As Camila’s predicament illustrates, even in the closest relationships there are times when people keep information secret. Camila’s relationship with Khaled is built on openness and trust, yet she has kept a big secret from him. What would you do if you were Camila? Would you tell him about the abuse, or would you continue to keep that information private? If you decided to tell him, could you disclose the information in a way that would help him understand why you had kept it secret from him for so long? If you decided not to tell him, would you continue feeling guilty about keeping a secret from him? In close relationships, people expect their partners to be open and tell them everything, but this does not always happen.

As discussed in Chapter 5, scholars have used a dialectical perspective to explain how people...
navigate between expressing some parts of themselves to others, while keeping other parts of themselves private (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Petronio, 2000, 2002; Rosenfeld, 2000). According to the dialectical perspective, people have strong needs for both openness and secrecy. Rosenfeld (2000) put it this way:

I want to be open because I want to share myself with others and get the benefits of such communication, such as receiving social support, the opportunity to think out loud, and the chance to get something off my chest. I do not want to be open because I might be ridiculed, rejected, or abandoned. Open or closed; let others in or keep others out? Every interaction has the potential for raising the tension of holding both desires simultaneously. It is not that one desire "wins" and the other "loses." Rather, they exist simultaneously. Interpersonal life consists of the tension between these opposites. (p. 4)

The push and pull of the forces of disclosure and privacy is evident in all types of interpersonal communication, even with cell phones. Indeed, people say that the feature they like most about their cell phones is that they can contact people whenever they want, but the feature they like least is that other people can also contact them whenever they want (Baron, 2008). In this chapter, we explore both ends of the openness-closedness dialectic by looking at how people express themselves through self-disclosure, as well as how people maintain privacy by setting boundaries, using topic avoidance, and keeping secrets.

SELF-DISCLOSURE

Communication is the primary vehicle for developing relationships and creating feelings of connection and closeness. In fact, much of the research on relationship development has examined how self-disclosure helps people move from being strangers to being close friends or lovers. Traditionally, self-disclosure has been defined as verbal communication that reveals something about a person to others. However, some researchers have also included aspects of nonverbal communication as self-disclosure. For example, if someone is wearing a religious symbol such as a cross or a particular type of scarf they are disclosing information about themselves and their affiliations. Some scholars also regard certain types of photos, especially when posted online on sites like Facebook, to be self-disclosive if they give people information about a person’s activities or whereabouts (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007). Most self-disclosure, however, is verbal. Some self-disclosure, such as talking about where you grew up or what your major is, is fairly impersonal; other self-disclosure, such as talking about your future hopes and childhood insecurities, is much more intimate. As discussed in Chapter 5, as relationships develop, increases in personal self-disclosure typically characterize communication. As relationships deteriorate, self-disclosure usually decreases.

Dimensions of Self-Disclosure

One of the first theoretical explorations of self-disclosure was developed by Altman and Taylor (1973). According to their social penetration theory, self-disclosure usually increases gradually as people develop their relationships. Self-disclosure can be conceptualized in terms of six dimensions: (1) depth, (2) breadth, (3) frequency, (4) duration, (5) valence, and (6) veracity (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Gilbert, 1976; Tolstedt & Stokes, 1984).

DEPTH AND BREADTH According to social penetration theory, the dimensions that are most central to the process of relationship development are depth and breadth. Depth refers to how personal or deep the communication is whereas breadth captures how many topics a person feels free to discuss. As relationships develop, they tend to increase in breadth and then depth. In fact, according to social penetration theory, it is helpful to visualize the process
of self-disclosure during relationship development as the slow unpeeling of an onion, as Figure 6.1 illustrates. An onion has a rather thin and flimsy outer layer, but as you peel through the various layers, they get harder, with the core of the onion very tightly bound.

Similarly, Altman and Taylor (1973) suggested that there are three basic layers of self-disclosure: (1) a superficial layer that is easy to penetrate; (2) a social or personal layer that is easy for most friends, family members, and lovers to penetrate; and (3) a very intimate layer, or core, that is seldom revealed, and then only to people who are completely trusted. At the superficial layer, people reveal commonplace facts about themselves that are not threatening in any way. For example, telling someone your name, major, hometown, zodiac sign, and favorite color are benign self-disclosures. At the social or personal level, people typically reveal more about their likes and dislikes and hopes and fears, but they still keep their deepest hopes and fears a secret. For example, you might tell most of your friends that you’d like to marry a certain kind of person, that you had an unhappy childhood, or that you are worried about getting a job when you graduate from college. But you might not tell them all the intimate details related to these topics. At the core, people share all the personal details that make them who they are. Within the core are people’s most secret, intimate feelings. For example, you might disclose negative childhood experiences that you would normally prefer not to think about, and you might confess all of your fears and insecurities about succeeding in your chosen profession. You might also reveal intimate, positive feelings about people by telling them how much they mean to you and how lost you would be without them.

**FREQUENCY AND DURATION** The next two dimensions focus on frequency (how often people self-disclose) and duration (how long people self-disclose). Various types of encounters can be characterized differently based on these dimensions. For example, when you have to work on a class project with someone you don’t know well, you might need...
to get together with this person frequently in order to complete the class assignment. Although your self-disclosure with this person would probably be described as low in depth and breadth, it would likely be high in frequency—at least until you complete the project. Of course, if you began to develop a close relationship with your classmate, the depth and breadth of your self-disclosure would probably increase so that you’d be talking about more varied and more personal topics in addition to discussing the assignment. This example illustrates an important point: Frequent self-disclosure can lead to liking and relationship development.

It is possible for people to have self-disclosures of limited frequency but long duration. A common example of this is the “stranger on the plane” (or train) phenomenon. When you sit down next to someone on a plane, you might chat with the person for the entire duration of the flight. You might even disclose intimate details about your life to your seatmate, figuring that you probably won’t see this person again, so you are not really making yourself vulnerable. Thus, it is the limited frequency of the interaction that allows you to confidently engage in self-disclosure that is high in both depth and duration. Online interactions can be similar to the “stranger on the plane” phenomenon in some ways. Studies have shown that people tend to disclose more information, including more in-depth information, online compared to face-to-face encounters. For example, one study showed that people were more willing to declare their romantic intentions toward someone over e-mail than face to face (Joinson, 2003). One reason for this is that rejection may be easier to handle online. Other research suggests that people might use higher levels of disclosure when communicating with acquaintances online versus face to face because there is more anonymity and communication is more controllable (Mesch & Beker, 2010).

In other cases, people engage in frequent but short disclosures. For example, coworkers might talk every day but only for limited amounts of time during a coffee break. One study showed that the duration of face-to-face interaction is more strongly related to closeness in friendships than is the frequency of interaction (Emmers-Sommer, 2004). This same study showed that friendships regarded as especially close and intimate tend to be characterized by high levels of in-depth communication. Thus, friends do not need frequent contact to stay close as long as they periodically have long, in-depth conversations.

VALENCE AND VERACITY The final two dimensions relate to the specific content revealed by the self-disclosure. Valence refers to the positive or negative “charge” of the self-disclosure. For example, if you disclose your dreams, your warm feelings for someone, or your happiest childhood memories, the self-disclosure has a positive valence. By contrast, if you disclose your fears, your hostile feelings for someone, or your unhappiest childhood memories, the self-disclosure has a negative valence. Valence is a crucial dimension of self-disclosure because it helps determine how people feel about one another. Think about friends who call you all the time to complain about their lives. Their self-disclosure might be full of breadth and depth, but instead of feeling closer to your friend, you might end up feeling depressed and want to avoid such conversations in the future.

Similarly, some research has shown that couples show an increase in depth of self-disclosure when they are continually arguing or when their relationship is in decline (Tolstedt & Stokes, 1984). The types of comments they typically make, however, are negatively valenced (“I wish I’d never met you,” “Why don’t you ever listen to me?” “You make me feel unimportant”). Thus, high depth alone does not tell the whole story. Depth and valence work together to create the emotional climate of a self-disclosure. Of course, some negatively valenced self-disclosure can draw people closer. For example, when two individuals feel comfortable enough to reveal their deepest fears, worst failures, and most embarrassing moments, they probably have developed a particularly close relationship. The key is to limit the number of negatively valenced disclosures.
relative to the number of more positively valenced disclosures.

Veracity refers to how honest or deceptive self-disclosure is. True self-disclosure is honest in that it reveals something real about oneself to others. However, there are times when people give false or misleading information to others that passes as self-disclosure. For example, when people like others, they sometimes exaggerate their positive personal qualities to try to make a positive first impression. When first meeting someone to whom they are attracted, they often exaggerate how successful they are, perhaps by describing their job as more high powered than it actually is (Rowatt, Cunningham, & Druen, 1998, 1999). Alternatively, they may exaggerate or hide certain aspects of their appearance through the use of clothing or makeup. One study of online daters showed that the less physically attractive people are in person, the more likely they are to enhance their photos and exaggerate their physical attributes on their dating profiles (Toma & Hancock, 2010). Of course, information that looks like self-disclosure but is actually deceptive can backfire, leading to lower levels of trust that hinder relationship development. Honest self-disclosure is the only real path for developing closeness. Indeed, studies have shown that when people met online, they were more likely to have a successful offline relationship if their online disclosure had been honest and in-depth (Baker, 2005; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). Dishonest representations are risky; they might open the door to someone finding you more attractive initially, but that door may shut when they find out the truth.

Most research on the dimensions of self-disclosure has been conducted in face-to-face contexts. However, a growing body of research has examined how self-disclosure operates in mediated contexts by looking at the dimensions of depth, breadth, and frequency (see Box 6.1).

**BOX 6.1 TECH TALK DEPTH, BREADTH, FREQUENCY, AND VALENCE OF SELF-DISCLOSURE IN COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES**

Besides communicating face to face, people self-disclose using a variety of communication technologies, including voice calling, texting, social networking, and e-mailing. Research has shown that the dimensions of self-disclosure play an important role in how people use self-disclosure to develop and maintain happy relationships using these communication technologies.

