



# STEALING HOURS

Based solely on outward appearances, Jack\* looked normal, made a good impression, and was a high-functioning adult as well. However, the drama of his hidden addictive life, and the ways it gained control over him are another story. Gradually the ways he kept secrets and the resulting pattern of living a double life of lies, cover-ups, and addictions (what I call “stealing hours”) undermined any hope of living a fulfilling life. This individual is hardly alone — his life mirrors the experience of millions of other people.

*We are as sick as our secrets!*

**by John Howard Prin, L.A.D.C.**

## **Is Your Client a Secret Keeper<sup>SM</sup>?**

A new client is sitting in your office during an initial assessment for substance abuse. He looks you squarely in the eye, but you sense that he is only telling you what you want to hear. You probe for straight answers but get carefully shaded remarks instead. The more you hear, the more you suspect that he may be cleverly misleading you or using a calculated strategy to misinform. If he is intentionally concealing key facts or consequences, your diagnosis needs to reflect this analysis; otherwise his progress in treatment will be hampered and chances for successful recovery decreased. Moreover, your own treatment-planning and case-management will be confused and overly complicated.

## **You may have just interviewed a Secret Keeper**

The term for this common phenomenon, called secret-keeping<sup>SM</sup>, derives from clients who are leading carefully concealed secret lives. Besides their drinking or drug misuse/dependency, which the therapist is attempting to assess, they are covering up hidden self-defeating behaviors such as compulsive gambling, sexual addictions, eating disorders, or credit card debts—the usual suspects. Burdened by these unhealthy secret activities, they “steal hours” away from their public lives to act out their secret behaviors or passions—often for decades—but rarely get caught.

Based on the premise that duality is at the root of everybody’s life, secret-keeping shows up in one of every 15 people. To some extent, everyone hides certain secrets and battles duality. But double-mindedness can take root and compulsive patterns, at some time or to some degree, can develop. Secret Keepers are people whose secrets have power over them and cause them to become sick, to misbehave, or to violate others. Behind the masks of sincerity and friendly smiles lies a darker side: the sordid, slippery domain of double-mindedness. At the root of double-mindedness is addiction—the constant shifting back and forth between two opposing mindsets: “normal on the outside” and “abnormal on the inside.” For many sufferers, daily life becomes a burdensome struggle of living in two worlds, ricocheting between public respectability and private temptations.

For clinicians, it is beneficial to determine the presence of secret-keeping traits in a client before significant work begins. What often presents as denial, for example, could really be the clever and consciously calculated strategy by a client to mislead or lie. Once a diagnosis is made that distinguishes between the unconscious lack of awareness of facts or consequences by one client versus the fully conscious and intentional concealment of facts or consequences by another client, progress can be made.

This article explores some of the ways clients’ secret-keeping traits manifest and some techniques therapists and counselors can use to identify these clients. A future article will offer some techniques behavioral health professionals can use to better manage these clients and help them succeed in recovery.

## Second Guessing First Impressions

The following list of early indicators gives some hints to help sharpen counselors’ awareness when initially assessing clients. *Secret Keepers tend to:*

- *Present well.* Male or female, regardless of ethnic origin, they function well, are often productive, and maintain their jobs and careers. They attend their kids’ soccer games and musical concerts, and pay taxes.
- *Be heavily invested in a positive image.* Secret Keepers generally dress well, have good hygiene, and take active roles in their communities. Their homes or apartments look nice, and they get along with neighbors.
- *Have much at stake (a lot to lose).* Their greatest fear is being found out, having their double lives exposed. At stake are their hard-earned reputations, career potential, borrowing credentials, and overall standing in the eyes of people who matter—family, friends, coworkers.
- *Suffer from co-existing disorders.* A married client and father in a men’s group continued to relapse despite sincere pronouncements that he wanted to stay sober. After many weeks, he finally disclosed that he’d been hiding 200 porno videos in the ceiling tiles of his basement and was betting large sums of money on fantasy

football games. His pornography and gambling habits, completely unknown to anybody, were generating inner conflict and remorse that prompted relapses.

