

Several weeks ago I wrote a column about a mom who asked her young son to keep a seemingly benign secret from Dad. I mentioned the confusion that came into the child's eyes and made a few suggestions about not placing the burden of a secret on a young mind.

Today I would like to write about the darkness of secrets and the potential for long-lasting trauma, not only from the angst of carrying the secret but from the actions that secrets are often covering up.

One of the characteristics of a secret is power. We can feel powerful when we know something that others do not know. We can feel powerless when we are left out of the secret. We can be manipulated by the threat of exposure of a secret that may put us in a bad light.

In many cases, the power of a secret grows disproportionately in our minds as we begin to adjust our life to accommodate the life of the secret.

Families have a communication system that defies modern technology. It is the communication of osmosis and most of us can relate to 'feeling' what is going on in the family without having to discuss it. Open communication is somewhat of a rarity in families because of the emotional investment that we have in each of our family members. No matter what, they belong to us and we to them. We will know them all of our lives and that means that anything we say can cause ongoing damage.

It takes a very healthy family to say what they think to each other openly and without judgement and then let it go for all time.

There are some secrets that the family is deeply invested in keeping locked inside. These are the really dark secrets of sexual, emotional and physical abuse. They represent the most painful, shameful and traumatic of the family storyline.

What we know today about the darkness of family secrets is that they become part of the family fabric and, although they are carefully guarded, they are repeatedly revealed over generations as the members of the family continue to act them out.

This does not always mean that victims of abuse become perpetrators. The unresolved, unspoken collection of toxic shame leaks out in a variety of ways, sometimes silently shaping the internal and external life of each member of the family. Individuals can begin to suffer from anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress, self-medication through drug and alcohol abuse, broken relationships, loss of employment, and ongoing health issues, to name a few.

If this is resonating with you or someone close to you, I urge you to talk to a professional counsellor. If you are living with the trauma of abuse, seek help immediately. If you are aware of destructive generational patterns in your family system, connect with a counsellor and/or a support group that can help you take control of your life and your choices.