In general, when people are first getting to know one another, they tend to disclose in greater depth and breadth when using communication technologies than when communicating face to face (Ruppel, 2015). There are two primary explanations for this. First, people are likely to be less self-conscious or worry about rejection when communicating via communication technologies compared to face-to-face. Second, people may compensate for the reduced nonverbal behavior in communication technologies by upping their use of verbal disclosure. However, in ongoing relationships people disclose more in person, with people reporting less depth and breadth in their text messages and phone calls than in their face-to-face interactions (Ruppel, 2015).

Other research has focused on how dimensions of disclosure in communication technologies function to maintain relationships. Hollenbaugh and Ferris (2014) found that people who are concerned with maintaining relationships with people in their social network tend to use Facebook disclosure that is high in breadth and frequency. Similarly, Boyle and O’Sullivan (2016) found that dating partners reported more intimacy when they used communication technologies to disclose in addition to disclosing face to face. High levels of breadth and positive valence were most important for promoting intimacy. Using communication technologies such as texting to engage in frequent disclosure that is high in breadth may help people feel present and accessible to one another throughout the day (Pettigrew, 2009).

However, some research suggests that it is also important for technology-assisted disclosure to be high in depth.

(Continued)
Close Encounters

Self-Disclosure and Liking

Because self-disclosure makes people vulnerable, the act of self-disclosure conveys both trust and closeness. Self-disclosure also helps people uncover similarities and reduce uncertainty about one another (see Chapter 4). When the information people exchange is favorable, people will want to get to know each other even more. Thus, according to social penetration theory, self-disclosure typically increases gradually as people get to know, like, and trust one another. If people do not develop trust or liking, self-disclosure will not progress very far, and the relationship will stagnate or terminate.

Many studies have examined the relationship between self-disclosure and liking or closeness. In a statistical review of 94 studies, Collins and Miller (1994) tested the disclosure-liking hypothesis, which predicts that when a sender discloses to a receiver, the receiver will like the sender more. They found support for this hypothesis, although this relationship appears to be stronger among acquaintances than strangers. Similar findings have emerged for studies looking at online disclosure. For example, Jiang and colleagues (2011) varied online disclosure so that some people received in-depth disclosure whereas other people received general information from someone posing as another student. When people received more in-depth disclosure, they reported feeling more liking and closeness to their partner. Collins and Miller’s statistical review also supported the liking-disclosure hypothesis, which predicts that people will disclose more to receivers they like. Thus, people are more likely to disclose to close relational partners and to people to whom they are attracted than people they dislike.

Of course, not all disclosure leads to increased liking. Scholars have identified several circumstances that affect whether self-disclosure leads to liking or disliking, including the timing of the disclosure, how personalistic disclosure is, the channel or means by which someone discloses, and the partner’s response to disclosure.

**The Timing of Self Disclosure** When self-disclosure violates normative expectations, it will not lead to liking (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993). Sometimes people disclose too much information too quickly or disclose negative information that leads others to dislike them.
145 (Bochner, 1984; Parks, 1982). As Derlega and colleagues (1993) observed, “Highly personal, negative disclosure given too soon inhibits liking unless some strong initial attraction already exists” (p. 31). Self-disclosure is usually a gradual process; the depth of disclosure reflects the level of closeness in a relationship. Therefore, too much disclosure too early can scare people away.

**PERSONALISTIC VERSUS NONDIRECTED DISCLOSURE** Self-disclosure is a better predictor of liking when receivers think that their partner only discloses information to certain special people. If senders are perceived to disclose information indiscriminately, the self-disclosure may be seen as less valuable, and liking may not result. Self-disclosure is valuable to the extent that people think that it is directed at them because they are trustworthy and have a close relationship (or the potential for a close relationship) with the sender. Taylor, Gould, and Brounstein (1981) called this type of communication personalistic disclosure. Personalistic disclosure is also important in computer-mediated contexts; people are especially likely to feel increased liking and closeness toward an online partner when they believe that disclosure was prompted by something special about them or their relationship (Jiang et al., 2011). In other words, they think that the disclosure was directed specifically at them rather than just general information they would share with a lot of different people. Blogs and social networking sites are also good examples of this. As Jang and Stefaneone (2011) suggested, the information people post on blogs is often nondirected disclosure that is sent to large groups of people rather than individuals and is therefore considered less personal. Similarly, there is a difference between posting a self-disclosive statement on your Facebook timeline versus sending a direct message on Facebook to a specific friend. The latter message would be more likely to signal closeness than the former.

**THE CHANNEL** Research also suggests that the communication channel—such as face-to-face or mediated— influences how much disclosure leads to liking. As noted previously, there is evidence that people actually disclose more personal information in mediated contexts—such as social networking sites and blogs—than in face-to-face contexts, especially when they are first getting to know one another (e.g., Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). One reason for this may be that people need verbal self-disclosure to get to know one another in mediated contexts, especially since they do not have access to information from nonverbal cues. According to Walther’s (1996) hyperpersonal model, people develop stronger impressions of one another in mediated contexts compared to face-to-face contexts because they over-rely on the limited, mostly verbal, information that they exchange. These stronger impressions can then lead to exaggerated feelings of closeness and liking compared to what they might experience in face-to-face contexts. Jiang and colleagues (2011) described this as an intensification effect: personal self-disclosure produces more intense feelings of closeness and liking in computer-mediated contexts than in face-to-face contexts.

**THE RECEIVER’S RESPONSE** Scholars have also noted that “disclosure will not lead to liking if it is responded to in a negative manner” (Derlega et al., 1993, p. 32). If a sender discloses sensitive information and the receiver dismisses the information or responds in an unkind or critical manner, both sender and receiver are likely to feel negatively about the interaction and about each other. As shown later in this chapter, people are less likely to disclose to others if they fear negative judgment or unresponsiveness. Usually, however, receivers match the intimacy level of a sender’s self-disclosure, as the literature on reciprocity of self-disclosure suggests.

**Reciprocity of Self-Disclosure**

For relationships to flourish in the initial stages, self-disclosure must be reciprocated. Extensive research has focused on the reciprocity or matching of self-disclosure, starting with Jourard’s (1959, 1964) pioneering work on patterns of self-disclosure.
Jourard believed that reciprocal self-disclosure, which he termed the **dyadic effect**, is the vehicle by which people build close relationships (see also Altman & Taylor, 1973; Gouldner, 1960). Reciprocal self-disclosure occurs when a person reveals information and the partner responds by offering information that is at a similar level of intimacy. For example, when Camila and Khaled were first getting to know one another, they started out by exchanging rather superficial information, but then Khaled shared some stories about his childhood with Camila, and she reciprocated by telling him some equally personal information about herself. This illustrates Jourard’s idea that self-disclosure usually begets more self-disclosure. In other words, people are likely to respond to high levels of self-disclosure by revealing similarly personal information. Of course, there are exceptions to this rule. For example, you might not want to continue a conversation with someone because you don’t want to “lead the person on,” or you might decide that the other person’s level of self-disclosure is inappropriate and makes you uncomfortable. In these cases, you are less likely to reciprocate self-disclosure.

Nonetheless, research suggests that people typically feel a natural pull toward matching the level of intimacy and intensity present in their conversational partner’s self-disclosure. In a statistical review of 67 studies involving 5,173 participants, Dindia and Allen (1992) concluded that the evidence overwhelmingly supports the tendency for people to reciprocate self-disclosure. People typically match the intimacy level of their conversational partner’s self-disclosure regardless of the context (face to face versus via telephone or the Internet), the type of relationship (strangers versus intimates), or the amount of liking or disliking (Dindia, Fitzpatrick, & Kenny, 1997; Henderson & Gilding, 2004; Hosman & Tardy, 1980). Individuals who violate the norm of reciprocity are perceived as cold, incompetent, unfriendly, and untrustworthy (Bradac, Hosman, & Tardy, 1978). The timing of reciprocity also makes a difference in initial interactions. Researchers used an experiment to compare two situations (Sprecher, Treger, Wondra, Hilaire, & Walpe, 2013). In the first situation, people took turns asking questions and disclosing across two interactions. In the second situation, people asked questions in one interaction and listened, and then disclosed in the other interaction (or vice versa). Sprecher et al. (2013) found that people in the first situation reported more liking, which shows that having shorter turns while disclosing reciprocally is important within initial interactions.

Although immediate reciprocity is highly preferred in initial encounters when people are first getting to know one another, in long-term close relationships reciprocity is often delayed. For example, a husband might disclose his social anxieties to his wife, who simply listens patiently. Subsequently, the wife might reciprocate by sharing some of her deepest fears while the husband assumes the listening role. Immediate reciprocity is not necessary because long-term partners know that they will have opportunities to reciprocate in the future.

Reciprocity is the norm in face-to-face encounters, but not always in mediated contexts. In particular, when people disclose on blogs or social networking sites, they do not usually expect a response unless their disclosure is directed to a particular person. A study on blogs (Jang & Stefanone, 2011), for example, showed that people were much more likely to reciprocate personal disclosures than nondirected disclosures. If receivers believe a message on a blog is intended for a general audience, they may not feel obligated to respond—either by acknowledging the message or by reciprocating with self-disclosure on the blog or in a later conversation. On social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, it is also likely that people are more likely to reciprocate disclosive statements sent via direct messaging rather than those placed on a timeline for all one’s friends to see.

### Risks Associated With Self-Disclosure

Despite its benefits, disclosing personal information is risky. When we tell other people our innermost thoughts and feelings, we become vulnerable
and open ourselves up to criticism. The vulnerability associated with self-disclosure may be stronger in face-to-face contexts, where people risk receiving immediate negative feedback and are less able to control their communication (Caplan, 2003). Indeed, some researchers have argued that people who lack the social skills necessary to communicate effectively in face-to-face contexts prefer to self-disclose online. As McKenna and colleagues (2002) put it, people “who have the social skills needed to communicate themselves well and effectively have little need to express their true selves or ‘Real Me’ over the Internet. The rest of us should be glad that the Internet exists” (p. 12).

