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Instructor’s Manual for Family Secrets: Implications for Theory and Therapy

with Evan Imber-Black, PhD

Cover design by Sabine Grand

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Instructor’s Manual

FAMILY SECRETS
Implications for Theory and Therapy

with Evan Imber-Black, PhD

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Tips for Making the Best Use of the DVD

1. USE THE TRANSCRIPTS
Make notes in the video Transcript for future reference; the next time you show the video you will have them available. Highlight or notate key moments in the video to better facilitate discussion during the video and post-viewing.

2. SESSION-BY-SESSION DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
Pause the video at different points to elicit viewers’ observations and reactions to the concepts presented. The Discussion Questions provide ideas about key points that can stimulate rich discussions and learning.

3. LET IT FLOW
Allow the sessions to play out some so viewers can appreciate the work over time instead of stopping the video too often. It is best to watch the video in its entirety since issues untouched in earlier parts often play out later. Encourage the viewers to voice their opinions; no therapy is perfect! What do viewers think works and does not work in the sessions? We learn as much from our mistakes as our successes and it is crucial for students and therapists to develop the ability to effectively critique this work as well as their own.

4. SUGGEST READINGS TO ENRICH VIDEO MATERIAL
Assign readings from Suggestions for Further Readings and Websites prior to viewing. You can also time the video to coincide with other course or training materials on related topics.

5. ASSIGN A REACTION PAPER
See suggestions in Reaction Paper section.
6. ROLE-PLAY IDEAS
After watching the video, organize participants into groups of four or more. Assign each group to role-play a session of family therapy, with an emphasis on working with family secrets. Each role-play shall consist of one therapist, two or more family members of different generations, and one observer. After the role-plays, have the groups come together to discuss their experiences. First have the clients share their experiences, then the therapists, and then ask for comments from the observers. Open up a general discussion on what was learned about working with family secrets.

An alternative is to do this role-play in front of the group with just one therapist and one family; the entire group can observe before discussing the interaction. After a while, another participant may jump in as the therapist if the therapist gets stuck or reaches an impasse. Follow up with a discussion that explores what does and does not work in bringing family secrets into therapy.

7. PERSPECTIVE ON VIDEOS AND THE PERSONALITY OF THE THERAPIST
Psychotherapy portrayed in videos is less off-the-cuff than therapy in practice. Therapists or clients in videos may be nervous, putting their best foot forward, or trying to show mistakes and how to deal with them. Therapists may also move more quickly than is typical in everyday practice to demonstrate a technique. The personal style of a therapist is often as important as their techniques and theories. Thus, while we can certainly pick up ideas from master therapists, participants must make the best use of relevant theory, technique and research that fits their own personal style and the needs of their clients.
Session-by-Session Discussion Questions

Professors, training directors and facilitators may use a few or all of these discussion questions keyed to certain elements of the video or those issues most relevant to the viewers.

FIRST SESSION
1. **October:** How did you react to the therapist’s exploration of the exact time of year Galen gets into trouble? Can you imagine using a process like this with your clients? What seems useful about this method of exploration? Are there parts that do not sit well with you?

SECOND SESSION
2. **Substance Use:** What do you think of the way Imber-Black handled Galen’s drinking in the session? Was her response appropriate? How about her management of the parents’ reactions? Are there other questions you would have asked or other comments you would have made if you were the therapist?
3. **Forming a Hypothesis:** What do you think of Imber-Black’s hypothesis that this family may carry a secret? Does it make sense to you? When a family you are working with resists your efforts to shift the focus off the identified patient, what do you usually think is going on? Take a moment to reflect on some of your past experiences with families. What else might make you think that a family was carrying a secret?

THIRD SESSION
4. **Revealing the Secret:** In this session, the secret of Galen’s biological father came out fairly easily. What in Imber-Black’s approach do you think helped with that? How might you have structured the session differently? How might you approach a session like this with parents who demonstrated more resistance to truth-telling?
5. **Loving Me Less:** When Ray exposed his fear that Galen would love him less if the secret were told, what do you think about the way
Imber-Black responded? Did she seem flip to you, or effectively direct? Do you think she should have spent more time processing Ray’s feelings at that moment, before moving on or did she handle it just right? Explore these questions.

FOURTH SESSION
6. **Therapist’s Agenda:** After discussing the homework with the parents, does it make good therapeutic sense that Imber-Black began to actively move them in the direction of opening up the secret? Do you think she pushes her position too strongly or is she appropriately directive here? How might you proceed differently in this session?

7. **Agreement:** Given their different positions and concerns, does it seem realistic to you that the parents would both agree to tell the secret? What role do you think Imber-Black had in facilitating their unified approach? How would you work with a couple who did not agree about what to do in the face of a secret like this?

SUBSEQUENT SESSIONS
8. **Countertransference:** Imagine you were the therapist working with this family. What kind of countertransference or personal reactions might have come up for you once the truth of Galen’s history came out? How would it be for you to be a part of this family’s process? If there were secrets in your own family, do you think you would be able to be a good therapist for this family? Why or why not?

