

# The secret to being a secret-keeper

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Credit: University of Queensland

If you want to be told a secret you're better off being assertive and compassionate rather than enthusiastic and polite, according to University of Queensland researchers.

Dr. James Kirby of the UQ School of Psychology, in collaboration with Assistant Professor Michael Slepian of Columbia University, an expert in the [psychology](#) of secrets, examined who we share our secrets with.

"We found compassion and assertiveness were key personality factors in having more secrets confided, whereas politeness and enthusiasm were not," Dr. Kirby said.

"People actually predicted politeness would be very important to them when choosing who they'd tell secrets, but when it came to actual secret disclosure they didn't confide to polite people."

The researchers conducted five studies, collecting information from more than 1000 participants, including both self-report and peer-report data.

The focus was on the four aspects which psychologists suggest make up nearly any social behaviour: compassion and politeness (which make up agreeableness), and assertiveness and enthusiasm (which make up extraversion).

"People were more likely to reveal secrets to people who are empathic, caring, and assertive in social interactions," Dr. Kirby said.

"Conversely, people were less likely to confide in people who merely enjoy social interactions, demonstrating enthusiasm, or people who focused on respecting social rules and norms, demonstrating [politeness](#).

"The more people express empathy, [compassion](#), and a desire to help others, the more other people confide secrets in them – we confide in those who we expect to be nonjudgmental, caring, and motivated to help."

The other interpersonal trait that is important to confiding is [assertiveness](#).

"We believe this to be the case because a goal of confiding is to obtain some help from the confidant – those who are assertive will help and act even in the face of obstacles," he said.

"People do not just confide in those who are motivated to help, but

confide in those who are more likely to have the drive to actually take action when it is needed.

"Likewise, enthusiastic people may not be serious enough for a confidant."

The study is published in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

**More information:** Michael L. Slepian et al. To Whom Do We Confide Our Secrets?, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2018).  
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