A study by Ledbetter and others (2011) tested this idea by investigating how attitudes toward online self-disclosure and attitudes toward social connection work together to predict disclosure on Facebook. In this study, people who reported a preference for online communication over face-to-face communication were unlikely to disclose on Facebook. This finding might represent an overall tendency not to disclose. In other words, people who would rather disclose online than in a face-to-face context may generally not like to disclose much personal information, regardless of the context. Ledbetter and his colleagues also found that people who believed that online communication is important for social connection reported more self-disclosure on Facebook but only if they also reported that they did not have a preference for online communication compared to face-to-face communication. This suggests that the people who disclose the most on Facebook have two characteristics. First, they believe that online communication is an essential tool for forming and developing social connections. Second, they do not have a preference for online communication over face-to-face communication, which means that they are comfortable in face-to-face settings and likely have good communication skills. To see how much of each of these characteristics you possess, complete the test in Box 6.2.

While communicating online may decrease some of the risks and vulnerabilities associated with self-disclosure, it cannot erase them all. Regardless of the communication channel, self-disclosure carries some inherent risks that lead people to avoid talking about certain topics. Some of the most common reasons people avoid intimate self-disclosure include (1) fear of exposure or rejection, (2) fear of retaliation or angry responses, (3) fear of loss of control, and (4) fear of losing one’s individuality (Hatfield, 1984; Petronio, 2002).

**FEAR OF EXPOSURE OR REJECTION** Sometimes people worry that too much self-disclosure will expose their negative qualities and cause others to think badly of them, like them less, and even reject or abandon them. Hatfield (1984) put it this way:

One reason, then, that all of us are afraid of intimacy, is that those we care most about are bound to discover all that is wrong with us—to discover that we possess taboo feelings . . . have done things of which we are deeply ashamed. (p. 210)

Hatfield gave an excellent example of how revealing one’s real self can lead to rejection and abandonment when she told the story of one of her former graduate students. This young European woman was beautiful, intelligent, and charming; in fact, many men fell madly in love with her. Of course, she was not perfect—she had insecurities and self-doubts, just as we all do. But she put on a bright, charming facade in order to fit the perfect image that people had of her. The problem was that whenever she got close enough to a man to admit her insecurities, she fell off the pedestal that he had put her on. It was impossible to meet the high expectations of these men. When her perfect image was shattered, they lost interest.

**FEAR OF RETALIATION OR ANGRY ATTACKS** People also worry that their partners might become angry or use what they disclose against them. For example, you might worry that your relational partner will retaliate or withdraw from the relationship if you confess to a one-night stand, admit telling a lie,
### BOX 6.2 PUT YOURSELF TO THE TEST

**ATTITUDES TOWARD ONLINE COMMUNICATION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I feel less nervous when sharing personal information online compared to in person.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. If I couldn’t communicate online, I would feel “out of the loop” with my friends.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I feel like I can be more open when I am communicating online versus in person.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. If I lost Internet access, I think I would probably lose contact with many of my friends.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I feel like I can sometimes be more personal during Internet conversations than face-to-face conversations.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Without the Internet, my social life would be drastically different.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. When online, I feel more comfortable disclosing personal information to a member of the opposite sex than I would in person.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I would communicate less with my friends if I couldn’t talk with them online.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I feel less shy when I am communicating online versus face to face.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Losing Internet access would change my social life dramatically.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. I feel less embarrassed sharing personal information with another person online than face to face.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Online communication is an important part of my social life.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. It is easier to disclose personal information online than in person.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To obtain your results, first add your scores for odd-numbered items. Then divide by 7. This is your score for Attitudes Toward Online Self-Disclosure. Your score will range from 1 to 7. The higher your score, the more you prefer disclosing personal information online rather than face to face. Next, add your scores for the even-numbered items. Then divide by 6. This is your score for Attitudes Toward Online Social Connection. This score will also range from 1 to 7. The higher your score, the more you believe that online communication is important for being socially connected with people. According to Ledbetter and colleagues’ (2011) study, if you scored low on the first scale (Attitudes Toward Online Self-Disclosure) and high on the second scale (Attitudes Toward Online Social Connection), you are especially likely to use a social networking site like Facebook, Twitter, or MySpace as a communication tool.

---

Source: This is a revised version of The Online Communication Scale, adapted from Ledbetter, A. M. (2009). Measuring online communication attitude: Instrument development and validation. *Communication Monographs, 76*, 463–486. Copyright © 2009.
or recount happy experiences you had with a former relational partner. One of our students once told us that he was secretly in love with his brother’s fiancée. The two brothers had always had a very close but competitive relationship, and he worried that disclosing his feelings could lead to anger, suspicion, and even confrontation. He also worried that his brother’s fiancée would end up hurt, confused, and maybe angry. In other cases, people use the intimate information we share with them as ammunition against us. For example, if you tell your best friend that you sometimes only pretend to pay attention to people, your friend might later accuse you of being selfish and of not really listening when he or she is disclosing personal problems.

FEAR OF LOSS OF CONTROL People also worry that if they engage in too much self-disclosure, they will lose control of their thoughts and feelings or the thoughts and feelings of others. For example, Khaled fell in love with Camila after only a couple weeks, but he did not tell her he loved her then because he knew he might scare her away. Similarly, Camila might be afraid that if she starts talking to Khaled about the abuse she experienced as a child, she will break down and cry uncontrollably. People may also fear losing control of information, especially if they think that the receiver might share the information with others without their permission (Petronio, 1991, 2002, 2013). The theory is rooted in the assumption that people set up boundary structures as a way to control the risks inherent in disclosing private information. Private information is considered “any information that makes people feel some level of vulnerability” (Child, Duck, Andrews, Butauski, & Petronio, 2015, p. 350). These boundary structures are based on three principles associated with private information: (1) privacy ownership, (2) privacy control, and (3) privacy turbulence. See Figure 6.2 for a pictorial representation of this model.

Privacy Ownership

According to CPM, our private information is first and foremost ours. We should be able to decide with whom we share that information, if anyone. Indeed, there have been very distressing examples of people’s reactions to losing the ownership of their privacy, as illustrated by the suicide of a college student whose sexual encounter with a same-sex partner was recorded without his knowledge or permission through a webcam (http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/02/06/the-story-of-a-suicide). NOTE: If you or a friend are in crisis and considering suicide, seek help right away. Call the National Suicide Prevention
Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 for assistance or visit the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention at www.afsp.org for more information.

When we decide to share our private information with others, those people become authorized co-owners (also known as “boundary insiders”), with responsibility to maintain that exclusive ownership unless granted permission to do otherwise. This issue of ownership and co-ownership is becoming increasingly important because a growing percentage of our private information is now co-owned, and because our norms and expectations of privacy have changed. The management of this ownership can be seen in individuals’ decisions about which pictures to post and/or what information to disclose on their social media sites (Child & Starcher, 2016). Posting information or images immediately makes a large number of people co-owners of that private information, with related risks. Indeed, decisions about whose friend requests to accept are integral to our privacy ownership efforts (Frampton & Child, 2013; Mullen & Hamilton, 2016). Your decision about whether to accept a “friend request” from another student in your class, from your boss, or from your uncle all have implications for the boundaries of your information ownership, especially if available restrictions to content accessibility (e.g., who can view what is on your social media sites) are not carefully monitored. That sort of monitoring is an example of strategies related to the next principle of CPM: privacy control.

**Privacy Control**

Petronio (2013) discusses privacy control as the “engine of CPM.” This principle speaks to the idea that people feel strongly about having control over their own private information. We not only want to decide who, if anyone, is allowed to co-own our private information, but we also want to be able to control what aspects of that information (if any) they are allowed to share with others and how the information is framed. For example, secrets held by an entire family (like not telling anyone outside the family they are on welfare) require that all family members agree to keep the relevant information private, which means that they must coordinate their boundary structures.
and rules on that particular issue. In a similar vein, someone who cheats on a romantic partner must either implicitly (and naively) assume or explicitly discuss a degree of boundary coordination with the sexual partner to keep the incident a secret. To help maintain coordinated boundary structures, people usually develop penalties for group or dyad members who violate the boundary structure (Petronio, 1991, 2002). Boundary coordination becomes especially salient when the information is revealed to someone who is not a part of the original group. For example, Camila and Sara may want to keep the abuse they experienced between just the two of them since they are the only two who can truly understand what they went through. If Camila decides to tell Khaled what happened to her, she may feel obligated to inform Sara of her decision before disclosing the information to Khaled, perhaps even to seek her permission (privacy ownership). If Khaled is told, the addition of a new member into the secret-keeping group may necessitate additional boundary structure coordination, and the rules must often be made explicit to the new member (privacy control). So Camila may tell Khaled not to tell another living soul what happened to her, and never even to mention it in front of Sara. In other words, even after we decide to share information with others, making them authorized co-owners, we still want to control whether that information is spread farther and how, if at all, it is framed when shared with others. Who do you tell about your breakup? How do you want the story of the breakup told? And what strategies do you use to see to it that your privacy on this issue is maintained and that you maintain control over the “story”? Even if you want to spread the information widely and you have little concern over ownership (privacy ownership), you probably still want to make sure that the “story” about your breakup (e.g., who is to blame, what happened, why) is told a certain way (privacy control).