9. **Cutoffs:** As you review the development of this therapy over the course of a year, what comes to mind for you around the issue of cutoffs? Has anything shifted in your awareness of the impact of emotional cutoff in families and its multigenerational impact?

CONCLUSION
10. **Personal Reaction:** How would you feel about being a client of Imber-Black’s? Do you feel an alliance could be made, and that she would be effective with you? Why or why not?
Reaction Paper for Classrooms and Training

- **Assignment:** Complete this reaction paper and return it by the date noted by the facilitator.

- **Suggestions for Viewers:** Take notes on these questions while viewing the video and complete the reaction paper afterwards, or use the questions as a way to approach discussion. Respond to each question below.

- **Length and Style:** 2-4 pages double-spaced. Be brief and concise. Do NOT provide a full synopsis of the video. This is meant to be a brief reaction paper that you write soon after watching the video—we want your ideas and reactions.

**What to Write:** Respond to the following questions in your reaction paper:

1. **Key points:** What important points did you learn about psychotherapy? What stands out in how Imber-Black works?

2. **What I am resistant to:** What issues/principles/strategies did you find yourself having resistance to, or what approaches made you feel uncomfortable? Did any techniques or interactions push your buttons? What interventions would you be least likely to apply in your work? Explore these questions.

3. **What I found most helpful:** What was most beneficial to you as a therapist about the model presented? What tools or perspectives did you find helpful and might you use in your own work?

4. **How I would do it differently:** What might you have done differently than the therapist in the video? Be specific in what different approaches, strategies and techniques you might have applied.

5. **Other Questions/Reactions:** What questions or reactions did you have as you viewed the therapy in the video? Other comments, thoughts or feelings?
Suggestions for Further Readings, Websites and Videos

BOOKS


WEB RESOURCES

www.psychotherapy.net  An in-depth interview with multigenerational family therapist Monica McGoldrick.

www.ackerman.org  Ackerman Institute for the Family, where Imber-Black is Director of the Center for Families and Health

www.familyprocess.org  *Family Process* is a multidisciplinary international journal, edited by Imber-Black, that publishes research, training, and theoretical contributions in the broad area of family therapy.

RELATED VIDEOS AVAILABLE AT WWW. PSYCHOTHERAPY.NET

The Angry Couple  
– with Susan Heitler, PhD

“I’d hear laughter”: Finding Solutions for the Family  
– Insoo Kim Berg & Steve de Shazer

The Legacy of Unresolved Loss: A Family Systems Approach  
– Monica McGoldrick, LCSW

Tools and Techniques for Family Therapy  
– John Edwards, PhD
Complete Transcript of Family Secrets: Implications for Theory and Therapy

with Evan Imber-Black, PhD

INTRODUCTION

And of course I am afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger.

My daughter said, “Tell them about how you’re never really a whole person if you remain silent, because there’s always that one piece inside you that wants to be spoken out, and if you keep ignoring it, it gets madder and madder, and hotter and hotter, and if you don’t speak it out, one day it will just up and punch you in the mouth from the inside.”

—Audre Lorde (2/18/34 - 11/17/92)

Imber-Black Commentary: Touch a family deeply and you will find a secret kept from a spouse, a child, a lover, a parent, an in-law, a friend, a boss, a teacher, or even from the secret-bearer. Secrets fashioned in one generation may be handed down like booby-trapped heirlooms, waiting to explode into symptomatic expression, even a generation or two later. All families have secrets, which divide those who know from those who don’t know. Some secrets fuel the emergence of symptoms. Secrets can profoundly influence the emotional process of the entire family. Many problems remain stuck because a powerful secret is affecting family relationships. A secret may remain deeply hidden or erupt suddenly in an unplanned, destructive fashion. Either of these extremes may intensify symptoms in a family member, and block the family from using its own resources and outside support for change. Careful therapeutic intervention is essential.
In this video, I will first review some key dimensions of secrets and their impact on families. I will also describe the relationship between secrets and symptoms. Then, I will present my work with a family, the Riegers, in which there is a profound secret. I will show how I ask questions about secrets and help create the conditions in which family members can gradually open up what has long been hidden.

Now let’s look at three key aspects of secrets:

1. Secrets are **systemic and relational**. Secrets create triangles, hidden alliances, and cutoffs. They define the boundaries of who is in and who is out, and regulate closeness and distance in family relationships.

2. Secrets create issues of **loyalty and betrayal**. Keeping a secret can make us feel close to those who share it, and more distant from those we keep the secret from. Only when we enter into a secret may we simultaneously become a trusted confident and a betrayer of trust within the same network of relationships.

3. Secrets create and reflect **hierarchical power relationships**. The very same secret, such as a secret of violence or sexual abuse, may keep one family member in a position of power, while keeping another family member, often a wife or a child, powerless and silenced. Those with less power in relationships may utilize secrecy and silence for their very survival.

