

SECRETS THAT MEN DON'T TELL



THEIR WIVES

HARVILLE HENDRIX PH.D. AND
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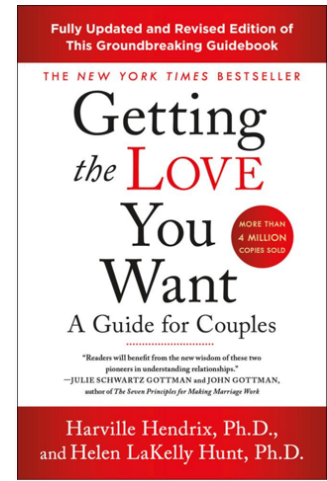
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SECRETS THAT MEN DON'T TELL THEIR WIVES

by Harville Hendrix Ph.D. and Helen LaKelly Hunt Ph.D.

It is widely believed, in our culture, that men are less likely than women to share their private thoughts and feelings. On an individual level, this statement seems absurd. All of us know men who are the proverbial “open book” and women who never seem to disclose anything personal. The truth is that *anyone* can be secretive about anything at any time—just as anyone can fully disclose (or even overshare!).

On a cultural level, however, widely held beliefs tend to have a kernel of truth hidden within them. Our relationships and families were built on a traditional view that reinforces specific gender roles and behaviors. “Real men don’t cry...” “Boys will be boys...” “Women are too emotional...” Overarching gender stereotypes—like men being more secretive and women being more emotional—are both born from and continually reinforced by this traditional model. But when men and women try to conform to who they are “suppose to be,” we all suffer especially when truths are veiled behind secrets.

Secrets live in the dark, and are generally connected to feelings of guilt, fear, and shame. In this resource, we explore some of the secrets that men have held, via case studies, and the ways we’ve seen this dynamic manifest in couples. We then end with some tips about how you can create greater connection and intimacy in your own relationship.

If these ideas and suggestions are exciting to you, we encourage you to find out about workshops and Imago therapists near where you live. There are many ways to learn the process and a supportive community to inspire you in this work!

The “Don’t Count Your Chickens” Complex: Rick and Stacey

Rick’s boss, a partner in the law firm where he works, told Rick that he was being considered for a partnership. Though Rick and Stacey had been working toward this moment, Rick saw no reason to tell his wife until the decision had been made. As the old adage goes, “why count your chickens before they’ve hatched?” Rick tried to put it out of his mind. Becoming increasingly preoccupied with the possibilities, he began working longer and later hours to further distinguish himself. On the surface, Rick believed he was helping Stacey by not saying anything until there was an actual offer. His intent wasn’t deceitful but the consequences can be just as destructive.

All Stacey knew was that her husband had become distant and was hardly ever home. Feeling unable to approach Rick, Stacey kept coming up with one bad scenario after another to explain his change in behavior. Consumed by his own thoughts, Rick didn’t notice Stacey’s turmoil. Even if he had, it wouldn’t have occurred to him that his withholding of information was causing her upset.

Even the closest partners can keep secrets from one another. It could be about a deep-seeded inhibition or an event from their past. It could be because they reason “logically” to protect from false hopes. Sometimes, withholding a secret gives the keeper a feeling of being in control. And other secrets are harboring fears. For Rick, it was an underlying fear of failure, of not being good enough – not only to Stacey, but to himself.

Stacey had a different perspective. If Rick had shared the news, she could have supported him through his feelings of excitement, anticipation, anxiety, and fear. Instead of being scared and becoming withdrawn when he called to tell her he was working late again, she would have understood why. She also could have handled more things around the house so Rick had more time to focus on work. Rick’s first omission created the need to withhold more and more thoughts and feelings from Stacey. Because he bought into the stoic and silent loner paradigm, Rick lost a wonderful opportunity to receive moral support from, and build greater safety and intimacy with his wife.

