

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

My good friend – I’ll call her “Mary” – will do anything for me. We’ve been friends for more than thirty years, and I value our relationship, but she can’t keep a secret. She is very observant, and seems to always get me to talk about things, even when I’m not ready to. Then she blabs our conversation to other people. I’ll give you a recent example. My husband and I have been having some problems, and Mary came over one morning after a particularly bad argument. She could tell that I had been crying, and asked what was wrong. I told her, but asked her to keep it to herself. The next day another friend – who knows both Mary and me – called to tell me she knew what I was going through, and was there to help if I needed her. There’s no way she could have known what was going on unless Mary told her. This is not the first time this kind of thing has happened. I don’t want to lose Mary as a friend, and I think her intentions were good, but I’m still angry.

-- Name Withheld

Dear Name Withheld,

I won’t take precisely the same cynical stance about keeping secrets that Benjamin Franklin did when he wrote, “Three can keep a secret if two of them are dead.” But, nevertheless, it is clear to me that some people are better able than others to keep confidences. Unfortunately, your good friend “Mary” is not among them, regardless of her intentions. You mention that this is not the first time this kind of thing has happened. So I can’t help but wonder why you continue to share intimate secrets with her, knowing that they’ll be on the eleven o’clock news – or at least a subject of discussion among your other friends. Also, remember that no one can make you do anything. Mary’s observations and inquiries do not mean that you have to discuss topics that you feel are not ready for dialogue.

You and Mary must have a great deal of love for each other, because usually there is nothing that ruins a friendship faster than loose lips. What is said in confidence must remain confidential. Trust in a friendship grows through mutual sharing, mutual caring, and keeping mutual confidences. Your relationship may have the “sharing” and “caring” down pat, but trust seems to be lacking.

You seem to have two choices. One, you can cease and desist sharing anything with Mary that you would not want others to know. This solves the problem of her broadcasting things you would prefer to keep private. But it also detracts from your close friendship, if you can’t talk with Mary about things that are important to you. Intimate connections require disclosure of matters that are close to our hearts. You may have to relegate Mary to a different level of friendship, where deep issues cannot be discussed, but you enjoy each other’s company on a more superficial level. If Mary is as good a friend as you believe her to be, I’m not sure that this option is the way to go. The second choice is more difficult, but it holds the possibility of your friendship growing deeper, rather than shallower.

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Have an honest conversation with Mary. Tell her how much you cherish your friendship, but that you are disappointed and concerned that you can't trust her to honor your confidences with her. Be gentle but firm, and give her concrete examples of ways she has betrayed your trust in sharing information with others. I would begin by talking about the most recent incident. Be willing to forgive and offer another chance, but don't continue to disclose your most innermost thoughts and feelings to Mary until she can honor your relationship by keeping your disclosures safe and confidential. Honor your friendship with honesty and perhaps your friendship with Mary will blossom as your trust in her grows.

P.S. Since we are speaking of honoring relationships, you might consider, once you are square with Mary, talking with your husband about why you two are arguing to the point of tears. Two such important relationships are worth some effort. Good luck.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2004 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.