Secrecy can deeply affect our relationships and our self-regard. A secret shapes the inner life of the secret keeper. “If you knew, you wouldn’t accept me or love me,” thinks the secret keeper. A secret also shapes the inner world of the outsider. The outsider may feel worried, confused, and mystified. “Something’s wrong, but I’m not supposed to notice. I must not be seeing what I’m seeing. It must be me who is wrong.” A secret can impede our competence, identity, and life course. A bright child is unable to learn in school until she discovers the important secret of her adoption. A young man doggedly pursues a career for which he is not suited. Later, he learns that his grandfather, who was murdered, and about whom no one spoke, worked in the very same field.
Not only may secrets cause symptoms, symptoms may also be kept secret, adding to the tense emotional climate in which family members can’t talk openly together. Even life-threatening symptoms, such as violence, alcoholism, addiction, or physical illnesses, particularly AIDS, may be kept secret because they are stigmatized by the wider culture and considered shameful. When symptoms are kept secret, access to needed relational, educational, and therapeutic resources are blocked.

A symptom can be a metaphor for a particular secret. A young child’s refusal to speak outside the family, an adolescent’s breaking and entering, or a young woman’s bulimia, can all be metaphorical comments on what remains hidden and unspeakable in the family. Symptoms can also serve to distract family members from facing unbearable secrets or difficult facts.

One person’s symptom can provide the family with a safe, repetitive topic of conversation. If the therapist also becomes narrowly focused on the symptom, it’s easy to miss the secrecy in which a symptom is embedded and from which it springs.

So we see that the cumulative effect of secrets on the family emotional process is far-reaching. Family members become anxious when they must zealously guard a secret, and live in constant fear of its disclosure. Conversation becomes rigid, narrow, and repetitive. Those kept out of the secret also experience heightened tension in relationships. Secret-keeping ultimately requires a withdrawal of one’s full emotional presence. Family members become missing in action, physically present but emotionally distant. Communication is marked by defensiveness, mystification, anger, and reactivity.

**FIRST SESSION**

This was certainly true of the Rieger family. Liz and Ray Rieger came to see me because they were terribly concerned about their son, Galen, who had just turned 14. Galen was losing interest in school, and recently received an in-school suspension for cursing at a teacher who was questioning him about some money which had been stolen from her desk. This was the most recent episode in a long series of flare-ups. Let’s look at a segment from the first therapy session.
Imber-Black: I’m really glad you could all come in today. I would be interested in hearing, really, from each of you what you think is going on in the family right now.

Ray: Well, Galen’s been getting in trouble at school, and it just seemed like the last straw. I mean, the things that have happened in the family, it just…one more thing. I don’t have time for this.

Liz: Well, none of us have time, you know. We’re working, we’re busy, we’ve got Megan who gets ignored. And it’s just one thing after another. The last straw was his teacher calling the other night. Money had been taken off her desk. Galen says he didn’t take it, but I’m about to wipe my hands of it.

Ray: Yeah.

Liz: Uh, we don’t know what to do. He’s grounded for two months and I, you know, what more can we do?

Imber-Black: What did the teacher say to you happened when she confronted him about the money?

Liz: She just said that he’s out of control in class.

Ray: He cursed her out. He used language that he doesn’t use at home. I just don’t understand.

Imber-Black: How long would you each say that this has been a problem for the family?

Liz: You know, it’s getting worse, but it’s just been going on, it seems like, since maybe 4th or 5th grade?

Ray: Galen and I have had…there’s something going on with us for, you know, we… Sometimes it’s okay, but we just, we seem to just get at each other’s throats. But there are times…It seems like it’s been forever, it’s been forever.

Imber-Black: You know, when you say there are times, I find sometimes for families there are specific time periods when a problem gets worse or gets better, and I wonder, just if you reflect over the last few years, are there special times or certain times when any of you notice that the difficulty that you’re struggling with gets worse?
Liz: It seems like school always starts out okay, the start of the school year, and I don’t know what happens.

Ray: Yeah, it’s a fresh beginning. I mean, it’s like it’s a new start.

Liz: But you know, within a few weeks, it just…something seems to go on.

Imber-Black: So more toward the end of September, beginning of October? Is that kind of what you would say?

Liz: It seems that way, uh-huh.

Imber-Black: Have you noticed that, Galen, that some of the difficulties that you’re struggling with get worse in October?

Galen: Not really.

Imber-Black: Uh-huh. What do you see, Megan? What happens for the family in October?

Megan: Like on Halloween or something, I make a mask or something, and he, like, gets real mad at me. He just steals it or breaks it or something, or steals all my candy and eats it.

Imber-Black: Uh-huh. And how is your mom doing at that time of year?

Megan: Well, I don’t know, like, my whole family gets really tense and really mad at each other because of my brother.

Imber-Black: And you think it’s because of your brother. Have any of you noticed anything else that seems to happen around that time of year?

Liz: I just always figure it’s just school and he thinks it’s going to be easy and it gets hard, and, you know, he just has a short fuse.

Imber-Black: You know, something I’m wondering when you think about what’s been going on with Galen, what’s your biggest fear? What are you most concerned is going to happen?

