

Catholic Caregivers

'Caregiving is pro-life!'

Keeping Secrets, Telling Lies

It's a bad idea to keep secrets from immediate family members if your loved one is facing a terminal illness.

Not always telling the care-receiver the truth—the whole truth—is a mistake, too.

Sooner or later, that secret, the whole truth, is going to be revealed. When that happens, a loving relationship based on trust is damaged. People are hurt more than they would have been if everyone had simply been honest from the beginning.

But it's *so* tempting.

If your parent or spouse is terribly frightened by the words "cancer" and "malignant," why not gloss over what the doctor has said? Why not just refer to his condition as "stomach problems" and keep his spirits up by telling him he'll soon be back on his feet and good as new?

Unless there are extenuating circumstances—significant dementia, for example—your loved one has the right to make his own decisions, and in order to make the best ones possible, he needs to know all the facts.

Why not? Because he's an adult. Has the right to hear the truth, even if it's a harsh truth. Unless there are extenuating circumstances—significant dementia, for example—your loved one has the right to make his own decisions, and in order to make the best ones possible, he needs to know all the facts.

While it's not unusual—and it's certainly understandable—that an adult child would want to shield a aging parent, want to protect him or her from as much worry as possible, doing that is also selling a parent short. It may help you to keep in mind that Mom didn't reach old age without going through hard times. She didn't get there without having squarely faced difficulties that couldn't be avoided.

Often a care-receiver, even one who's frail, is much tougher and wiser than others may realize.

If both your parents are still living, there may also be times when one of them says to you, "Don't tell your mother" or "Don't tell your father." But a spouse knows when there's a serious problem, and hearing "everything's fine" can make him or her worry even more because obviously everything *isn't* fine. Obviously something is very wrong.

There may also be times when a parent wants to keep the secret with only one child. "Don't tell your brother. He has enough to worry about with his job." "Don't tell your sister. It will only upset her." Of course it will add to his worry! Of course it will upset her!

Some things in life are very worrisome, are very upsetting, but worse still is being excluded from an inner family circle.

You need to keep in mind getting the secret out into the open means more than simply stating it out loud. It means being there for your spouse and children, for your parents and siblings, as they too acknowledge the harsh reality that must be faced.

It means supporting, encouraging, consoling and loving one another. Maybe it means all of you coming together, one final time, as a family.

But what about not telling the truth when it's *not* a life-and-death situation? Lying can seem like such a good idea at the time. The perfect solution.

When the truth comes out, and it always seems to at the worst possible moment, it can take a long time before trust is reestablished.

For example, Mom has made it clear she will not pay for getting extra medical help at home. If her health insurance doesn't cover a visiting nurse, then she will do without. But you're the one handling her bills now. You know she has plenty of money. She's just being stubborn. So you go ahead and hire a nurse and tell Mom the insurance company has a new policy. No harm done.

That's not so. When you start lying to your loved one or begin withholding information from him or her, harm *is* being done.

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But, again, it comes down to this: Your loved one has a right to know. Your parent needs to know if she is going to make informed choices. Your spouse needs to know if he is going to be able to prepare for what's coming.

If sometime you're tempted to lie, imagine someone keeping similar, personal, vital information from you. Imagine someone lying to you about it just so you won't worry.

You would be furious. And rightly so.

Telling the truth is another way you show your love and respect for the person who's in your care. □

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