

CONFESSIONS OF A TEENAGE GOSSIPChoices, September 1989

I knew it might be a lie. And if it were true, I knew she wouldn't want anybody to know. But I lived for gossip, and I spread it faster than the six o'clock news. I couldn't control myself. Here's what happened.

By chance, I ended up at Gail's house one Saturday night with a small "in" group. I didn't know her well, but a couple of guys invited me along. I was surprised to see Seth, the "big man on campus" there without his girlfriend Lorita. Lorita was Gail's best friend. I was even more surprised to see how Seth and Gail seemed to flirt when they thought nobody was watching. Or was I imagining things? I couldn't tell for sure, but later when they disappeared for awhile, I was convinced I had my scoop!

SPREADING THE WORD

I was as excited as a runner at the starting block. Next morning, I called my networks. I reached three friends. (I planned to call Lorita and warn her about Seth's cheating as a finale.) First, I casually dropped the fact that I'd been at Gail's small party the night before. (Instantly, I rose a notch in their estimation.) Then, in a confidential tone, as if delivering the most shocking secret of all time, said, "Did you know about Gail and Seth?"

Now, before I go on, I want to ask you, "What's wrong with a little fun, juicy gossip?" It's as old as history itself. In fact, the Greek writer Hesiod called gossip "a kind of divinity," both because it's so powerful, and because people seem to worship it (no more than yours truly). After all, if a friend called you up and said, "I have some great dirt. Want to know?", could you say "No"?

WHAT'S GOSSIP?

Now you might be wondering, what is gossip anyway? "Gossip is a piece of information shared by two people about a third party who isn't there," says Gary Alan Fine, a sociology professor and gossip expert at the University of Minnesota. Usually the information is of a personal nature.

False gossip is obviously worse than true gossip. But the person who hears gossip often doesn't know the difference. (After all, the one person who knows for sure isn't there!) What makes gossip so effective is whether it's believable, Fine says. For instance, the first friends I called to tell about Gail and Seth replied, "You're crazy. I don't know Gail, but she doesn't seem the type." (I was so annoyed at this reaction I considered spreading gossip about this friend...)

CONFESSIONS OF A TEENAGE GOSSIP - PAGE 2**WHY WE GOSSIP**

Gossip can be one of the most powerful weapons to hurt someone with. "Gossip is often about our vices or things we don't want others to know about us," Fine says. (Wouldn't you rather die than have the whole school know your deepest secrets?) That's why I wasn't too surprised when the second friend I gossiped to about Gail and Seth cautioned me, "If this gets around, you could wreck Seth and Lorita's relationship. And Gail and Lorita's friendship."

Does this mean that gossip is always vicious or harmful? No. "Gossip has a bum rap and doesn't deserve it," says Jack Levin, a sociology professor at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts. Gossip that is both true and does not hurt someone has very important functions, he says. What are they?

- * Gossip helps to connect us to a social group. "Through gossip we define the people we care about, who we like and who we don't like," says Levin. For example, he says, two teens who gossip together are really saying to one another: "I feel comfortable enough with you to gossip. We're part of the same group."
- * Gossip helps us decide what is acceptable behavior in our social group, Fine adds. For example, in a group of close friends, each member's conduct is under "a kind of constant review," notes British anthropologist Max Gluckman.

If someone goes too far in his or her actions, people react with gossip, which is a way of saying, "Our group doesn't like your behavior. If you're not careful, we'll give you a bad reputation and exclude you from the group." So, if my gossip about Gail and Seth were true, for instance, it might alert people to the fact that these two are unreliable friends.

- * Gossip can be a form of idle entertainment, or as one sociologist called it, "intellectual chewing gum." What's more relaxing to an avid gossip than chatting on the phone or thumbing magazines such as People?

However, what often makes gossip so powerful is its more negative aspects--as only I know too well!

AIMING TO HURT

When is gossip harmful? Negative gossip has a hostile aim, says Levin. The person who spreads it wants to hurt the object in some way--even if the person is unaware of his own aim.