**Privacy Turbulence**

The third principle is that co-owners of information sometimes undergo privacy turbulence. Privacy turbulence occurs when new events force renewed boundary management (Petronio, 1991; 2013). There are situations in which old boundary structures may need to be either fortified or renegotiated. For example, when people’s lives change, topics previously avoided (e.g., the future of the relationship) may become acceptable topics (e.g., after a marriage proposal). Similarly, once a previous boundary structure is violated (e.g., when a secret is first disclosed), a radical change in the nature of the new structure may occur (e.g., the once-secret information becomes a commonplace disclosure). When the boundary expectations held by the original owner of the information are violated, confidentiality is considered to have been compromised. This breach is the sort of event that creates privacy turbulence.

Pederson and McLaren (2016) studied how people who had experienced a hurtful event managed that information with others. One of the unfortunate outcomes of that process was that they were sometimes hurt again by an “authorized co-owner” (a friend who they had told about the hurtful incident) telling others without permission. That privacy breach created **boundary turbulence** by forcibly reshaping the boundaries of who now owned that information and what they may know about it. That turbulence, in turn, likely affects the person’s willingness to reveal private information to others (ownership control) and their concern about the loss of control over information once revealed (privacy control).

Although medical settings are not contexts where most people expect confidentiality breaches, Petronio and Reierson (2009) identified several examples of such violations by medical personnel. For instance, patients are sometimes frustrated by the loss of control over their medical information once it enters the realm of a medical team, especially within teaching hospitals where the case may become an occasion to test medical students’ knowledge. Patients may feel violated by a loss of control over sensitive information. The result may be boundary restructuring in future encounters...
with physicians—a dangerous outcome since it may involve concealment of important information as a way to prevent a potential privacy breach. The ways in which individuals negotiate privacy boundaries thus can be both complex and challenging.

**Influences on Rules for Privacy Management**

CPM theorists also acknowledge that our decisions about privacy ownership, privacy control, and even our management of privacy turbulence is impacted by five main factors that shape our notions of privacy: (1) *culture*, (2) *personality*, (3) *the relationship*, (4) *biological sex*, and (5) *motivations*. First, each culture has different rules regarding privacy and self-disclosure (see Box 6.3). For example, some cultures have relatively loose rules regarding what topics are appropriate to discuss with strangers; other cultures are more restrictive. For example, cultures differ in terms of ownership over health information. Certain cultures, including in some Asian and Middle Eastern countries, have a family-centric tradition of health information disclosure, whereby physicians give information about a patient’s health only to a patient’s family. The family then decides what, if anything, to tell the patient. In contrast, countries such as the United States have strict laws that ensure that health information belongs only to the patient.

Second, personality guides disclosure decisions. Some people are highly self-disclosive and expressive, whereas other people are much more private. Third, a host of relational factors, such as attraction, closeness, and relationship type (friends

---

**BOX 6.3 AROUND THE WORLD**

**PRIVACY MANAGEMENT AND CULTURE**

Cultures vary dramatically in the extent to which individuals’ privacy is promoted. One dimension that seems to separate cultures on this front is communal-individual norms. In communal cultures, individuals play a secondary role to the good and rights of the community (e.g., the family). In contrast, individualistic cultures generally prioritize individuals over community members. This difference affects privacy expectations and disclosure norms in many ways. For example, studies have shown that some communal cultures treat an individual’s health information and health decisions as community owned. Physicians either withhold diagnosis information or first inform family members who then decide what to reveal to the patient (Hamadeh & Adib, 1998). Compare that to norms in the United States, where laws require the disclosure of medical information to the patient, and only the patient.

Privacy may also be difficult to maintain in cultures that are highly communal because of the realities of the living contexts. Communal cultures often expect all family members to live under one roof, often with very little space. Under these conditions, the privacy of one’s bedroom evaporates. When one shares a room with four or more siblings or relatives, it is difficult to maintain privacy. Famously, some people from communal cultures share generally private marital successes and challenges with family members. For instance, sheets taken from the bed after the first marital sexual episode may be displayed publicly, as evidence that the marriage has been consummated. Uncles or aunts may also be brought in as mediators to help solve marital conflicts in the family. Clearly, privacy maintenance is difficult in these contexts. A norm is established where community members, typically all with close connections to one another, look out for each other. So a teenager who tries to escape with a girlfriend to a remote location for privacy often discovers that the rendezvous was far less private than he expected, because others in the community saw them going to that location and then immediately shared the information with the parents.

Given the decreased status of the individual, vis-à-vis the community, in communal cultures, individuals’ perceptions of the appropriateness of revealing personal struggles is very different from those of people from more individualistic cultures. Therapists have long been

---

*Copyright ©2018 by SAGE Publications, Inc.*

This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.
aware of the need to be sensitive to cultural differences on this front (Sue & Zane, 1987). People often consider therapists in the United States to be safe havens to reveal dark personal secrets, and research has shown that such disclosures to therapists can be very beneficial. This benefit, though, is unlikely to be realized in communal cultures, where therapists’ offices are not shielded from the strongly held notion that personal disclosures and the difficulties they sometimes reveal are selfish and inappropriate. In other words, even people who go to therapists for help may be unwilling to engage in the necessary disclosure because of a sense, accurate or not, that they will be perceived by the therapist as overly focused on themselves.

Implications of cultural differences in individualism and collectivism has also been shown to have implications for privacy concerns on social media sites. In a comparison of attitudes of people in Germany and in the United States, Krasnova, Veltri, and Günther (2012) found that trust in the members of the social networking sites played a stronger role in shaping online self-disclosure decisions for participants in the United States than it did for those in Germany. Reed, Spiro, and Butts [2016] completed an even more comprehensive examination of privacy and its impacts on disclosure decisions on social media by examining 200,000 randomly selected Facebook users across 30 countries. Their results showed strong differences across countries in users’ disclosure preferences on Facebook (as defined by four different privacy settings).

Finally, much of our understanding of family strengths comes from an assumption that parents and children should disclose to one another. While that may be true in individualistic cultures, some communal cultures are founded on a premise of a certain distance between parent and child. As such, both parents and their children may perceive personal disclosures to one another as too intimate of an exercise. The patterns we have discussed here point out an interesting reality: We have argued that disclosure is linked to privacy—the less one discloses, the more privacy one has. However, we have also pointed to the reality of communal cultures, where both privacy and disclosure are low in some cases. What gives? What is the relationship between privacy and disclosure? These are interesting and important questions that do not yet have clear answers, but one thing is clear: People’s experience with privacy goes beyond simple disclosure patterns.

versus coworkers), impact the dynamics of privacy and self-disclosures. As mentioned previously, people tend to disclose more with individuals they like than with those they dislike. Fourth, sex differences, although usually small, can nonetheless influence privacy boundaries. As discussed later in this book, women’s rules for disclosing information sometimes differ from men’s: women tend to disclose somewhat more than men, particularly on intimate topics (see Chapter 7). Finally, individuals’ motivations can affect how they manage privacy boundaries. For instance, people who are motivated to make friends may disclose more than those who are motivated to accomplish a task, and people who worry about getting hurt or rejected might avoid self-disclosure that could make them vulnerable. CPM recognizes that the ways in which we create disclosure boundaries are influenced by these many factors, which shape when, where, and to whom we disclose information.

Negotiating Privacy in Relationships: Challenges and Violations

The central feature of CPM is its recognition that we cherish our rights to privacy and our ability to control information. But perhaps the most interesting questions revolve around information ownership issues. Ask yourself: What information does your romantic partner (present or future) have a right to know—your past dating history, financial status, job history, whether you have a sexually transmitted infection (STI), details about your parents’ relationship, or none of the above? Do you have the right to decide whether to disclose these types of information or not? Now ask yourself this: What information about your parents do you have the right
to know—the quality of their relationship, their health and well-being, or what they did in college? Put yourself in Khaled’s shoes. Does he have a right to know everything about Camila? Or does Camila have a right to keep some information private?

To address real-world privacy right challenges that people face, Petronio, Sargent, Andea, Reganis, and Cichocki (2004) used CPM to study family and friends who serve as informal health care advocates for patients. Their results showed some of the privacy-related difficulties that physicians, patients, and extended family members face in these situations. Physicians in the United States are often uncomfortable giving information to someone other than the patient, and advocates sometimes worry that the information they receive could depress or worry the patient and undermine the treatment. Advocates also struggle about whether to keep certain patient information private (by not divulging it to the physician) or whether to reveal private information for the sake of the patient’s health. In the end, most advocates put the patient’s health needs over their privacy needs.

This struggle for privacy emerges in many different contexts and relationships. Given that adolescence is a time when we generally try to establish our own identities separate from that of our family, it is not surprising that privacy struggles occur with some frequency in families with teenage children. Teenagers may believe they have a right to be independent and to maintain their privacy, but parents may believe that their teens still need guidance and protection. In this sense, the boundary coordination rules in families can be complex, and their negotiation can be very difficult. In general, though, these privacy struggles decrease once children “leave the nest” (e.g., for college). Parents’ privacy violations at that stage reflect a failure to recognize the children’s “right” to independence at a time when their sense of autonomy is beginning to flourish (McGoldrick & Carter, 1982). The consequences of privacy violations at that stage may be particularly damaging to the parent–child relationship, but how common are they, and what form do they take?

To answer these questions, Petronio and Harriman (1990) asked college students to describe recent instances of privacy violations by their parents and how they responded. All of the students were able to describe at least one example, and 96% of them described at least three such incidences, suggesting that parents’ privacy violations are a fairly common occurrence for college students. Eight types of parental privacy violations were reported: (1) asking personal questions about the student’s life, (2) giving unsolicited advice, (3) making unsolicited remarks about the student’s life, (4) opening the student’s mail without permission, (5) going through the student’s belongings without permission, (6) entering the bathroom without knocking, (7) eavesdropping on face-to-face conversations with others, and (8) using a second telephone line to listen in on a phone conversation without permission. Moreover, two general reactions were reported: (1) confrontation, where the child openly challenges the guilty parent (asking the parent to stop the privacy violation, confronting the parent with evidence), and (2) evasion, where the child changes the behavior to protect privacy but does not discuss it directly with the parents. Petronio and Harriman found that students were more likely to react in a confrontational manner when they caught their parents secretly trying to invade their privacy than when their parents invaded their privacy by asking questions or giving unsolicited advice. Not surprisingly, the authors noted that these sorts of privacy violations and the resultant confrontation were related to decreased trust and a drop in the quality of the parent–child relationship.