In our work, we define an exit as an activity we engage in outside of the relationship that in which we act out our feelings. It can be unintentional as in the case with Rick. But the consequence of an exit is that it drains the relationship of energy and prevents intimacy. And an exit usually masks some underlying fear – often unconscious. Some of our darkest fears are that we are, in our deepest core, inadequate and unworthy of love. Instead of having someone we love leave us when they find out how horrible we are, we protect ourselves by creating walls and escape routes. This way when they eventually do leave (or the promotion doesn’t come thru) it won’t hurt so much. Right?

By contrast, when partners build true intimacy with one another, they create a relationship that can withstand life’s toughest disappointments. Though releasing the secrets to the light of day may feel like the equivalent of a hurricane hitting land, a couple who learns how to weather the storm together grows stronger with each life challenge. In this way, coming clean can feel like a real coming home. Sharing our inner thoughts is a way for couples to choose—over and over again—to stay firmly rooted in the connection they are building and deepening with each other over each passing year.

In our couples' workshops, we teach several exercises which give couples new, more effective, ways of exchanging information about their relationship to each other and to become more aware of one another's inner thoughts, feelings and perceptions. The foundation of all of these communication exercises is called "Imago Dialogue," which is a simple 3-step process. The first step is called begins with a simple skill called "Mirroring."

Basically, mirroring is a process of reflective listening. The partner that talks first (the "sending" partner) talks about his or her thoughts and feelings and the other (the "receiving" partner) reflects back what was heard until it is clear to the sending partner that the Receiver has "gotten the message." The second step is called Validating, where the Receiver says, “You make sense, and what makes sense is....” (a lot different than, “Well, that’s stupid!” which immediately shuts down our partner’s experience.) The final step is Empathy, where we imagine what the other partner is feeling. “I imagine that makes you feel... (worried, sad, anxious, happy etc.)” The result of learning to share information in this way is greater understanding of our partner's point of view, greater compassion for our partner's emotional experience, and both partner's satisfaction of finally feeling each has been heard.

Rick's reason for his secrecy—and Stacey's inability to ask him what was going on—may seem to be logical excuses for withholding information from one's partner. When the pain or shame inside is too great, many close down a part of themselves by creating a way for them to bleed out the time and energy and care they would normally use to feed their relationship. What could have changed this dynamic between Rick and Stacey immediately was the willingness to share and listen. Instead of creating our own stories internally, taking the first step can break a destructive pattern of rupture.

The Eye of the Beholder: Jonas and Shandra

Jonas, a successful orthopedic surgeon specializing in sports medicine, is one husband whose wife never suspected his private agony and self-doubt. To look at him, anyone would assume that he had high self-esteem: Jonas is strikingly handsome, six feet tall, and extremely fit. Well, at least to everyone but himself: "I'm scrawny...too thin...no muscle tone...a bag of bones." Since his teens, Jonas had been obsessed with his body image, especially his upper-body size. He'd painstakingly compare himself to every man he knew; and in his estimation, he always fell short.

But Jonas never shared his feelings of inadequacy with his wife Shandra. Shandra had been a cheerleader and a key member of the debate team before getting a degree in early childhood education. She was utterly in love with her husband, and assumed his daily exercise routines and protein-packed weight gain products and work-out equipment were all signs of Jonas's dedication to his health.

Little did she know the pain and shame Jonas felt each time another of his athletic patients walked in the door for an appointment. "What a masochist I must have been to have gone into this specialty," Jonas confided in us, "99% of my patients are hulky, muscular jocks!" Jonas cannot see himself as he really is when he looks in the mirror. And he further weighs down the shame he feels by heaping judgments about himself on top. He can feel the secret bubbling up from his gut like acid. But each time he does everything in his power to swallow it back down. And yet it is a great struggle for him to accept himself with his body the way it is and he would never dream of exposing his feelings of inadequacy even to Shandra. Because he was so focused on his exterior, he assumed Shandra would be the same. His deepest fear was that once she realized how inadequate he was, she'd leave him for someone "more worthy".