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So when I gossiped about Gail and Seth, the truth is I wanted to put them down. Why? I was jealous of them for being so popular, and because they seemed to have it all. Of course, I also gossiped about them because I thought they were important, and wished they were my friends. Finally, I wanted to show my group that I was "in the know".

"Negative gossip is double-edged. It allows people to enjoy the not-very-nice aspects of human nature by talking about them, and at the same time condemns them." In other words, I can spread a rumor about Gail and Seth's behavior and pass judgment on them at the same time. "It's like having my cake and eating it, too," says Mr. Fine.

The trouble is, gossip is double-edged in another way. It can hurt the person who gossips as much as, or more than, the targets--especially when the gossip is false. Gossip places the person who spreads it at the center of attention, and makes him/her feel important, but not for long. "A person who gossips too much may lose status in his friends' eyes," Levin says. "He/she becomes defined as a big-mouth who can't be trusted."

Get the picture? When I gossiped about Gail and Seth to my third friend, who loves to dish the dirt as well as anyone, she said, "Wait 'til I tell Marc, Leah, and Nathan!" But my friend didn't just stop with them. Oh no. My friend went right back and told Gail!

Two days later she stormed up to me at school and chewed me out in front of one million people 'til I wanted to crawl into a locker. "First of all, I didn't invite you to my house. Second, Seth and I are best friends and that's it. Your gossip is nothing but lies! And third, the next time you think about spreading rumors, just remember, nobody will believe you. Because everybody in this school knows what a big-mouth you are!"

As if that wasn't enough, I think everyone I'd ever gossiped about stood and cheered her on! Yes, I found out the hard way--for teens, gossip is like dynamite. As Levin says, "rumor that means little to a 26-year-old can be devastating to a 16-year-old." Teens are beginning to create and figure out a social life for themselves. And gossip really can help make or break reputations. After all, my reputation was finished.

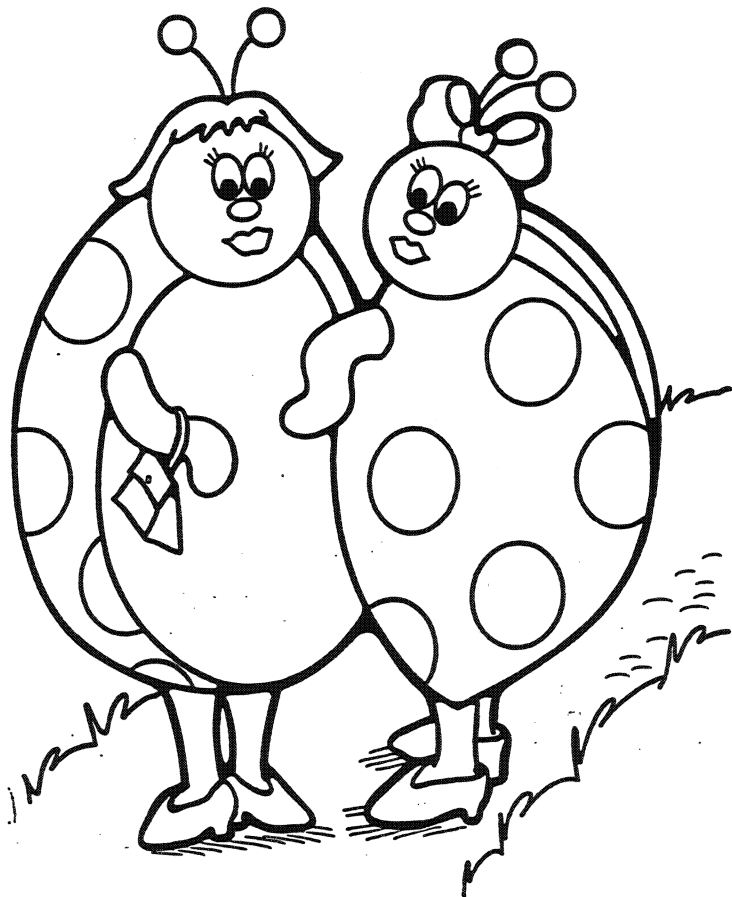
HOW TO HANDLE GOSSIP ABOUT YOURSELF AND OTHERS

If you or a friend is the object of false gossip, what should you do? A lot of people think the best way to handle negative gossip is to remain silent. But, according to Jack Levin, the sociology professor from Boston, silence only makes matters worse. It allows the gossip to spread without any answer, so people are more likely to believe it.