- *Seldom have criminal or detox histories.* To safeguard their positive images, Secret Keepers isolate on the sly. They wait to indulge until they can withdraw inconspicuously from being observed by anybody, thereby avoiding any public display or reason for arrest. Maintaining a clean record is one of their cleverest cover-ups.

Clients who fit these kinds of indicators may not, of course, be Secret Keepers at all. They may simply be upstanding citizens who have blundered and have one-time consequences that require a chemical evaluation. The professional assessor may have only suspicions to go on at first, but assessment is an ongoing process throughout treatment and aftercare. Thus, the assessor should stay alert to these kinds of hints and other signs as they crop up in future treatment sessions.

## Actual Secret Keeper Examples

Herman\* was one of my clients who sought treatment for his alcoholism but carefully avoided disclosing his use of cocaine. When I was preparing his discharge summary, I learned from his probation officer of his recent positive urinalysis for cocaine. I called Herman into my office, told him I had no leverage to prevent his legal penalties, and raised the issue of dishonesty with him. He broke down in tears—grateful tears. Herman admitted that having kept his deceptive secret felt far worse than it now felt having it be known, and he pledged to fight his addiction to cocaine by staying abstinent. I emphasized how he had destroyed trust, and he begged for a second chance. We discussed the concept of “rigorous honesty,” as the Big Book urges, and he pledged to do so with such passion that I agreed to reinstate him. In the weeks ahead, his abstinence took hold and his nickname became known to co-members in the group as “Honest Herman.”

Another of my clients, Trevor\*, reluctantly sat through treatment for his abusive drinking and drugging, but nothing much happened until he confessed during a private meeting with me about the 23 credit cards that he had charged to their maximum limits. Much of his drinking was meant to deaden the guilt and shame he felt. Like Herman, Trevor’s addictions were multiple, in addition to stealing from his childrens’ college savings funds. Until each of these addictions was admitted to and exposed, his full healing and release from the dishonesty and deception of secret-keeping<sup>SM</sup> only generated negative reactions harmful to himself and loved ones. After numerous relapse-prevention sessions and weekly 12-step meetings, Trevor eventually started living in the healthy present rather than the repetitive, addictive past. Both he and Herman came to realize the benefits of disclosing vulnerable information in supportive environments and changing their behavior based on whole-minded thinking.

The following chart is a tool that can be used to help sift through the complex web of lies, deceit, cover-ups, excuses, and alibis exhibited by clients with secret-keeping histories. The first two of these four categories are *not* clinically significant, but the third and fourth are.

Continuum of Secrets			
1	2	3	4
Simple Secrets (everybody has)	Sinister Secrets (dark & nasty but passive)	Secret Keeping (acting out ethical and moral wrongs but not illegal)	Criminal Behavior (arrestable offenses)

1. “Simple” secrets are those that emerge from isolated, rare events, the kind of harmless mistakes or lapses in judgment that seldom require

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self-disclosure or therapy—often memories from childhood or adolescence. A young student peeks at her classmate's test answers or an underage driver takes his dad's car out for a joy ride and returns the vehicle safely. Indirectly secrets like these open the individual to dualistic thinking that can sneak in and take hold.