Liz: You know, all I can tell you, I just worry about him just not thinking before he does things.
**Imber-Black:** Do you have a picture in your mind of the kind of adult he’s going to be?

**Liz:** Well, I’m sure he’ll be fine if he just kind of pulls himself together.

**Ray:** Yeah, yeah.

**Liz:** You know, I’d like him to be like Ray, who’s very responsible and, you know, seems to think before he does things, but...you know, I don’t know.

**Ray:** I mean, even Megan does a better job of that sometimes.

**Liz:** Yeah, I think she watches what he does and avoids getting into trouble, but she does her homework, she doesn’t get in trouble.

**Imber-Black:** Uh-huh. What do you think about that, Galen?

**Galen:** She gets in just as much trouble as I do, sometimes. She doesn’t get blamed for anything she does. It always leads to what I’m doing.

**Imber-Black:** You know, when you think about your whole family, including your extended family, I’m wondering, is there anybody that Galen reminds you of?

**Ray:** Uh, no, not really.

**Liz:** Uh-uh.

**Imber-Black:** You know, I’m wondering, as you think about your family’s history, if there’s any event in the life of your family that some of Galen’s behavior brings to mind right now.

**Liz:** I don’t...I can’t think. You know, I’m feeling so much pressure about his problems with school, it’s kind of interesting to think about the family, but...

**Ray:** I’m not sure how relevant that is, Doctor. I mean—

**SECOND SESSION**

**Imber-Black Commentary:** Following the first session, Galen stayed out much later than usual without permission and got drunk for the first time.

**Imber-Black:** How was your week since I last saw you?

**Liz:** Galen drank. He was out...he drank. He went out with some kids
and came back and he had been drinking. I don’t know what to do. I mean, I don’t know what to do. He was drinking…[to Galen] You were drunk, you were drunk.

**Imber-Black:** Is that the first time anything like this has ever happened?

**Liz:** As far as I know, yeah. I don’t know what you were thinking about, I don’t know what you were doing. Do you know what can happen?

**Galen:** It was only a couple of beers.

**Liz:** It was more than a couple of beers.

**Ray:** If it was only a couple of beers—

**Liz:** It was more than a couple of beers. It really was. Nobody’s sick like that.

**Ray:** Well, kids do that.

**Galen:** At least I’m not doing drugs.

**Liz:** Well, who knows where one thing leads to another. Do you have any idea what can happen?

**Imber-Black:** You know, I’m wondering: Has anyone else in the family ever had a problem with alcohol?

**Ray:** No, not…certainly not in my family.

**Liz:** We don’t drink. I mean, once in a great while we might have a glass of wine. He’s not seen any drinking that I’m aware of.

**Imber-Black:** Galen, what do you think about your parents’ response to what happened?

**Galen:** First they’re yelling at me, then they’re speaking to me softly like I’m their friend or something. I don’t know what to think. I don’t understand half their thinking.

**Imber-Black Commentary:** Several aspects of the first two sessions with this family made me wonder about the possibility of an important secret. While no one or two of these factors, or all of them together will automatically indicate the presence of a secret, they at least raise the hypothesis in my mind: The degree of their constriction; their discomfort with any effort on my part to shift the focus off of Galen; the escalation of
Galen’s symptoms immediately following the first session, as if he were responding to a covert message to keep the focus on his own behavior, and thereby protect the family from having to delve into anything else; Liz and Ray’s tendency to both under—and overreact to Galen’s missing his curfew and getting drunk.

• Degree of Constriction
• Discomfort Shifting Focus
• Escalation of Symptoms
• Under and Overreaction

THIRD SESSION

Then, Liz and Ray came in without Galen for the third session.

Liz: I hope it was okay that we came, just the two of us. Galen couldn’t come today, and we didn’t think there was any point in just coming with Megan, so we came.

Ray: We thought it would be best to capitalize on the time to see you anyway.

Imber-Black: I’m glad you decided to come anyway, because, you know, in my experience, when there’s a problem with a child like there is with Galen, sometimes it’s good to have an opportunity just for the adults to talk. So, maybe we could use today to talk about things that perhaps would be hard to raise with the children here.

Liz: I don’t know what you’d have in mind.

Imber-Black: I guess I’m wondering if there are things in Galen’s history, or in the history of the family, in the relationships, that you’ve had a hard time talking to him about that maybe we could spend some time talking about today.

Liz: Well, you know, there are some things he doesn’t know about, and doesn’t need to know about, but…Do you want to talk to her about that? I don’t know if it has to do with this—

Ray: I don’t know. I guess we could. We’re here alone anyways.

Liz: Okay, this is just among us.
Imber-Black: Yeah, please, go ahead.

Liz: It’s probably important for you to know that, you know, Ray is a wonderful father, but he’s not Galen’s father. He’s Megan’s father.

Imber-Black: I see.

Liz: But I was married a long, long time ago and Galen’s real father died when Galen was six months old, in fact, um—

Imber-Black: Oh. How did he die?

Liz: It was a car accident.