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Here's what you can do:

- * "Confront gossip you hear quickly and directly," Levin says. Let the person who spreads the gossip know it's a lie. If you find out the source of the rumor, tell that person, too.
- * Use friends to support you. "Find people who are reputable--the person everyone can believe--and use them as allies," Levin says. "Make sure they let everyone know the gossip is a lie."
- * Remember that gossip goes stale very quickly. The hot news today in school is tomorrow's memory--often replaced by new gossip.
- * What if the gossip is true? "Don't try to duck a true rumor," Levin says. "It's better to 'fess up". But, of course, that's up to you.



Name _____ Period _____ Date _____

CONFESSIONS OF A TEENAGE GOSSIP

1. What did the Greek writer, Hesiod, call gossip? _____

2. What is gossip? _____

3. _____ gossip is obviously _____ than true gossip. The problem is the person who hears gossip often doesn't know the _____.
4. What makes gossip effective is whether or not it's _____.
5. Why do we gossip?
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
 - c. _____
6. Is gossip always vicious and harmful? _____ Why? or Why not?
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
 - c. _____
7. When is gossip harmful? _____

8. What is double-edged gossip? _____

9. Why is negative gossip double-edged?
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
 - c. _____
10. Teen gossip can be like _____.
11. How can you handle gossip about yourself and others in a healthy way?
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
 - c. _____
 - d. _____
12. The next time you think about spreading gossip, just remember...

Name _____ Period _____ Date _____

CONFESSIONS OF A TEENAGE GOSSIP - TEACHER KEY

1. What did the Greek writer, Hesiod, call gossip? A KIND OF DIVINITY
BECAUSE OF ITS POWER AND PEOPLE SEEM TO WORSHIP IT
2. What is gossip? A PIECE OF INFORMATION SHARED BY TWO
PEOPLE ABOUT A THIRD PARTY WHO ISN'T PRESENT
3. FALSE gossip is obviously WORSE than true gossip. The problem is the person who hears the gossip often doesn't know the DIFFERENCE.
4. What makes gossip effective is whether or not it's BELIEVABLE.
5. Why do we gossip?
 - a. IT CAN BE A POWERFUL WEAPON TO HURT SOMEONE
 - b. WE LIKE TO TALK ABOUT OTHER PEOPLE'S VICES
 - c. WE WANT TO BELONG
6. Is gossip always vicious and harmful? NO Why? or Why not?
 - a. IT CAN CONNECT US TO A SOCIAL GROUP
 - b. IT HELPS US DECIDE WHAT IS ACCEPTABLE BEHAVIOR
 - c. IT CAN BE IDLE ENTERTAINMENT
7. When is gossip harmful? NEGATIVE GOSSIP HAS A HOSTILE AIM
WHEN THE PERSON GOSSIPING WANTS TO HURT SOMEONE
8. What is double-edged gossip? IT HURTS THE PERSON WHO
GOSSIPS AS MUCH AS THE TARGET PERSON
9. Why is negative gossip double-edged?
 - a. PEOPLE ENJOY THE NOT-SO-NICE ASPECTS OF OTHERS
 - b. PERSON GETS TO BE THE CENTER OF ATTENTION
 - c. FALSE GOSSIP ALWAYS COMES BACK TO YOU
10. Teen gossip can be like DYNAMITE.
11. How can you handle gossip about yourself and others in a healthy way?
 - a. CONFRONT GOSSIP QUICKLY AND DIRECTLY
 - b. USE FRIENDS TO SUPPORT YOU
 - c. REMEMBER GOSSIP GOES STALE FAST
 - d. IF RUMOR IS TRUE, ADMIT IT!
12. The next time you think about spreading gossip, just remember...
NOBODY WILL BELIEVE YOU ANYWAY!