Many of our secrets under our fears stem from childhood. And while we do not encourage couples to focus on childhood, an occasional "visit" there helps bring to light some of the often unconscious behaviors that we act upon today. By sharing these vulnerabilities and experiences, we build intimacy with one another, providing a gentle and powerful way to heal the separation so many couples experience.

As we encouraged Jonas to share with Shandra, he began to share how distant they had been from one another and how much he missed the closeness they once shared. As Shandra mirrored, and invited Jonas to share more, he moved into his feeling of not being good enough for her. And, with our gentle guidance, slowly he connected that feeling with his childhood. As a child, Jonas was small for his age. As the "scrawny kid" on the block, he often felt inferior to the other kids and was a frequent target for the neighborhood bully. Even though he's now an

adult with a successful life, the picture of the defenseless little boy he once was lingers in his emotional memory and clouds his perception of himself.

Jonas was unaware of the powerful impact that early childhood wound still had on his adult self-perception. Sharing his pain with Shandra has enabled him to face the old hurt, and to be more accepting and compassionate with himself. He's still committed to health and fitness. However, his secret shame no longer holds him prisoner. By sharing, Shandra was also able to respond how he is more to her than just "great abs," allowing himself to hear and slowly feel the unconditional love she felt for him.

The secrets we keep run the spectrum from simple concerns to serious, relationship-threatening (or in some cases, life-threatening) predicaments. But no matter the magnitude of the private worry, each person felt that their own secret, if disclosed to their partner, could threaten the relationship and their partner's view of them as a partner.

Psychologists are just beginning to differentiate between the feelings of guilt and shame, two distinct emotional states which have often been mistakenly lumped into the same experience. Guilt is about an action in the outside world. Shame is about the self. One feels guilty about something they did, said or thought, or didn't do, say or think. When one feels shame, one is ashamed of who they are as a person. The guilt, shame, or fear of attack or rejection can often be so great as to cause physical illness. Ulcers, indigestion, migraine headaches and high blood pressure have all been linked to chronic stress. Keeping a secret can indeed make the one withholding the secret feel like a ticking bomb about to explode.

The Life-Threatening Secret: Miguel and Gloria

It took a life-threatening event for Miguel to finally come clean with his wife, Gloria, about his tormented secret life. Controlled by the debilitating addiction of compulsive spending, Miguel was hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt. To keep up with the minimums on their bills, he borrowed money from family and friends. Exhausting everyone he knew, he embezzled from his company, and even went so far as to take a second mortgage out on his and Gloria's home.

As is true with compulsive or addictive patterns, Miguel was treading water in a sea of denial. In his mind, he spent not for himself, but to build a beautiful life for the woman he loved with all his heart. He told himself his spending wasn't serious, that he had things under control. He managed to keep up this balancing act for years before an emergency room doctor diagnosed him with a serious ulcer. While waiting for the specialist to arrive at the hospital for his surgery, Miguel felt the full weight of his deception. Gloria was looking at him with such love and strength. He didn't deserve her. He never had. Quietly, Miguel told Gloria everything.

Luckily, Miguel's surgery was successful. Once he'd regained his strength, Miguel and Gloria began marital therapy. "Initially I wasn't aware, but these last couple of years I knew something was up," Gloria admitted at their first session. "Of course, I could see he was under a lot of pressure, but whenever I asked him what was going on, he would tell me it was nothing—just work being hectic and that I shouldn't be worried." Rather than reaching out to his wife for help, Miguel withdrew into himself. "Deep inside I wanted to tell her, but the fear of her exploding in a rage paralyzed me," Miguel admitted. Though he was terrified of her anger, he realized that he felt so torn up inside that he'd begun setting things up here and

there in the hopes that Gloria would just confront him.

When people feel unsafe in their relationship—which both Miguel and Gloria did—their defenses become engaged. Hearts become closed off, deflective shields go up, and suddenly the real Miguel and Gloria—underneath the walls of their defenses—are nowhere to be found.