Imber-Black Commentary: Jerry had been drinking before the wreck, and apparently caused the accident. Liz and Jerry married in January of 1979. Galen was born in May of that same year, and Jerry died on October 10, 1979. It was clear from the dates that Liz was pregnant before their marriage. Although Liz’s family reluctantly supported the wedding, they did not want a public ceremony because of their embarrassment about Liz’s being pregnant. Her mother also felt that Liz was marrying beneath her status. Jerry came from a working-class family and Liz’s was upper-middle class. Jerry was seen as irresponsible, impulsive, and headed for trouble when he died. His alcoholism was very embarrassing to Liz and her family, and they tried to keep it a secret. Liz’s mother took the lead in expressing the idea that Galen would be better off not knowing about his biological dad.

In the face of this pressure, and because she never felt comfortable with them, Liz distanced from Jerry’s parents. Before long, she had totally cut off from them. Ray somewhat reluctantly went along with the secret. He legally adopted Galen shortly after he and Liz married. Over time, Galen began to demonstrate a pattern of increasingly impulsive behavior, which reminds Liz of Jerry. Liz and Ray have begun to think to themselves that Galen carries Jerry’s bad seed, his irresponsible genes.

Imber-Black: Who are the people who know about this? Who in your extended family know, for instance?

Liz: Well, of course my family knows, but it’s all but forgotten. I mean, it was such a long time ago. My mother—

Imber-Black: What advice did your mom give you at the time?
Liz: She just thought that Ray was going to be a very good father for Galen, and wanted a family, and she just thought it would be best for everybody.

Imber-Black: I’m wondering, over the time that the two of you have been together, have there ever been times when you’ve thought together or separately, maybe we should tell Galen. Maybe he’s getting old enough now to know this.

Ray: You know, it seemed that it… it’s gotten such a thing built up now that to tell him about it now would be just difficult.

Liz: I do wonder once in awhile.

Imber-Black: Uh-huh. Do the two of you ever talk about that with each other?

Ray: Not much, no. It doesn’t come up.

Imber-Black: In my experience, I think, when you start out making a decision not to share information like this with a child, it’s usually because you want to protect him, and it sounds like that was the impetus for this in your family. And then, as the child grows, it gets a little confusing to know when’s he old enough to know. I’m sure with some of the behavior Galen’s been getting into, it’s made you doubt even more, should we tell him this.

Liz: I’ve worried a little bit about the drinking. That really worried me a little bit.

Imber-Black: That sort of reminded you of his dad then?

Liz: Just a little bit.

Imber-Black: When did his dad die?

Liz: His dad died in October of 1979.

Imber-Black: I see. Do you make any connection between that and what we were talking about a few weeks ago, about Galen’s getting pretty problematic every October?

Liz: Well I know, if I’m honest about it, sometimes in the end part of October, I get a little low. But I keep to myself. I’m sure it doesn’t affect anyone else.
Ray: I’ve noticed that, though, now that you’re talking about it, a lot of times about this time of year, you really seem to be distant from me; I mean, not available, not affectionate. I’ve just felt that you’ve gone somewhere, you know?

Liz: I didn’t know you knew that.

Imber-Black: Yeah, it’s interesting, in my experience when it’s hard to talk to a child about something, sometimes other areas of family life become hard to talk about, too. It sounds a little bit like maybe that’s what’s happened here.

Liz: I didn’t know you knew that. I just kind of kept to myself and I didn’t know you knew that.

Ray: I just…I didn’t want to bring it up, you know.

Imber-Black: You know, I’m curious what you think: If the two of you don’t tell Galen about this, who do you think will tell him?

Ray: I’ve thought, you know, I’ve thought about it vaguely, what would happen if someone…but I don’t know who he’d run into that would tell him.

Liz: I kind of thought maybe when the time came when he really started dating, or had a serious girlfriend, maybe, you know, that might be a time—

Imber-Black: I see. So you have thought about, sort of, some markers that would show you that he’s old enough to handle this material.

Liz: Just a little bit, I’ve thought about that.

Imber-Black: You know, I’m wondering, in your whole family, both sides of the extended family, who do you think would be most in favor of you telling him now, and who, perhaps least in favor?

Liz: I don’t think anybody would be in favor. It would be kind of a relief to me, but the whole family was frankly glad when it was over with Jerry, even if it was a tragic kind of thing.

Imber-Black: I see. But you do think it would be a relief to you, huh?

Liz: It really would, you know? It would.

Imber-Black: Okay.
Ray: Why? Why would it be a relief to you?

Liz: Just keeping the secret… And I look at him and how he, you know, sometimes he doesn’t look as much like you as, say, Megan does. Just all the stuff, you know? I—

Imber-Black: I’m curious if you did tell him—if you can imagine that for a moment—what do you think his response would be?

Liz: See, I don’t know how you go about something like that. He’d be so angry, and then wouldn’t he wonder how many other things we had… It’s lying. It gets very complicated. I think well enough alone.

Ray: Well, that’s why, I don’t know about relief, because to me… I’m his father, and I don’t know how that would make him feel about me. Sometimes we don’t get along that well as it is.