TOPIC AVOIDANCE AND SECRET KEEPING

So far, we have discussed how people violate others’ privacy. On the other side of the coin are ways that people maintain privacy by managing information. Two information-management strategies—(1) topic avoidance and (2) secret keeping—are related in that they are both efforts to erect privacy barriers.
around information, but they are different in that they often involve varying degrees of shared knowledge. Topic avoidance simply reflects cases where someone intentionally avoids discussing a particular topic. People in relationships avoid discussing topics of which they are both aware—Khaled and Camila may avoid talking about the time during sophomore year when they were miserable after having their first big fight and breaking up for a week. Secret keeping, in contrast, involves intentional efforts to keep information away from others, such as Camila and Sara’s decision not to disclosure their abuse to anyone but each other. (See Afifi, Caughlin, & Afifi, 2007, for further discussion of the difference between topic avoidance and secrets.)

Both topic avoidance and secret keeping are common in all types of close relationships. Baxter and Wilmot (1984) found that over 95% of the college students in their study could name at least one topic that they considered to be “taboo” or off limits in their friendships or dating relationships. Relatedly, most studies of secret keeping have found that nearly everyone keeps at least some information secret from partners, family members, or friends (see Finkenauer, Kubacka, Engels, & Kerkhof, 2009; Vangelisti, 1994a; Wegner, 1992). Given the similarities between topic avoidance and secret keeping, the research in the two domains is reviewed together although we periodically focus on each separately, as appropriate.

**Topics Commonly Avoided or Kept Secret**

Although people can avoid talking about almost anything, some topics are more likely to be avoided than others. Guerrero and Afifi’s (1995a, 1995b) summary of the available research revealed six general topics that are commonly avoided in close relationships: (1) relationship issues (e.g., relationship norms, the state and future of the relationship, the amount of attention to the relationship), (2) negative experiences or failures (e.g., past experiences that may be considered socially unacceptable or were traumatic), (3) romantic relationship experiences (e.g., past or present romantic relationships and dating patterns), (4) sexual experiences (e.g., past or present sexual activity or sexual preferences), (5) friendships (e.g., current friendships with others, the qualities of the friendship, the activities engaged in together), and (6) dangerous behavior (e.g., behaviors that are potentially hurtful to oneself). Golish and Caughlin’s (2002) study of avoidance between parents and their children led to the addition of six more topics: (1) everyday activities (e.g., school, daily events), (2) other family members (e.g., talking about the other parent or step-parent, siblings), (3) money, (4) deep conversations, (5) drinking or drugs, and (6) religion. Of course, no one study will capture all the possible issues that may be avoided in relationships, so it is best to think of these as ones that are commonly avoided. For example, given that most studies in this area used college students, adolescents, and young married couples, they likely underrepresent some of the topics avoided by older adults. They also mostly reflect white, middle-class populations, thereby under-representing topics that may be more salient to communities of color or to individuals belonging in other socioeconomic groups.

If we turn to common topics that people keep as secrets, we find that they fit within the same category types described for avoided topics. For instance, one-night stands, a socially stigmatized illness, an alcoholic father’s behavior, or a real dislike for someone are all among the sort of things one might keep as a secret. Of course, it is also worth noting that the content of secrets may be positive—although probably not the first thing we think of when discussing secrets. Yet, you may keep secret the surprise birthday party you are planning for your best friend, the vacation plans you made for yourself and your romantic partner, or a gift you purchased for your child. These are positive examples of secret keeping.

Consistent with the notion that most information kept secretive is negative in some way, Caughlin, Afifi, Carpenter-Theune, and Miller’s (2005) study of secret keeping in romantic relationships and friendships revealed that the three most common secrets were dating or sexual history (22% kept this secret
from a dating partner or friend), an affair (held by 18% of the sample), and personality or opinion conflicts (held by 14% of the people in the study). In a study of family secrets, Vangelisti and Caughlin (1997) showed that finances—which include issues related to money, business holdings, and other assets owned by family members—were the most often kept secrets by families, followed by substance abuse, and then premarital pregnancy.

Families are a common context for secret keeping. Karpel (1980) discussed three forms of secrets particularly relevant to family units that differ in the complexity of the required boundary coordination (to use CPM terminology). The first form of secrets is whole-family secrets, which are held by the entire family and kept from outsiders. For example, sadly, Armstrong (1978) described a common tendency to keep a child’s sexual abuse by a family member secret from all those outside the immediate family, assuming that the family is aware of the abuse. This tendency may explain why Camila and Sara are so reluctant to share their past abuse with anyone but a professional therapist.

Karpel’s (1980) second form of secrets, intrafamily secrets, occurs when some family members have information they keep from other members. This is the case for Camila and Sara, who have kept information about their abuse from everyone, including close family members such as their parents and aunt. Originally, Camila’s sexually abusive uncle may have told her and Sara to “keep it our little secret,” thereby hiding the abuse from other family members (Cottle, 1980). Other intrafamily secrets can be benign or even positive, such as Camila and Sara keeping the surprise gift they are getting for their parents’ anniversary a secret from everyone until they open it.

The third form of secrets, individual secrets, occurs when information is held by a single individual and kept secret from other family members (Karpel, 1980). For example, Khaled might not have told any of his family members about some of the harassment he received at school after 9/11. Individual secrets may or may not be shared outside of the family. So even though Khaled didn’t tell his family, he may have talked to Camila about how hurtful it was for him when some of the kids harassed him at school.

Reasons for Topic Avoidance and Secret Keeping

People engage in topic avoidance and secrecy for a myriad of reasons. Many of these reasons fall under three general motivations: (1) relationship-based, (2) individual-based, and (3) information-based (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000; Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2009).

RELATIONSHIP-BASED MOTIVATIONS Paradoxically, people can use topic avoidance to strengthen or to disengage from a relationship. In fact, contrary to research conducted in the 1970s and early 1980s that touted the benefits of complete openness and self-disclosure, more recent studies on topic avoidance suggest that one of the most important reasons for not being completely open/disclosive is a concern for maintaining the relationship (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000; Parks, 1982). Baxter and Wilmot (1985) found that the desire for relationship protection was the single biggest motivator leading to avoidance of a particular issue with a relational partner. Similarly, Hatfield (1984) and Rosenfeld (1979) noted that fear of abandonment often explained someone’s decision to avoid certain topics or keep something a secret. In other words, if people are worried that their partner will disapprove, they will likely keep something to themselves.

This motivation is not restricted to romantic relationships. Friends and family members also withhold information that could harm their relationships. Afifi and Guerrero (1998) found that males were more likely than females to claim relationship protection as a reason for topic avoidance in their friendships and that people avoided certain topics with male friends more than with female friends because of this concern. In family relationships, Guerrero and Afifi (1995a) found that individuals were more likely to be driven by a desire to protect the relationship when avoiding topics with
their parents, as opposed to their siblings. In an extension of this research, Golish and Caughlin (2002) found that relationship protection was more often a reason underlying avoidance with stepparents than with fathers, and with fathers than with mothers. Thus, although relationship protection is an important reason underlying decisions to avoid disclosure, it seems especially relevant to some close relationships.

In contrast to the desire to protect and sustain the relationship, some people avoid discussing certain topics or keep secrets in hopes of destroying the relationship or preventing it from becoming closer. This motivation has been labeled relationship destruction or relationship de-escalation (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000). Although much less work has focused specifically on this motivation, several lines of research support the idea that people use topic avoidance or secrets to terminate a relationship or to prevent it from becoming more intimate. For instance, during the breakup stages of relationships, partners may distance themselves from the other by shutting down communication and withholding previously shared information (see Chapters 5 and 15). Another way to think about this motivation is how it works, for example, when someone you dislike wants to become friends with you. You might strategically avoid discussing personal topics with this person so that intimacy cannot develop.

INDIVIDUAL-BASED MOTIVATIONS People also avoid discussing certain issues to protect themselves. Chapter 2 highlighted the importance people place on protecting their public identities. Literally hundreds of studies have shown that people work hard to project and maintain a positive image. Not surprisingly, then, one of the main reasons people avoid discussing certain issues is that disclosure on certain topics may make them “look bad.” Afifi and Guerrero (2000) labeled this motivation identity management. In fact, across four studies—spanning sibling, parent–child, stepparent–child, friendship, and dating relationships—the fear of embarrassment and criticism, fueled by feelings of vulnerability, was the leading reason given for topic avoidance (Afifi & Guerrero, 1998; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995a, 1995b; Hatfield, 1984). Together, these studies suggest that the primary reason people avoid discussing certain issues is the fear that disclosure will threaten their identities. Relationship protection is a close second. Apparently, people decide that it is better not to talk about something if it might make others perceive them negatively. If a person’s identity is on the line, disclosure often is not worth the risk.

Besides this concern over public identity, people may avoid specific topics as a way to maintain privacy. This motivation, which Afifi and Guerrero (2000) termed privacy maintenance, is rooted in individuals’ needs for privacy and autonomy. Given the importance of privacy maintenance in people’s lives, one way that people maintain privacy is to avoid disclosure about certain topics. For example, you may become annoyed with a friend who wants to know all the details about your romantic relationship or who constantly asks you how well you did on exams or term papers. In response, as a way to protect your privacy, you may refuse to answer your friend’s questions and avoid bringing up any related topics in the future.