In our work, we teach the concept of the Space Between. This is our label for the field that exists between and around a couple. Like the night sky that seems empty but is filled with every manner of wonder, the Space Between is filled with the ideas and actions of the two individuals within the relationship. Tend to this space with love and care, and the energy field that surrounds your relationship will pulse with feelings of peace and contentment. Fill this space with the jagged secrets, blame, neglect, and criticism, and your relationship will feel fractured and broken. To disengage those deflective shields, people need to feel safe. This means filling the Space Between with care and respect and love.

Just as financial experts helped the couple untangle the web of loans and late fees and defaults, we helped Miguel and Gloria create a safe and caring field of love in their Space Between. Beginning with this strong foundation, we brought in other Imago exercises they could use to deepen their connection. Over the course of their therapy, Gloria and Miguel slowly began to reconnect with one another, create safety in their marriage, and begin to weave together an open and honest relationship. In addition, Miguel sought the help of a support group for individuals with compulsive spending and began to get his life under control.

Clearly, the types of secrets we keep are not always as relationship or life-threatening as Miguel's. However, when we conceal any important information from our partner, it is as if we were to tell a lie. And, as we all know, one lie leads to another and another until the non-disclosure in communication becomes a fiercely fixed habit within a cluster of mind-fields.

The Inferiority Complex: Ash and Sam

Ash and Sam have been together for eight years, six of them married. From the start, Ash encouraged Sam to follow her long-held dream of becoming a counselor. When Sam enrolled in the state university after returning from their honeymoon, Ash was supportive. But, when Sam shared that her high grades qualified her for the Dean's List, and that she was receiving uncommon praise and encouragement from her professors, Ash began to experience a growing discomfort.

Both the thought of Sam building such a robust life outside of their home, and how admired she was disturbed Ash. But how could he tell her about the fears twisting around inside him? "How much of an ass would I have been to sit Sam down in the midst of all of this just to tell her how sick with jealousy I was?" Along with keeping the secret, Ash's mind would come up with judgment after judgment. After earning a Master's Degree in social work, Sam began developing her private practice. In a few short years, she was earning almost twice as much as Ash did on his elementary school teachers' salary.

On the outside, Ash was the perfect loving and supportive spouse. But no matter how much Ash wanted to feel proud, Sam's newly won career success triggered intense competitiveness

and envy. “I should be glad Sam has found fulfilling work, and be grateful for the extra money. I just can’t help feeling that Sam’s success is somehow making me seem like a loser. My father was all about winning and being the best. In his mind, someone who comes in second isn’t second-best, but the first loser.” Ash’s preference for reading and teaching over sports—the utter lack of competitiveness within him—created such disgust within his father. And all of this was being triggered by Sam’s success.

Sam, in the meantime, had thrown herself into school right after getting married. She’d noticed, in the far recesses of her consciousness, that Ash seemed moodier. But she was juggling so much and just assumed that he was feeling down about how little time they had together. Sam figured that once she’d built up at least a small set of clients she’d be able to slow down and things would go back to normal.

Our individualistic, driven need to win at all costs hurts everyone. In general, men in our society still find themselves operating from the idea that they need to be the providers of the household. Some believe that it isn’t “manly” if a wife makes more than her husband. Or, if a problem should come up, then a “real” man takes care of situations himself. These paradigms make it scary for many to share their vulnerable side, even with those closest to them.

Most of the time, when we’re functioning under the umbrella of these traditional roles that no longer define who we are, we don’t realize how unconscious we’ve become. We take these definitions as just being the “truth.” It’s why they’re often so hard to let go of—because we don’t realize how hard we’re holding onto them. But we’ve got an easy and effective way to let go of these strong cultural mores: cultivate curiosity! Curiosity awakens different parts of our selves, it is a questioning experience that can be full of wonder. When we seek to get curious about our partner, we move away from the part of us that assumes and judges and is perhaps looking for the ways our partner is wrong.