2. "Sinister" secrets are those that become ingrained thoughts or attitudes, which can risk one's mental health. Three college fraternity brothers got drunk and went boating together at midnight. One fell overboard and the other two jumped in to save him. The two drowned but the first survived. He felt intense guilt and concealed any hint about their drinking at the young men's funerals, and years later he feels exhausted, dirty inside, and burdened by having caused his pals' deaths and deceiving their families. One act (getting drunk) led to another (falling overboard while boating) that compounded into a tragedy (two drownings) that led to a cover-up (concealing truth from the victims' parents) that led to years of torment from silently keeping the truth secret. His progress in treatment was stunted until he came clean.
3. "Secret-Keeping" goes one step further and includes *acting out* the habits or rituals that can lead to risking one's safety, health, or sanity and that of others; these harmful patterns make the client feel sick and can benefit from disclosure and therapy. Secrets in this category include behavior patterns and rituals that lead to stealing hours away from one's "normal life" to feel better. These hidden acts stretch, and eventually break, ethical/moral standards and relational boundaries but do not cross the line into crime (breaking the law). The head pastor of a leading-edge evangelical metropolitan church engaged in an ongoing extramarital affair that broke ethical, moral, and relational boundaries, but he was not hauled off in handcuffs when caught nor did he face criminal charges or serve time in jail.
4. "Criminal" secrets may include a mixture of secrets from the previous categories, but acting out violates legal boundaries/standards, thereby making them crimes punishable by law. Sara Jane Olson fits this description. After evading arrest for attempted murder in California as a fiery member of the rebellious Symbionese Liberation Army under the alias Kathleen Soliah, she lived 24 years inconspicuously as a suburban mother and housewife in St. Paul, Minnesota until being discovered and sent to prison.

## In Closing

Using this chart helps separate "everyday" secrets (Continuum 1 and 2) from "dysfunctional" secrets (Continuum 3 and 4). It offers criteria to base treatment-planning decisions on: *ethical/moral/relational boundary violations*, for example, that are documented and which will support clinically valid reasons to address these issues with planned therapeutic interventions. The assessor's job during the course of treatment also may be easier once the destructive habits withheld by Secret Keepers are identified, as compared to helping clients in denial who unconsciously do not/cannot fathom the harmful depths of their addictions. Providing different interventions for each kind of client will benefit both the clients and the therapist. ▼

\*Names have been changed.

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The following MetaViews (self-help principles) are from John's perspective as a professional counselor and recovering Secret Keeper<sup>SM</sup>. Hopefully these reflections will encourage you to consider your clients' challenges and choices.

Secret-keeping<sup>SM</sup> can start as innocently as eating too much candy. A secret life can begin long before addiction to mood-altering chemicals. Of course, some secrets are normal and present no harm—not everything about a person needs to be shared.

The triad of secret-keeping emotions below traps one in a guilt cycle:

- the *excitement* of breaking rules,
- the *pleasure* of indulging in what is forbidden, and
- the *delight* of not getting caught.

Secret lives center on substances, objects, or events—not people with whom we are meant to connect. Sneaking off to seek thrills offers the subconscious pay-off of numbing persistent heavy feelings, but patterns can develop of secretly isolating or disconnecting from family, friends, work associates, or the larger community.

Over time, as Secret Keepers' negative feelings stay harbored internally, their insides no longer match their outsides. Eventually they become experts at one of the eight split mindsets of secret-keeping, *Acting one way while feeling another*. They may smile and say friendly things on Tuesday while feeling remorse and self-loathing for Monday night's losses at the casino.

Secret Keepers keep their private thoughts locked away in mental solitary confinement. A secret life demands high levels of calculation and hair-splitting between two worlds—an additional source of stress. Alibis or excuses become "normal," but they are really just lies. Active deception (lying) occurs whenever one *walks a tightrope between two opposing worlds* (another of the eight split mindsets), taking a toll on one's personal integrity and relationships with loved ones.

Delusional thinking after months and years can form irrational beliefs. Irrational beliefs can lead to the "*Lie of Addiction*": *Something outside me can fix what is wrong or missing inside me*. Hidden habits and the intensity of addictions may help convince us that we can reverse ugly reality and salve our hurts, but the actual result is: we set ourselves up for unrealistic expectations and failure.

## Reference

Prin, John. (2004). *Stolen Hours: Breaking Free From Secret Addictions*. Minneapolis: Syren Books.

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