18. I think TA is hiding something from me	the rest	2.86	1.172	3.313	0.001	1.184
	your (honorific)	2.13	1.218			
15. There are a lot of things I don’t tell TA.	the rest	2.4	1.102	2.98	0.003	1.084
	your (honorific)	1.79	1.031			

As can be seen in the table, there is a significant difference between the highly satisfied partners and the other partners on 3 of the other questions. In this case, the degree of difference is ranked in descending order as 16 questions, 18 questions and 15 questions. People with high intimacy satisfaction believe that they should not hide things/

thoughts that will have an impact on the relationship and believe that their partners have a low level of hiding things from them. This is consistent with previous findings.

### 3.3 Descriptive statistics and analysis of multiple choice questions in the questionnaire

**Table 5 Things you want your partner to share**

issues	options (as in computer software settings)	frequency	per cent
Things you wish your partner would share with you?	His pleasure.	117	79.6
	His future plans.	117	79.6
	His troubles/pain	113	76.9
	The people he’s in contact with.	87	59.2
	He’s in real time.	79	53.7
	His past.	74	50.3
	He lives his life in every way.	44	29.9

**Table 6 Perceived things partners cannot hide**

issues	options (as in computer software settings)	frequency	per cent
What do you think your partner must not hide from you?	What he's not happy with in the relationship	103	70.1
	His troubles/pain	86	58.5
	His sexual history.	69	46.9
	His future plans.	68	46.3
	His relationship history.	64	43.5
	The people he's in contact with.	55	37.4
	His past experiences	49	33.3

From the above two tables, it can be seen that more than 70% of the respondents want their partners to share their joys, worries and plans with them, and close to 60% want their partners to share the people he comes in contact with; more than 70% think that their partners must not hide what they are dissatisfied with in the relationship, more than 50% think that they must not hide their worries and pains, and close to 50% think that they must not hide their sex life history and future plans. This is an opposite

trend to the subjects' self-representation on these issues. As shown in the table below, in the self-representation scale, subjects' questions about negative feelings in the relationship, sexual life history, worries and pains (things that generate negative emotions), and people they come in contact with (the opposite sex around them) were the least revealed. It indicates that the subjects want their partners to share with them, but they themselves will not actively share with their partners.

**Table 7 Ranking of self-exposure issues (in descending order of exposure)**

self-expression scale	average value	(statistics) standard deviation
23. My views and feelings about my character traits	4.49	0.612
40. My study (work) aspirations and goals	4.48	0.696
39. My attitude and views on relationships and marriage	4.43	0.731
32. My positive feelings at this stage of my relationship (marriage)	4.39	0.717
41. My vision of future life	4.39	0.763
24. Objects/people/behaviour I like and dislike	4.37	0.787
34. What I appreciate about my partner	4.35	0.764
22. My views and feelings about my face (face) and body shape	4.33	0.734
25. Things that have made me feel positive emotions in the past or currently	4.31	0.79
31. My views on sexual morality and the behaviour I believe I should observe with my partner in matters of sexuality.	4.29	0.811
36. My communication and interaction with friends	4.2	0.619
27. My emotional history	4.19	0.917
33. My negative feelings at this stage of my relationship (marriage)	4.18	0.884
29. My sex life to date	4.15	0.996
35. What I'm not too happy with about my partner	4.14	0.865
30. Am I satisfied in my sexual relationship with my partner	4.12	0.928
26. Things that have made me feel negative in the past or currently	4.09	0.875
37. Which members of the opposite sex I am in contact with in my neighbourhood?	3.91	0.972
28. My privacy	3.91	0.986
38. Is there anyone of the opposite sex around me who has a crush on me or is pursuing me?	3.82	1.014

**Table 8 Feelings of knowing your partner is hiding something**

issues	options (as in computer software settings)	frequency	per cent
How would I feel if I knew he was hiding something from me?	feel a little uneasy	71	48.3
	dismayed	55	37.4
	fury	52	35.4
	It's okay. It's not a big deal.	45	30.6
	apprehensive	35	23.8
	panic-stricken	17	11.6

As shown in the table above, nearly half of people feel slightly upset when they learn that their partner is withholding information from them; more than 30% feel frustrated and angry. This is consistent with Merrill & Afifi's findings: when people think their partner is withholding information, they tend to feel frustrated that their partner isn't telling them this information and wonder if this reflects poor communication skills of their own (e.g., "Does my partner think I don't have the communication skills to talk about this?" [4]. This frustration can be expressed indirectly through individuals being more likely to be angry with their partner.

#### 4 Conclusions and recommendations

Disclosing secrets increases intimacy satisfaction, whereas keeping secrets has no significant positive effect on increasing intimacy satisfaction, but rather decreases it. Partners are usually more likely to share personal attitudes and less likely to share privacy and interactions with the opposite sex.

Perceiving a low level of a partner hiding something from him/herself, believing that a partner should not have secrets, and believing that one should not hide things/ideas that would have an impact on the relationship had a positive impact on intimacy satisfaction.

Highly satisfied partners are more likely to share topics related to matters common to both people in the relationship and related to intimacy. Other partners are more likely to share topics related to personal traits and personal life. Low-satisfaction partners are less likely to share about their sex life and whether there is someone of the opposite

sex around who is attracted to them or is pursuing them. Self-disclosure can increase the satisfaction of intimacy between partners. Particularly when it comes to things of mutual interest to both partners, such as positive feelings in the relationship, the need to hide as little as possible about interactions with the opposite sex, and emotional and sexual histories, this contributes positively to increased intimacy satisfaction. At the same time, it is important to share and communicate positively with the other person when you want them to share.

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