Curiosity helped Ash let go of the self-judgment he felt. The more curious he became—both about Sam’s successes and his own reactions to them—the less hold these feelings had on him. As he allowed himself to get more and more curious, he saw the connection between his reactions to Sam and his feelings of inadequacy around his father. And all of this exploration he was able to slowly share with Ash through the Dialogue process. As he worked through all of this, Ash moved into a place where he was genuinely happy for Sam and appreciative of her contributions to the household, bragging about how amazing she was.

5 Types of Secrets Men Hide From Their Wives

Again, we’re looking at men being secretive through the lens of an older paradigm that defines very strong and specific ideas about how each gender is “supposed to” function. Men don’t necessarily have any special hold on having secrets—women can be just as “guilty” for similar reasons. But here are some of the secrets bundled by type:

1. Life-Threatening Secrets:

- An addiction to drugs, alcohol, gambling, pornography, etc.
- Surviving childhood incest, physical, and/or emotional abuse.

- Contracting the HIV virus or another disease from a previous relationship and feeling afraid to be tested or have both of you tested.
- History of clinical depression or attempted suicide before you met.

2. Secrets in the Bedroom:

- Sexual fantasies are kept under lock and key, fearing one's partner will either be intimidated or disgusted.
- Wants more wild and uninhibited sex with a wild and uninhibited sex partner.
- Wants to feel desired and wants you to demonstrate this by initiating lovemaking.
- Sex isn't as exciting as it used to be.
- Worries about sexual performance or fears of being judged as an inadequate lover.

3. Secrets at Work:

- Feelings of powerlessness when the manager or a customer isn't happy and yells.
- Insecurity about holding onto one's job.
- Inability to handle the competition to get ahead.

4. Secrets at Home:

- Doubting the ability to be a good provider for the family.
- Worries over not being a good enough parent.
- Jealousy over having to work and not be home with the kids.
- Upset that the kids favor the parent at home over the one who goes to work.
- Concern that personal issues will be discussed outside of the marriage—especially with in-laws.

5. Family and Childhood Secrets:

- Still wishing for parents to say how proud they are of their adult children's successes.
- Wishing and longing for a more nurturing father who could have offered greater wisdom and spent more time.
- Wishing for affirmation from one's partner.

Looking toward cultural mores, a key to why so many men keep secrets from their wives has been proposed by researchers in the field of psycholinguistics. They've discovered that one of the major concerns for men is that the telling of secrets always enables risk, because

knowledge is power: *someone who knows your secret now has a subtle power over you.* Although men may give the outer appearance of strength and assuredness, inside the heart of every grown man lives a memory of the vulnerable little boy he once was. From birth, boys are taught to believe that they must be strong and solve their problems by themselves. They're told: "don't cry," "don't show your weakness," "be a man," "be tough." So, they learn to keep their fears and doubts to themselves.

All too often, they keep the vulnerable side of themselves hidden from the one person they'd most benefit from opening to - their partners. What's more, strangely enough, for more men than you would imagine, this tender, vulnerable side is even unknown to *them!* You may believe that he's being secretive on purpose, but *it may never even occur to him to share his fears with you.*

Letting the Secrets Go

What's no secret is that there are more ways that men and women are similar than they are different. And we all deserve to have the freedom and safety to be ourselves. We deserve to have a healthy balance of closeness and privacy, and we all long for the experience of feeling loved, respected, and valued by our partners.

So how do we create a healthy relationship that doesn't harbor secrets that result in couples accepting parallel, separate lives or push couples toward divorce? We've given you hints throughout this article! And following is the recap.

1. Remove all exits

The greater the safety in the relationship, the higher the chance BOTH partners will disclose their thoughts and feelings. And one of the best ways to ensure that everyone in a relationship feels safe and connected is by ensuring that you've removed all the ways you avoid intimacy in your relationship. Some are "functional" such as work and children. Others are "terminal" such as addictions or affairs. All exits drain the relationship at different paces. Begin by defining your exits and make a commitment (even if it for a short period of time) to "close" or modify that exit in the relationship so you can spend more quality time with your spouse.