Imber-Black: What are you most concerned about, Ray, in terms of that, if he were to know? How do you think that would affect the relationship between the two of you?

Ray: I don’t know. I guess respect. He wouldn’t respect me as much. Maybe he wouldn’t love me as much. I don’t know—

Imber-Black: Okay, so that’s what is at the core of some of this for you, that it’s frightening to think that maybe he would respond that way. Have you worried about that?

Liz: Yeah, I do. I mean, I think Galen and Ray don’t have the best relationship, but part of that is just adolescence, I think. But I just would hate for it to get worse.

Imber-Black: Okay.

Liz: Do you think we should tell him?

Imber-Black: Well, I think I’d like us to think about that, and look at that question, now that this is on the table. What I’d like to ask the two of you to do between now and the next time we meet—and I think the next time we meet, I’d like to ask just the two of you to come in again—is to do a little homework at home on this question. What I think might be helpful would be if each of you, first separately, think through all of the relationships in the family—your relationship, yours with Galen, yours with Galen, yours with Megan, yours with
Megan, Galen and Megan with each other, relationships to extended family—and to ask yourselves, what would be the pros and cons, the advantages and disadvantages, on each relationship, of opening this secret? And then, what would be the pros and cons on your whole family’s functioning? Okay?

And then after you’ve done that, maybe take some notes, I’d like the two of you to have a conversation with each other. I find that when people can do this, what I’m asking you to do, it helps you to think through the questions that I’m hearing from you today. And then if you’ll come back with that, then I think we’ll be a little closer to the answer of what you should do next.

Ray: Okay.

FOURTH SESSION

Imber-Black Commentary: The two week break is given so that they will have sufficient time on their own to reflect on the secret and the implications for opening it up or not. They report on this process in the next session.

Imber-Black: How did you do with the homework?

Liz: You have tough homework. It was a good idea, you know, to think how to tell people, but I don’t know how to do that. I mean, I wouldn’t know how to start.

Imber-Black: Okay. You know, I think what I’d like to suggest is that we hold that and what I’d be interested in is, What did you think about in terms of the pros and cons of opening this? How do you think that would work in the various relationships in the family?

Liz: Sometimes I think the only one who would be a winner would be me. I mean, I’d be kind of relieved.

Imber-Black: Would you?

Liz: But other than that, I, you know, like I said, I don’t know where… I don’t know how I’d do it.

Imber-Black: Uh-huh.

Liz: You know, with Megan, or my mother.
Ray: It seems so hard.

Imber-Black: What kinds of specific things did you think about, Liz?

Liz: Well, you know, I’ve changed a lot in the years since I agreed with my mother, you know, not to talk about this, so I could probably talk to her. But it’d still be pretty hard. I mean, she’d be really upset, I think.

Imber-Black: Okay.

Liz: And, uh—

Imber-Black: Do you feel like you need to get her permission, or—

Liz: No, I think I could do it, but I think it would be hard on her. And it would be kind of hard to do it, I think.

Imber-Black: Okay. What other relationships did you think about in the homework I asked you to do?

Liz: You know, this is really weird, but I kept thinking about Jerry’s parents, you know. Was it a silly idea that at sometime they were just going to turn up, or there’d be some… you know, we’d drive in the driveway and they’d be there. It’s been really scary and upsetting.

Imber-Black: Okay. This must have been something that’s been on your mind through the years.

Liz: Yeah, I mean, you know, your parents are great with Galen, but Jerry’s parents, you know, are his grandparents, and I’ve just been thinking about that all week.

Ray: I didn’t know you’d been thinking about that.

Imber-Black: Commentary: I questioned Liz about her relationship with her former in-laws and her fears about their entry into Galen’s life. It emerged that they saw her as a bad influence on their son, Jerry. She got pregnant with Galen, and then Jerry and Liz married, and his parents were critical of her. But looking back, much of the fuel for the cut-off was Jerry’s death itself.

Liz: So I haven’t seen them, you know, since Galen was a few months old.
Imber-Black: Well how do you imagine it would go if they did come back into his life, even as sort of an extra set of grandparents?

Liz: I don’t know how your parents would feel about that.

Ray: I’m not sure how I feel about that. That’s kind of uncomfortable, and now for these new people to be showing up and announcing themselves as his grandparents, it makes me feel uncomfortable. I don’t know what it would do to my parents.

Liz: You know, it can go either way. I mean, it’s helped to think about telling, but on the other hand, you know, I just almost wish we could go back to before all of this began. Because I don’t know how to tell, and what all would happen if we started. You know, one thing just leads to another.

Ray: I know. There are times that it seemed it would work out; it would be easier. And sometimes it’s just so complicated.

Imber-Black: You know, maybe now would be a good time for us to talk a little bit about what you came in for with Galen, and where we are now with this issue of the secret about his father. It does seem to me that some of Galen’s behavior is linked pretty directly to this secret. You know, I’m thinking about things like the fact that he gets pretty problematic and pretty out of hand every October, the time of year when his dad died. I know this is a new idea, but in my experience with children, when there is a central secret like this, they sense it. Kids have pretty good antennae. You get sad in October, the two of you get more distant, pretty soon everybody’s distracted by what Galen is doing. So that, in a funny way, him not knowing the information, I think ends up being some kind of a disservice to him, and ultimately to the two of you, too, because you have to handle what he ends up doing. So I guess it would be my view that now is probably a time to think pretty directly about opening this with him.

