**The secret keeper**

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Almost everyone has secrets; some darker than others, some a shade lighter. Some stay with the individuals, whereas many times, knowingly or unknowingly, others become entangled in the dark web of secrets that push people into a complex role of a secret keeper. Today, I want to discuss parents’ infidelity where sometimes one of the parents knowingly involves a child if she finds out about the infidelity by asking her to collude with the secret and hold her silence, or sometimes a child stumbles onto a parental secret affair and self-appoints herself as the secret keeper. In both cases, I can imagine the child becomes the gatekeeper of the parents’ marriage and believes it is her responsibility to keep the marriage intact.
A secret like this in both scenarios means a child has been pushed into an abyss of conflict that will take years to be processed and healed from. To be forced to carry the burden of keeping the secret undisclosed is beyond the capacity at such a tender age and has a powerful energy that keeps growing as time passes and unfortunately the child becomes the container for the parent’s shame and guilt. The emotional burden of hiding a secret may have similar feelings and fear of consequences as the owner of the secret is experiencing.
When a child has been appointed the position of a secret keeper; it is a lifelong trauma especially if that secret remains a secret. A child’s sense of identity could be dominated by the secret. More importantly there is also a conflict of ‘I love the parent I hate and I hate the parent I love’ because it is natural for the child to feel attached to the parents.
The mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual impact of secrets are huge and will impact the psyche for years and years; severe anxiety, nightmares, flashbacks, depression, and so on. It is cruel to place a child in a helpless position where the shame of the secret has its burden to process as well the deep sense of betrayal for not telling the other parent; blinded by the chronic fear of unimaginable consequences if ‘it gets revealed’ beyond the fear of parents’ marriage ending. The conflict is deep; ‘I want to share it’ but ‘I cannot risk sharing it.’
People re-enact their traumatic experiences again and again and a young child might unknowingly put herself in a similar situation in her adult life that is secretive or be resistant to transparency having learned at a very early age that secrets are permitted. There is a profound meaning in the affair and will have a bearing on his or her relationship and choices in intimate relationships in adult life. For such an adult, ‘an apple doesn’t fall from the tree’ has a different meaning than for another person consumed by fear that she can and might end up cheating like the parent did.
The secret keepers are impacted by this role throughout their life unless they embrace it as trauma and seek help for it. Therapy can be a safe place to share this secret and offer a corrective emotional experience. One can imagine that it will take time to trust the therapist because it is not the adult that has the mistrust but it’s also the child within that is paralysed by the fear of disclosing the secret and the unthinkable consequences. The years and years of reminding myself, ‘don’t tell anyone will take some time to be challenged. Therapy can help to discharge pent-up emotions like shame, guilt, and anger that block free functioning and let the dissociated emotional wounds emerge and be integrated.
As parents, we for starters, need to stop including our children in our family conflicts. Don’t put your child through this ordeal of sharing the burden of your life choices. If she has come to know of your ‘secret’ then have the courage to face it. More importantly, if as a parent you are having an affair, do observe your children and notice any change in their behaviors, eating or sleep routine, or anxiety that seems to be triggered for no reason. Our children do not deserve to be the gatekeeper of our relationships. And for those who are still carrying such ‘secrets’, I will share what my friend who is a therapist says,
“Letting go of the role of secret-keeper doesn’t mean that you have to share the secret. Just let go of the role you were once given.”