2. Learn and practice Imago Dialogue

Although this article is about secrets and the courage to share, we also need to learn how to listen which is actually very difficult for most of us. Mirroring (listening and repeating back what is heard), Validating (making sense of their perspective), and Empathizing (imagining the emotions) with our partner tells him or her that they matter. It also prevents the stories we make up in our own minds when our partner is behaving a certain way.

3. Invest in the Space Between

Rather than focusing on your own emotional state, imagine the "between" that exists in the space that flows around and in the middle of you and your partner. What are you investing in that space? What flows from you into it? The more you treat the Space Between as the field in which you and your partner build a healthy relationship—the more you fill it with love, respect and caring—the healthier and happier you'll both be. Tend to this space as you would

the most magical garden. Weed out all criticism. Replace them with appreciations. This creates safety in the relationship. And when we feel safe enough with our partner, we are able to divulge our fears and experiences without fear of retribution or rejection.

4. Cultivate curiosity and wonder

The easiest way to shift our selves out of judgment is to become curious about our partner. The quickest way to dismantle our defenses and become more vulnerable with our mates is to allow that curiosity to evolve into wonder. Wonder is that state of awe that we feel when we are so in love with our partner. It is the jaw-dropping reality of a new baby arriving into the world and the quiet amazement we feel when we realize that we've found "the one." Rather than creating our own internal stories about why our partner is behaving a certain way, ask! If your partner shares something with you, listen, mirror, and invite more! This is very different from our usual mode of "relating" which is reacting to our partner's messages.

We trust this resource has shown you it's possible to build closeness, overcome secrets, and create a zone of safety with your partner. As you apply this new perspective, we hope your relationship experiences a level of intimacy and excitement like never before!

- Harville Hendrix and Helen LaKelly Hunt

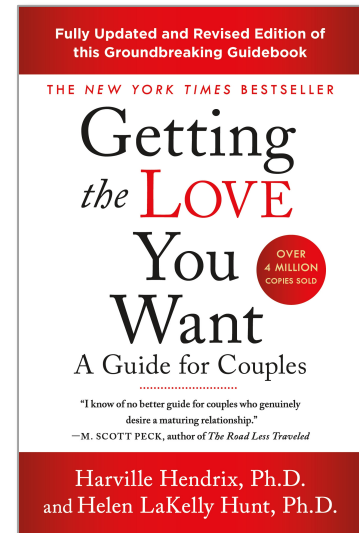
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About the Authors

Harville Hendrix Ph.D. is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Getting the Love You Want: A Guide for Couples*, *Keeping the Love You Find: A Personal Guide*, and with his wife, **Helen LaKelly Hunt Ph.D.**, *Giving the Love that Heals: A Guide for Parents*. Harville and Helen have written over 10 books with more than 3 million copies sold. In addition, Harville has appeared on the Oprah Winfrey television program 17 times.



Harville and Helen co-created Imago Relationship Therapy to promote the transformation of couples and families and create relational cultures that support universal equality. Together, they have developed a variety of resources to help couples, families, and educators strengthen their relationship knowledge and skills. In addition, they co-founded Imago Relationships International, a non-profit organization that has trained thousands of therapists in educators in 51 countries around the world.

Harville has over 40 years experience working as a couple's therapist, educator, clinical trainer, and lecturer. His educational background includes graduate degrees from Union Theological Seminary (NY), the University of Chicago, and a former professor at Southern Methodist University. In addition to being co-creator of Imago, Helen has been inducted into the Women's Hall of Fame for her support of the women's movement.

Harville and Helen have been married for 36 years and have six children and six grandchildren. They live in New York City and Dallas. For more information, visit:

<https://www.HarvilleandHelen.com>

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