Liz: That’s a…In a way, I feel like that would be a big relief, and it’s also a tall order.

Imber-Black: Yeah, oftentimes it is a big relief, and I think…You know, I don’t want you to hear it as an order from me. I certainly want to be able to be there to help you try to figure out what would be some
of the best ways to do this. What do you think about what I’m saying in terms of his behavior and the link to this pretty core secret in the family?

**Ray:** I never thought about tying it together like that.

**Liz:** You may have something. If I’m really honest about it, I mean, I get kind of low in October. Not because, you know, I was still in love with Jerry or anything, but just, you know, I just think about it at that time of year, and maybe it affects Galen. Maybe he picks up on that.

**Imber-Black:** Yeah, I imagine that he does. And, you know, the other thing I’m thinking is that there is an opportunity right now for the telling of this to really be in the hands of the two of you, versus him finding out in some accidental, unplanned way.

**Imber-Black** Commentary: It is important to give the family as much time as they need to think about whether they really want to open a secret, unless issues of immediate safety are involved. I always try to respect the family’s decision-making and their sense of timing, while at the same time being clear about my own position. At this point, Liz decides to move forward.

**Liz:** I think I would really like to tell him. I really think it would be a relief to me.

**Imber-Black:** Um-hmm.

**Liz:** Would you be willing to do that with me, because I always thought it was all my fault, you know, because of the pregnancy, and—

**Imber-Black:** Let me be really clear. I think the issue of fault doesn’t even pertain here. I do think that what you decided to do in keeping this from him was a natural kind of thing that parents would do to protect a young child. He was just a baby when this happened, and then you came into his life and he sees you as his father. I do think it would be important for the two of you to sit down and tell him together.

**Ray:** Right…I guess that’s right. I was thinking it certainly should come from me. I should be involved in that. I feel like in a way I almost have more at stake than anybody else here, you know?

**Imber-Black:** Well you all have something at stake, I think.
Liz: How, how would we do it? Where?

Imber-Black: Well, would you rather tell him at home? Or would you rather have a session here and tell him?

Ray and Liz: What do you think?

Imber-Black: Well, you know, in my experience in working with a lot of families with secrets, generally I find it’s better to do it at home, unless there’s some element of danger, which certainly does not pertain to your situation. When there is, then I recommend that we do it in the session. But in working with the two of you, you know, I think that you’re strong people and that you could handle this very well at home, and that then, we would use our work here to deal with all of the relationship changes that the two of you have very astutely pointed out are going to happen.

Ray: You feel okay about doing it at home?

Liz: Well, I’d like to talk more about when and how but, yeah, it would be a relief.

Imber-Black: You know, sometimes when a secret like this opens, or people have decided to open it, there is kind of an order of telling that people think through, and I’m wondering, are there some people that you think you’d want to talk to, to tell your decision to before you tell Galen?

Liz: I’d have to tell my mother. I don’t know quite how to do that.

Imber-Black: Okay, well, let’s talk about that for a minute. How do you think you would go about doing that?

Liz: I think I need to just tell her that this is what Ray and I decided we needed to do for our family.

Ray: On the phone or something.

Imber-Black: Okay, all right. That sounds good to me.

SUBSEQUENT SESSIONS

Imber-Black Commentary: After the session, Liz called her mother to inform her that she was going to tell Galen about Jerry. As predicted, her
mother became quite anxious, but Liz was able to explain to her mother that this was a decision she and Ray had made, and she believed it was necessary for Galen to know the facts. Her mother was able to hear her, and much to Liz’s surprise, her mother supported her decision.

The next day, she and Ray told Galen, and as expected, he was initially upset. It is usually the case that when a major secret is opened up, the real relationship work has just begun.

In subsequent sessions, the therapy focused on helping the family develop a more accurate picture of Jerry, including both positive and negative facts about him. Liz showed Galen photos of Jerry that had been in storage, told him stories about his biological father, and answered Galen’s questions about his dad. They took a trip as a family to the cemetery where Jerry is buried. Ultimately, I helped Liz reconnect with her former in-laws. After the awkwardness of the initial contacts by letter and then by phone, they responded to her more warmly than she ever would have guessed, and were very interested in meeting Galen. Gradually a clearer, more objective picture of Jerry came into focus, including his good qualities, as well as his problems. Liz gave Galen several things of Jerry’s that symbolized some of his dad’s best qualities: a backpack—he was a real outdoorsman—and a copy of his favorite book. He loved to read sea stories.

Liz and Ray worked to enable a more open integration of the facts of her first marriage into their own history. Although Liz had not kept Jerry a secret from Ray, the pressure of maintaining the secret from Galen had greatly diminished the degree to which her history with Jerry had been processed by the new marriage partners. In particular, Liz had not let Ray know just how devastated she was by Jerry’s death.