INFORMATION-BASED MOTIVATIONS The final set of reasons people choose to avoid disclosure or keep information to themselves is based on the information they expect to receive from the other person. In particular, people may choose to avoid disclosure because they suspect that the other person will find the disclosure trivial, not respond in a helpful way, or lack the requisite knowledge to respond. Afifi and Guerrero (2000) labeled these types of motivations partner unresponsiveness. For example, if you have a problem for which you need advice, but you think your friend will be unable to provide you with much help or will not care enough to really listen, you will likely avoid discussing that problem with your friend. Studies have found that people are especially likely to avoid discussing problems with men for this reason (Afifi
In fact, a study by Burke, Weir, and Harrison (1976) found that 23% of wives, compared to only 10% of husbands, avoided disclosure because of a belief that their spouse would be unresponsive. This finding is consistent with later research on social support; that research shows that women generally are better listeners than men (Derlega, Barbee, & Winstead, 1994). Consistent with the negative implications of partner unresponsiveness for disclosure, perceptions of support are associated with less secret-keeping and avoidance. In that vein, Tilton-Weaver’s (2014) study of 874 seventh and eighth graders across two years found that their perceptions of their parents’ supportiveness was one of the strongest predictors of their secret-keeping from parents one year later. Adolescents who perceive their parents to be supportive appear to be significantly less likely to keep secrets from them.

People also engage in topic avoidance or secret keeping when they believe that talking about a particular topic would be futile or a “waste of time.” Afifi and Guerrero (2000) labeled this motivation futility of discussion. Although this motivation has received less attention than the others, it may play an important role in people’s decisions to withhold information. For example, believing that your partner or friend is so entrenched in her or his position as to make discussion meaningless certainly will motivate topic avoidance, but it may also be especially detrimental to relational success. Knowing that your partner will never understand why you loaned a lot of money to a friend, for instance, may make you keep that information secret.

Recent research has revealed another important information-based motivation for avoidance and secrecy—but one that is less focused on failings of the “other” and more on the self. This motivation revolves around one’s own communication inefficacy (Afifi, 2010; Afifi & Robbins, 2014; Afifi & Steuber, 2009). Specifically, people often avoid a topic or keep something secret because they don’t feel they have the communication skills to bring up the topic or maintain discussion in a competent and effective manner. They may not know how to start the conversation or think they’ll freeze once the discussion starts. In either case, the motivation to just stay quiet in these cases is strong.

Collectively, these motivations account for many of the reasons that people maintain strict information boundaries within their relationships. It is also important to keep in mind that people often avoid topics or keep secrets for several reasons, not just one, and that the reasons are often related. Knobloch and Carpenter-Theune (2004) found that people who avoided topics with their partner because of concerns that discussion would damage their image also worried that talking about the issue would harm the relationship. Indeed, these two motivations—(1) identity management and (2) relationship protection—are the most commonly cited reasons for information management and tend to work together to prohibit disclosure. Other research has uncovered more specific reasons why people keep information to themselves. For example, Golish and Caughlin (2002) found several specific reasons why parents and children use topic avoidance with one another, including lack of contact (especially in the case of divorced families), the emotional pain of discussion, and simple dislike for the person.

**How People Engage in Topic Avoidance**

Most studies of topic avoidance have involved asking people to rate how much they avoid discussing a certain topic with a particular person on a scale that ranges from “I always avoid discussing this issue with this person” to “I never avoid discussing this issue with this person.” Recently, however, scholars have started investigating specific ways people practice topic avoidance rather than just measuring the degree of topic avoidance.

Dailey and Palomares (2004) identified eight general strategies for avoiding disclosure, varying in directness and politeness. Examples of avoidance tactics perceived as direct and impolite include abruptly saying something like “you should go” or simply leaving the conversation when a topic comes up. Other strategies for avoiding disclosure are more
subtle and polite, such as using a cliché to avoid expressing true feelings (e.g., “that’s the way the ball bounces” or “it is what it is”) or giving a hesitant response to signal discomfort about the topic, hoping the other helps out by switching topics. In one study, college students who had frequent contact with their parents recalled their response when their parent last asked them about a topic they wanted to avoid (Mazur & Hubbard, 2004). Participants offered 10 different avoidance strategies, ranging from telling a lie (i.e., avoiding through deception), to showing anger or irritation, to appearing disinterested or uncomfortable.

**Topic Avoidance During Relationship Transitions**

People can engage in topic avoidance at any time. Sometimes topic avoidance is embedded in a relationship, such as spouses avoiding talking about politics because they know they cannot change each other’s minds and will only argue. Other times, topic avoidance is a one-time occurrence. For instance, perhaps you are in a bad mood and don’t want to talk about something, but later you end up sharing everything with your partner. Even though topic avoidance can occur at any time, there appear to be certain transition points in relationships, and two in particular, that are marked by higher overall levels of topic avoidance.

**TOPIC AVOIDANCE IN ESCALATING ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS**

Researchers have examined how relationship stage affects the times when people are most likely to avoid certain topics. The assumption for a long time was that people most avoided disclosure in the beginning stages of dating relationships, when intimacy was still somewhat low and topics were considered sensitive. Knobloch and Carpenter-Theune (2004), however, found that the most avoidance in dating relationships usually occurs in the middle stages of development, when intimacy is moderate. Their rationale is that people are most likely to fear that discussing a topic will harm the relationship, make them look bad, or have other negative consequences when a relationship is shifting from casual to serious. They also reasoned that this transition time is accompanied by increased uncertainty about the relationship and how one’s partner might react to certain disclosures. Their findings supported these predictions: People who reported moderate levels of intimacy were the most uncertain about their relationships and also the most likely to avoid topics with their partner.

**TOPIC AVOIDANCE DURING FAMILY TRANSITIONS**

Studies of family communication have also shown times in the parent–child relationship when avoidance is particularly high. Not surprisingly, young people are most likely to avoid topics with their parents during their middle teenage years (Guerrero & Afifi, 1995b). Mid-adolescence is a time when teens try to separate themselves from their parents, and keeping information private from parents is an important way for teens to develop a unique sense of self. Less avoidance occurs when children go to college or leave their parent’s home. Another time when avoidance is high is during and shortly after a divorce. Studies have found that children from divorced families are more likely to avoid issues with their parents than are those from intact families, especially if the child feels caught between loyalties to each of the parents. A common reaction in these cases is for the child to shut down and avoid expressing feelings so as not to betray either parent (Afifi, 2003; Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; Golish & Caughlin, 2002).

**Consequences of Topic Avoidance**

Avoidance is common, but what about the consequences of avoidance? Can avoidance have positive consequences for individuals and relationships? As mentioned earlier in the chapter, some scholars say yes (Altman, Vinsel, & Brown, 1981; see also dialectics theory, Chapter 5), but most researchers still find that avoidance is a symptom of an unsatisfying relationship. For example, Dailey and Palomares (2004) studied three different relationship types—(1) dating relationships, (2) mother–child
relationships, and (3) father–child relationships—and found lower satisfaction across all three relationships when individuals avoided discussing their concerns about the relationship with their partner. Importantly, though, avoidance on another topic—personal failures—was not associated with lower satisfaction. Therefore, one possibility is that avoidance is harmful to relationships only when it is about issues that are directly relevant to the relationship itself. The conclusion here would be that avoidance about relationally relevant issues harms the relationship while avoidance of non-relationally relevant issues has little effect. However, in complete contrast to that prediction, Caughlin and Afifi (2004) found that people who avoided a topic in order to protect their relationship tended not to experience negative consequences.

One explanation for these seemingly contradictory findings may lie in Afifi and Joseph’s (2009) **standards for openness hypothesis**. This hypothesis extends earlier work (Caughlin & Golish, 2002) showing that people’s perceptions of how much their partner is avoiding influences satisfaction more than a partner’s actual avoidance. In this most recent explanation, Afifi and Joseph (2009) argued that the perception of a partner’s avoidance is harmful to relationship satisfaction to the extent that it comes across as a sign of a bad relationship. In other words, if people associate openness with having a good relationship, they will think there is a problem if they perceive their partner to be less than open. Since women often have higher expectations of openness in relationships than men, and are often more attuned to shifts in their partner’s openness, women are more likely to become dissatisfied in the face of perceived partner avoidance than men. Thus, women may be more likely than men to perceive topic avoidance and to experience negative relationship consequences associated with topic avoidance. The effects for topic avoidance hold both similarities and differences to those found for secret keeping.

**Consequences of Secret Keeping**

Secret keeping can have positive or negative consequences. Sharing a secret can communicate trust and show that a relationship is close. On the other hand, having a secret kept from you can make you feel left out. Thus, there are both negative and positive consequences involved in secret keeping—with complexities related to various relationship contexts.

**NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF SECRET KEEPING**

Research on the effects of secret keeping on individuals has focused on how keeping information secret influences people’s thought patterns through a process called **hyperaccessibility** (Wegner, 1989, 1992; Wegner & Erber, 1992; Wegner, Lane, & Dimitri, 1994). Because secrets require people to avoid disclosing information to others, people often try to suppress the information and thoughts related to that secret. The reasoning here is that if people suppress thoughts about a secret, they will be less likely to disclose secret information because it will not be “on their minds.” However, thought suppression is not usually successful and can even backfire. The strong impact of thought suppression can be illustrated by a simple example. Here it goes: **Do not think of dancing elephants.** Now that you have been asked not to think about dancing elephants, you will probably have dancing elephants on your mind as you read this section. The simple request for people to suppress a thought about a particular thing, regardless of how innocent the request or how irrelevant the thing, has been shown to increase their thinking about it. In fact, that information is often all they can think about. So no matter what, please don’t imagine dancing elephants as you read on.

In their study of thought suppression, Wegner, Schneider, Carter, and White (1987) asked students not to think of a white bear and then had them ring a bell every time they thought of the bear. Rather than suppress the thought of the white bear, the students, on average, thought of the bear more than once per minute over a 5-minute period. Several subsequent studies have confirmed that the desire to suppress
a thought does the exact opposite, bringing it to the forefront of our thoughts and thus making it *hyperaccessible*.

