

The "R" Word,
Part Three:

Disclosing Secrets and Playing Offense Keep Relapse at Bay

The author of *Secret Keeping* suggests strong offense strategies to win the recovery game. *by John Howard Prin*



If you are in early sobriety, welcome to a lifetime of satisfying, authentic recovery. Two practical solutions to help strengthen your recovery besides relapse prevention include sobriety retention and honestly disclosing your secrets. Retention means to keep something valuable you already have; prevention means to defend something valuable from threats. The former is based on a strategy of offense; the latter is based on a strategy of defense. These two techniques—disclosing secrets and playing offense—can offer new ways to help boost your effectiveness and improve your odds of success for staying sober.

Pre-sobriety, you may have hidden your using behavior and deceived people who asked about it, even to the point of lying outright to protect yourself. Put plainly, you kept secrets. A Twelve Step adage com-

behaviors. If so, take a look at this chart and determine where you may have fit.

Column 3 is the battleground of secret keeping because it:

- *Leads to acting out sneaky rituals and stealing hours away from one's normal life to feel better by indulging an addiction;*
- *Triggers self-defeating behaviors that require clever cover-ups, alibis and excuses that lead to a double life;*



→ CONTINUUM OF SECRETS →			
1	2	3	4
Simple Secrets	Silent Secrets	Secret Keeping	Illegal or Psychotic Behavior
Everybody has some	Dark and nasty but passive	Acting out ethical and moral wrongs	Arrests or institutional confinement
Benign	Passive	Dynamic	Malignant

monly heard is, “You are as sick as your secrets.” If keeping secrets was a major part of your past, your recovery will depend on remedying this dysfunctional behavior.

Secrets Sabotage Your Sobriety

Like so many former users captive to their addictions, I once kept a rat’s nest of secrets cleverly covered up. Sneaking drinks and concealing traces of my abusive binges was normal, something I came to name “secret keeping.” If you can relate to this kind of subterfuge, you probably were good at dodging the truth and misrepresenting the frequency, amount and consequences of your substance abuse or compulsive

- *Stretches, and eventually breaks, ethical and moral standards and relational boundaries;*
- *Crosses the line from thoughts and plans (columns 1 and 2) to actions and habits (columns 3 and 4).*

If you find that the statements above describe your former addictive behaviors and attitudes, then you will need to come clean. Sobriety involves doing anything that helps you go back, literally, to square one; otherwise, your hard-earned sobriety is vulnerable and tenuous.

During your active addiction, your secret keeping required a lot of maintenance.

Hiding your secret self from others caused you a great deal of stress and unease, which only led to further addictive behaviors to escape the discomfort. It is essential to your newfound sobriety to disclose these secrets, offering you peace of mind and a healthy foundation for ongoing recovery.

Let’s say you take the courageous step of admitting your secrets to yourself or sober friends. Well done. But somewhere along the line the people closest to you, your family and children and trusted friends, will no doubt need to learn about these skeletons as well. That means committing yourself to coming, and staying, clean.

Disclosure of Secrets

In order for this sensitive process to succeed, it is necessary to consider who you need to tell, when and where to tell them, the amount of detail necessary to disclose and the need for the person listening to react and respond. Weighing each of these wisely helps make the awkward process of disclosing less difficult and uncomfortable. Consider these dos and don’ts.



COMING CLEAN WITH LOVED ONES: WHO, WHEN, WHERE AND HOW MUCH TO TELL

DON'T disclose over the phone, email or letter. Speak in person, if possible.

DON'T wallow in details or names. Speak in themes.

DON'T save the worst for later.

DON'T allow young children to be present. Speak to children separately.

DO meet with a professional counselor ahead of time, perhaps also when disclosing.

DO meet in a quiet place where the listener feels safe.

DO write out what you will say. Use as a guide, not word for word.

DO allow the other person to vent feelings and ask questions.

Dual Motivation Wins the Game

Stable sobriety involves more than saying no to alcohol or drugs, compulsive gambling or shopping. It also means saying yes to significant changes in self-concept, thinking, lifestyle and values. With the aid of a sports analogy to clarify, it means playing offense.

The path to a truly stable recovery can be littered with obstacles. Relapse prevention, a strategy based on defense, requires you to avoid what is negative (triggers, high-risk situations, old behaviors, stinking thinking). Gaining what's positive (offense) is the basis of sobriety retention.

Both approaches have their merits and, when they work together, are especially powerful. Use both approaches—relapse prevention and sobriety retention—along with the techniques of disclosing secrets.



DUAL MOTIVATION WINS THE GAME

External pressures to relapse lead to playing DEFENSE

- Blocking points
- Struggling not to lose
- Feeling trapped: no choices
- Spousal/family threats
- Saying "I'm sorry" too often
- Perspiration (to win)
- Avoiding what's worse

Internal motivators to stay sober lead to playing OFFENSE

- Scoring points
- Staying loose – win or lose
- Growing: new choices
- Spousal/family support
- Keeping promises you made
- Inspiration (to win)
- Gaining what's better

Check out the chart, and compare the outer game of competing to win to the inner game of feeling inspired and satisfied as a winner.

Think of yourself as an athlete in how you conduct your life. The more points you put on the scoreboard—the more days you stay sober and live happily without using—wins the game and inspires everybody, especially yourself. Playing offense is positive, adds points and wins games. Although practicing relapse prevention techniques will help prevent a loss, building a new life of winning sobriety makes victory taste all the sweeter.

One Winning Game

Let's take a look at someone in early recovery, Barry, and how this dual approach played out in his life. At the ripe age of 31, Barry determined to make the most of his chances to build sobriety. Besides staying away from bars and former drinking buddies (defense), Barry began frequenting bookstores and libraries (offense). He'd always loved books, so rediscovering reading was like going to the candy store. Rather than dwelling on the void left by the misspent times when he used to get drunk and strung out, he switched to spending enjoyable hours reading about his favorite subject, psychology. He became so enthused that he returned to college to

finish a bachelor's degree that he had let fizzle 10 years earlier due to drinking and drugging. With new non-using friends and the reinvigorated goal of educating himself for a professional career, he invested his money on tuition and books (earnings he formerly squandered on drinking and drugs) and his newly available time on studying.

Having a positive goal to focus his energy on made staying sober easier (offense), along with his discipline of avoiding high-risk situations and increasing his awareness of triggers to evade (defense). Also, Barry stopped focusing on the years he had squandered job opportunities, thereby lessening his resentments and self-pity, and instead he improved his self-esteem by jotting down things in his daily life he felt grateful for (waking up with a clear head thanks to no more hangovers, for example). By appreciating everything he had rather than pouting about things wrong or missing, Barry made his sobriety easier, less risky and more enduring.

A lifetime of satisfying, authentic recovery can become the source of fulfillment you once sought in addictions—now that's something to cheer about! ■

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