Imber-Black: Liz, let’s spend a little time talking about what that period of time was like for you when Jerry died.

Liz: Well, you know, it was hard. It was really hard. I mean, I was a lot younger, you know, but he was the first person who was really important to me outside of my family and, you know, it was kind of an exciting time. There was a lot of intensity in the relationship. It was just the two of us, you know. None of the parents were behind it. It was really hard for me when he died.
Imber-Black: When the two of you got together, how did this get talked about?

Ray: Well, some of these things I didn’t know how difficult—

Liz: Well, it was in the newspaper and all, because it was quite an event when Jerry died, but I didn’t think he had to know much more.

Ray: We didn’t talk about it that much.

Imber-Black: I see. How do you think that’s worked for the two of you over the years of your marriage? It’s almost like it’s become a little taboo, I think.

Liz: It feels funny talking about another husband with Ray, you know?

Ray: It feels funny hearing it. I don’t know if it would have been easier, though, at this point, to have known more about that. I don’t know how we would have talked about it.

Imber-Black: Are there some questions that you have Ray, that you want to ask?

Ray: I guess you really loved this guy. I mean, you wouldn’t have married him if you—

Liz: No, I really did. I mean, it was different, you know. We were kids. I mean, I really did. But it was different.

Imber-Black Commentary: Finally, a year after the secret was opened, a ceremony for the whole family was held, in which Ray and Galen adopted each other as stepfather and son, with special mention of Jerry as Galen’s biological father being included.

CONCLUSION

When working with secrets, it’s crucial to distinguish shameful secrets from dangerous secrets. Shameful secrets, like the secret in our case example, may be about issues from the family’s history, such as a suicide, another death, divorce, past abuse, mental illness, or paternity. Or a shameful secret may be a current event: an illness, an adoption, infertility, financial problems, an affair—any issue that when kept secret supports symptoms and generates distress in relationships and individual functioning.
Shameful Secrets such as:

- Suicide
- Death
- Divorce
- Past Abuse
- Mental Illness
- Paternity
- Illness
- Adoption
- Infertility
- Financial Problems
- An Affair

These secrets, however far-reaching in their emotional consequences, do not place anyone in immediate danger. A therapist encountering a shameful secret that poses no immediate risk has time on her side to do the necessary relationship building and careful coaching that can permit the healing of the many complex issues emanating from the secret.

Dangerous secrets, which may also be shameful, are those that put people in immediate physical danger or extreme emotional distress. Here, the therapist is ethically bound to move quickly and decisively in order to promote the safety of the vulnerable client. Such secrets include current physical and sexual abuse, and life-threatening symptoms, such as severe substance abuse or suicidal threats.

Dangerous Secrets such as:

- Current Physical and Sexual Abuse
- Life Threatening Symptoms related to Substance Abuse or Suicidal Threats

As therapists, we also need to help our clients think through the distinction between secrecy and privacy. As a general rule, secrets involve a sense of shame, while private matters may not. More to the point, secrets often violate a person’s right to know information that affects them, such as issues of birth origin or one’s own health status. The
withholding of such information blocks the other’s ability to think and act clearly about their lives.

Secrecy:
- Shame
- Violates the Other’s Right to Know
- Blocks Clear Thoughts and Action

In contrast, privacy typically pertains to concealment that doesn’t significantly affect another person or family relationship.

Privacy: Concealment that has little Effect on the Other

Secrets don’t simply spring full-blown from within a family’s own boundaries. Decisions regarding secrecy, as well as what remains private, are embedded in a social and cultural fabric that includes economic, political, religious, ethnic, class, and gender values.

- Economic
- Political
- Religious
- Ethnic
- Class
- Gender

Information which was considered shameful, and therefore secret, 30 years ago, such as pregnancy before marriage, is now accepted and spoken about openly in most families. Painful secrets about skin color, still kept in many African American families, stem directly from the history of slavery and the ongoing legacy of racism in our society. Recently, our government has adopted the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy for gays and lesbians in the military. This policy, described as a reform, institutionalizes a pattern of secret-keeping in which knowing, but acting like you don’t know, and pretending that you are what you are not, is officially sanctioned. In both families and larger systems, ever deeper layers of secrecy, shame, and related symptomatic behaviors, are the predictable outcomes of such a policy.

To do effective therapy involving secrets, we will need to be prepared to help a family examine any given secret in its multiple, overlapping
contexts, including the relevant beliefs and constraints from the wider culture. Individuals and families will inevitably confront us with an endless variety of secrets and secret-keeping. Each of us will need to continue the challenging work of evolving our own ways of identifying, understanding, and working with secrets.

I’d like to close with the words of the poet Audre Lorde, from her book Sister Outsider:

We can learn to speak when we are afraid, in the same way we have learned to speak when we are tired. For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition. And while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of silence will choke us. The fact that we are here and that I speak these words is an attempt to break that silence and bridge some of the differences between us. For it is not difference which immobilizes us but silence, and there are so many silences to be broken.
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