But is this hyperaccessibility permanent? Don’t those thoughts eventually fade? According to Wegner and associates (1987), the hyperaccessibility of the suppressed thought decreases over time if one removes oneself from contact with the relevant information or secret. This scenario can be applied to Camila’s situation. Children who were sexually abused may eventually stop thinking about the “secret” if they are separated long enough from the abusing adult, but the thoughts will come flooding back as soon as the possibility of seeing that adult surfaces. Since Camila’s uncle is dead, seeing Sara, who went through a similar experience, or her aunt, who was married to the abuser but likely did not know of his actions, may trigger terrible memories. This triggering of thoughts that are normally suppressed is called the **rebound effect**. The rebound effect may also make it difficult for people to keep other secrets, such as infidelity. In this case, the unfaithful person may be away from the partner or lover at work long enough to successfully suppress the thought of infidelity, but seeing the partner or lover will immediately serve as a reminder of the thought being attempted to suppress. The hyperaccessibility of the thought will make it difficult for the unfaithful person to keep the infidelity a secret and is likely to result in more guilt about the affair or more anxiety about being caught.

The **fever model of self-disclosure** (Stiles, 1987; Stiles, Shuster, & Harrigan, 1992) can explain these effects. According to this model, people who are distressed about a problem or who think about a problem a lot are much more likely to reveal thoughts and feelings about the problem than are those who are not experiencing anxiety about an issue. If given the opportunity, people who are feeling highly anxious about something are likely to disclose more about it than people who are not. This model, when combined with Wegner’s research on the hyperaccessibility of secrets, may explain why people so often reveal secrets to others. Their hyperaccessibility (especially during times when the secret information is “rebounding”) makes the level of stress and anxiety so high that individuals have to find an outlet. The result frequently is the selection of someone they consider to be a confidant.

Afifi and Caughlin’s (2006) research has shown another consequence of the secret keeping and rumination mix. At two points in time, they asked students about a secret they were keeping from a friend or dating partner and found secret keeping was harmful for self-esteem. Although it was the first study to show this link, the association makes sense, especially for individually held secrets, in which the information being concealed is often something that people regret and something that makes them question themselves. Given the negative impact that low self-esteem has on individuals and relationships, the fact that secret keeping promotes rumination about a negative aspect of self may be one of its most damaging consequences.

The maintenance of secrets has been shown to have additional negative consequences. First, keeping secrets negatively impacts the quality of interactions with the person from whom the secret is being kept (e.g., Brown-Smith, 1998). Knowing that you have to keep a secret from someone can lead to awkwardness. Or you might just avoid the person so that there is no chance the secret can slip out. Second, secrets encourage concealment of relational problems and can lead to deception. Hiding a secret from others requires the secret keepers to put on an “air” that everything is fine and that the secret keepers share a happy relationship. This pretense can cause personal and relational stress (Karpel, 1980). For example, growing up, Camila may have had to act as if she didn’t fear her uncle when the extended family got together. Concealing her feelings likely added even more stress to her life. On some occasions, she may have decided to pretend she was sick so she wouldn’t have to see her uncle. Sometimes the maintenance of secrets results in the spinning of lies to cover up the information. The consequence is often a web of deception that must be continuously tended. If discovered, the
deception is often considered a serious relational transgression that erodes trust (see Chapter 13). Yet, in some cases, such as Camila’s, uncovering a secret can be the first step toward recovering from a traumatic event. Khaled and her parents would likely understand why she kept the information secret and help her deal with the scars left from the sexual and emotional abuse.

In addition to stress, suppressing information can lead to depression, delinquency, aggression, and low self-esteem, as shown in a study of 10- to 14-year-olds from the Netherlands who were keeping secrets from their parents (Frinjs, Finkenauer, Vermulst, & Engels, 2005). Family-held secrets can also create power imbalances. Given that knowledge often is equated with power, family members who know the secrets have power over those who do not (Imber-Black, 1993). When children know secret information about their parents, the typical power structure in families is sometimes irreversibly altered, changing the family dynamics forever (Brown-Smith, 1998). For example, imagine a child knowing about a parent’s adulterous affair and holding that parent hostage with the information. Any disciplinary power that the parent has over that child is undermined by the fear that the secret will be disclosed.

The power structure of families has been studied to better understand to whom children are likely to disclose individual secrets (see Chapter 12). Affifi, Olson, and Armstrong (2005) found that children were least likely to disclose secrets to the parent whom they saw as having the greatest punitive power. So while holding a parent’s secret may decrease the parent’s power, children who hold individual secrets are especially likely to fear repercussions from powerful family members and, as such, continue concealment from those people.

Another possible consequence of family secrets is the development of what Karpel (1980) called a split loyalty pattern. Secret keepers are often put in a bind of having to choose between being loyal to other secret holders or being loyal to friends or family members who may be hurt by not knowing the secret. Camila is caught in this bind. She feels guilty about not telling Khaled, but she also worries that telling Khaled would betray her sister. Split loyalties create lose-lose situations, ruin relational dynamics, tear families apart, and destroy friendships.
Discussing the situation with Sara and telling her she wants Khaled to know may be Camila's best option. If Sara objects, she might suggest telling Khaled about her own experiences without disclosing what Sara went through.

**POSITIVE CONSEQUENCES OF SECRET KEEPING**

Although most of the research suggests that keeping secrets has negative consequences, there are cases when secret keeping has positive consequences. Although some studies have shown it is harmful for early adolescents to keep secrets from their parents, other studies have found secret keeping beneficial in middle adolescence. Specifically, 14- to 18-year-olds are usually in the midst of developing their own identities. As discussed in research on avoidance, an important developmental event is the ability of children this age to form their own identities separate from their parents. Keeping secrets seems to perform that function, and as such, some types of secret keeping may be developmentally advantageous for children at this stage (Finkenauer, Engels, & Meeus, 2002).

Another way that secret keeping may be beneficial is that it sometimes increases cohesion among holders of the secret. Secrets kept by a whole family, spouses, dating partners, friends, or members of a group may bring the secret holders closer together because of the bond of trust they share. Research by Vangelisti (1994a) and Vangelisti and Caughlin (1997) supports this conclusion. Students in these studies reported that the existence of whole family secrets often improved relationships, perhaps by creating a special bond between members who were trusted to keep secrets. Thus, secret keeping can sometimes be beneficial rather than harmful to relationships.

**Consequences of Revealing Secrets**

There are no doubt various consequences of keeping a secret, but what are the consequences of revelation? Derlega and Grzelak (1979) noted five reasons why people eventually reveal private information: (1) to achieve catharsis, (2) to clarify their own interpretation of events, (3) to get validation from others that they are still a good person, (4) to make the relationship closer, or (5) to control others. Each of these reasons has different consequences—positive and negative.

**POSITIVE CONSEQUENCES OF REVEALING SECRETS**

Although it is impossible to say with certainty when someone should or should not disclose a secret, Kelly and McKillop (1996) made several recommendations for when to do so. Their research led them to identify three reasons people might want to consider revealing secrets: these include if revealing the secret (1) reduces psychological or physical problems, (2) helps deter hyperaccessibility, or (3) leads to resolution of secrets. First, there is considerable evidence that secret keeping is stressful and wears on secret keepers psychologically and physiologically (see Pennebaker, 1990). Spiegel (1992) has found that individuals with life-threatening illnesses who reveal private information in therapy sessions have a longer life expectancy than those who do not. Pennebaker's research on social support also suggests that the mere act of disclosing distressful information makes people feel better.

Second, as noted previously, keeping information secret makes secrets salient. As Wegner and colleagues (1994) put it, “The secret must be remembered, or it might be told. And the secret cannot be thought about, or it might be leaked” (p. 288), thus creating the two conflicting cognitive processes discussed earlier. Disclosing the secret frees the secret keeper from having to suppress it and makes it no longer hyperaccessible, thereby decreasing anxiety.

Third, without disclosing the secret, secret keepers cannot work toward a resolution of issues underlying the secret. Sharing the information may provide the individual with insight into the secret and allow a much-needed regained sense of control over life events (see Pennebaker, 1990). The secret keeper often has an unbalanced view of the situation and may benefit from the perspective of the recipient of the disclosure. Silver, Boone, and Stones (1983)
found that female victims of incest who were able to reveal the secret to a confidant were much more likely to feel better about themselves and their lives than those who were unable to do so. Afifi and Caughlin (2006) showed that those who revealed their secret across an 8-week period experienced a significant increase in self-esteem. It is also worth noting that Caughlin and others (2005) found that those who revealed secrets often reported partner reactions that were less negative than they had originally feared. So one benefit of disclosing may be that one gains the advantages of catharsis and resolution without the feared destruction of the relationship.

**NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF REVEALING SECRETS** These positive consequences of revealing a secret should be weighed against the possible negative consequences. Specifically, three considerations can be assessed: Kelly and McKillop (1996) suggested that people might consider keeping a secret if revelation would (1) elicit a negative reaction from the listener or (2) help a person maintain a privacy boundary; Petronio (1991) suggested that people might decide to keep secrets if revealing private information would (3) be seen as a betrayal by others.

First, given the typically negative nature of secrets, there is always a possibility that the recipient of the information will react with disapproval or shun the discloser. In fact, Lazarus (1985) reported that confidants often distance themselves following the disclosure of a negative secret. Coates, Wortman, and Abbey (1979) showed that people who disclose secret problems to others are considered less attractive than those who suppress such disclosure. When people have kept negative information to themselves as a way to manage their identities, they are especially likely to put stock in the listener’s reaction when they finally reveal the secret. Disconfirming reactions may worsen what is likely an already diminished sense of self.

Work on disclosure of abuse demonstrates this point especially well. Dieckman (2000) interviewed female victims about their decision to tell others about their abuse. Her interviews highlighted the difficulty associated with disclosure and the importance of the response. Victims of abuse often hesitate to tell others about their experience because they fear being perceived as “weak” or being ridiculed for staying in the relationship. Indeed, Crocker and Schwartz (1985) found that many people responded to disclosures of abuse by telling the discloser that they “would never put up with that kind of treatment” and asking them why they didn’t “just leave.” Since victims typically disclose past abuse for the purpose of self-expression or validation, responses like those can diminish the discloser’s ability to cope with the situation. Rather than helping disclosers, such responses often lower their self-esteem and discourage future disclosure. Their already low sense of self falls even lower because the response they feared the most—ridicule—is the response they received. Worse yet, the discloser might decide to keep the information secret once again, rather than risking more ridicule. As this example illustrates, the listener’s response to sensitive self-disclosure is of paramount importance.

Second, preserving personal boundaries is critical to people’s identities, as conveyed in the communication boundary management theory discussed in this chapter. To the extent that secrets make up part of the personal boundaries of individuals, secret keeping may help people maintain a sense of independence. Some scholars have even argued that secret keeping serves a developmental function by helping people manage their personal identity (Hoyt, 1978). By contrast, revealing the secret erodes the personal boundaries being tightly held by the secret keeper. In a related vein, keeping secrets greatly increases a person’s control over the information. By contrast, the decision to disclose a secret requires boundary coordination and leaves the individual vulnerable to betrayal of confidences. The information is no longer solely the person’s own, and the individual has less control over how the information is spread.

Third, sometimes secrets are shared between two or more people, and revealing the secret to someone outside the dyad or group will be seen as
a betrayal. Indeed, research reported in Chapter 13 suggests that betraying confidences is one of the most common relational transgressions in friendships, romantic relationships, and family relationships. If a confidence has been betrayed, revealing a secret often has a significant cost. Trust is eroded, and future self-disclosures from the person who feels betrayed are less likely. As such, another negative consequence of revealing secrets may be severe sanctions by other secret keepers. To ensure that a member of a group of secret keepers is not tempted to disclose the secret, groups will often make explicit boundary rules or threaten individuals with severe penalties for revealing the secret (Petronio, 1991).

The diversity of potential positive and negative consequences makes it difficult to determine when to disclose a secret and when not to do so. Kelly and McKillop (1996) developed a decision-making model for revealing secrets that takes into account the primary consequences associated with the revelation of individually held secrets; Figure 6.3 shows the model. In a similar vein, Petronio (1991) noted that the answers to five questions typically determine what people will disclose and to whom they will disclose it: (1) How badly do you need to reveal the information? (2) What do you think will be the outcome of the disclosure? (3) How risky will it be to tell someone the information? (4) How private is the information? and (5) How much control do you have over your emotions? These questions reflect a variety of issues raised in this chapter, as well as capturing the essence of Kelly and McKillop’s model. Clearly, then, issues of anxiety, hyperaccessibility, and informational control play a key role in determining whether the revelation of secrets is likely to produce positive or negative outcomes.

**FIGURE 6.3  ■ Decision-Making Model for Revealing Secrets**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Is the secret troubling?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ruminations OR anxiety, depression, ulcers, headaches, back pain</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Is an appropriate confidant available?
Discreet
Nonjudgmental
Able to help

- Yes
- No

Keep secret

Reveal secret

Keep secret (or write it down)

SUMMARY AND APPLICATION

People have an innate need to express themselves to others. Yet they have an equally strong need to keep certain aspects of themselves private. This chapter examined types of communication that help people fulfill both of these needs, starting with self-disclosure. Although people can learn things about others by observing their reactions and assessing their appearance, one of the best ways to get to know someone is through self-disclosure. Self-disclosure occurs when people reveal something about themselves to others, usually through verbal communication. Most close relationships, such as the one shared by Khaled and Camila, are developed primarily through the exchange of self-disclosure. As relationships develop, the amount of breadth, and then depth, increases as people feel closer to one another. Self-disclosure also varies in terms of frequency, duration, valence, and veracity.

In relationships like Khaled and Camila’s, self-disclosure leads to more liking and closeness. However, not all self-disclosure is equal in terms of its ability to foster a closer, more satisfying relationship. Self-disclosure needs to be gradual and appropriate given the context of a relationship. When disclosure is too personal or occurs too early in a relationship, negative reactions can follow. Disclosure is also more likely to lead to liking when it is perceived to be personalistic rather than indiscriminant, and when it is reciprocated. Some research also suggests that the link between self-disclosure and liking is intensified when people communicate online rather than in person. In some cases, instead of leading to increased liking and closeness, self-disclosure leads to criticism, retaliation, loss of control, or a loss of individuality. Indeed, one of the paradoxes of self-disclosure is that by revealing ourselves to others we open the possibility of getting close to others, but we also open ourselves up to rejection. People who are not skilled at communication may prefer to self-disclose online where the risks are smaller.

Even in the best of relationships, people want privacy at times, as CPM theory suggests. For example, Camila and her sister, Sara, feel that they “own” the information about the abuse they experienced as children. Therefore, it is important that they are able to construct boundaries to protect that information and control whom has access to it. Privacy can be maintained a number of different ways, including by engaging in topic avoidance and keeping secrets. Commonly avoided topics include finances, drug use, personal failures, topics that emphasize differences between people, and sexual history. People have different motivations for avoiding topics and keeping secrets. Understanding what those motivations are may be the first step in deciding whether or not to reveal information.

For instance, Camila might realize that when she was a child she avoided talking about the sexual abuse she suffered because she was afraid of her uncle and was deeply ashamed. Even after her uncle died, she continued to feel that she was somehow responsible for the abuse or that she should have at least stopped her uncle from harming her sister. When she digs deep, she might also realize that she is afraid to tell Khaled. She doesn’t think he will judge her, but she can’t be 100% sure he won’t, and she feels as guilty about having that suspicion as she does about not telling him. Eventually Camila may understand that she was an innocent victim. She may also recognize that now her main motivation for keeping the abuse a secret is that she does not want to re-live the emotional pain, not that she thinks Khaled will judge her. Through these types of realizations, Camila may come to believe that she can share her secret with Khaled, and that he will support her through the emotional pain and help her heal old wounds. However, if Camila decides to keep this information a secret, it is her right to do so.

The research in this chapter also provides other helpful information about when to reveal a secret.
When people are feeling high levels of uncertainty and ruminating about a secret all the time, they might consider telling their secret to someone to relieve their stress. People also decide whether or not to reveal a secret based on how supportive and nonjudgmental they think the listener will be. Ultimately, this might be what leads Camila to reveal her secret to Khaled—she knows he loves her and she can trust him. If she thought otherwise, she’d be more likely to keep the information private.

After sharing her secret, positive consequences could follow. Camila may feel less stress and guilt, her self-esteem may be bolstered because of Khaled’s supportive response, and their relationship may be closer because they now know they can truly trust each other even with their darkest secrets.

As Camila’s predicament illustrates, the tug-of-war between the forces of disclosure and privacy can wage in even the closest of relationships. In fact, the process of negotiating privacy boundaries can be especially delicate and complex when our relationships are particularly close. This is because many people subscribe to an ideology of intimacy (Parks, 1982). In other words, many people think that openness is the hallmark of close relationships and that any attempts to maintain privacy will hinder the development and maintenance of intimacy. Camila probably felt this way since she experienced guilt about not revealing information about her past to Khaled. The research in this chapter, however, suggests that it is normal and healthy to erect privacy boundaries. Individuals need privacy as well as connection. Relational partners who are always together and constantly sharing every bit of information with each other may lose their individual identities and become engulfed by the relationship. Thus, the hallmark of satisfying relationships may actually be the maintenance of individual identities in the midst of a close, connected relationship.

**KEY TERMS**

- authorized co-owners (p. 150)
- boundary structures (p. 149)
- boundary turbulence (p. 151)
- breadth (p. 140)
- communication inefficacy (p. 158)
- communication privacy management (CPM) (p. 149)
- confrontation (p. 149)
- depth (p. 140)
- disclosure-liking hypothesis (p. 144)
- dyadic effect (p. 146)
- fever model of self-disclosure (p. 161)
- futility of discussion (p. 158)
- frequency (p. 140)
- hyperaccessibility (p. 160)
- identity management (p. 157)
- individual secrets (p. 156)
- intensification effect (p. 145)
- intrafamily secrets (p. 156)
- liking-disclosure hypothesis (p. 144)
- nondirected disclosure (p. 145)
- partner unresponsiveness (p. 157)
- personalistic disclosure (p. 145)
- privacy control (p. 149)
- privacy maintenance (p. 152)
- privacy ownership (p. 149)
- privacy turbulence (p. 149)
- rebound effect (p. 161)
- relationship de-escalation (p. 157)
- relationship protection (p. 156)
- self-disclosure (p. 140)
- social penetration theory (p. 140)
- split loyalty pattern (p. 162)
- standards for openness hypothesis (p. 160)
- topic avoidance (p. 140)
- valence (p. 140)
- veracity (p. 140)
- whole-family secrets (p. 156)
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. This chapter includes a discussion of some of the conditions that make it more or less likely that self-disclosure will lead to liking and relational closeness. Which of these conditions do you think are most important, and why? Do you agree that people tend to disclose more online than in face-to-face contexts? Why or why not?

2. In this chapter, we discussed several studies suggesting that most close relational partners consider certain topics to be “taboo” and keep certain secrets from each other. Based on your personal experiences, do you agree or disagree? What types of topics are taboo in your relationships?

3. How hard is it for you to keep a secret? Do you agree with the idea that attempts to suppress thoughts about a secret actually make it harder to keep the secret?

Sharpen your skills with SAGE edge at edge.sagepub.com/guerrero5e. SAGE edge for students provides a personalized approach to help you accomplish your coursework goals in an easy-to-use learning environment.