

## Guard Your Lips and Tongue

By Gloria Saltzman MFA, MFT

*“I am only telling you this because I consider you my closest friend, don’t tell ANYONE, but...”*

In the recent film “Infamous” about Truman Capote writing In Cold Blood, there is a scene sequence that shows him telling at least four of his closest friends, information that is not supposed to be shared with any of them. Each time he lets out his sloppy secrets, he prefaces his vocal eruption by declaring their relationship as exclusive. The point in the film is to show Capote as disingenuous in addition to not being able to keep quiet when he is supposed to.

I’ve said some variation of these words and they’ve been said to me countless times. That feeling that you will burst if you can’t tell your best friend or life partner, some bit of news that is not generally known easily unzips that promised seal of the lips. Behaving this way with friends or spouses may show a lack of integrity and still be socially excusable. When we are in a professional role and learn private information that could harm another or that we have agreed not to share, the responsibility is far graver. The Old Testament states that “those who make it a habit to talk about others ...cut themselves off from many good things in the world around them.”

A woman enters an elevator after leaving her doctor’s office. She has spent several hours talking with her doctor about the lack of available interventions to

help her medical diagnosis and is in a daze. She wonders if her treatment choices or lifestyle are to blame for this devastating outcome. Huddled in the back corner of the elevator, two nurses enter the car at the next floor.

“Did you hear about the metastases of that woman we saw today? She is so young, isn’t it just awful?” The nurses shake their heads in agreement and glib horror. Glib because it is not happening to them and it is not their news to speak of so freely. For the woman huddled in the back corner, already blaming herself, although their conversation may or may not be about her, it makes her feel violated. The lack of courtesy and privacy their musak conversation displays is laden with inconsideration and ignorance. Whether the intention is to defame character or to spread innocuous news, another person’s information should not be shared with others without permission.

The HIPPA( Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) laws that we are all mandated to observe, are a clear attempt to maintain the right to privacy. “A major goal of the privacy rule is to assure that an individuals ‘ health information is properly protected while allowing the flow of health information needed to provide and promote high quality health care and to protect the public’s health and well being.”

These laws apply to us as clinicians when we are speaking with our colleagues and other professionals. Awareness of the right to privacy in all areas of our lives for all people would be a positive effect of practicing these ethics. We have all

heard the far too common tales of party goers over hearing discrete facts from indiscrete sources.

“Effective psychotherapy can only occur when trust and safety are experienced by the client. Without an atmosphere of confidence and trust, it is not possible to share the stories and experiences that may cause shame or embarrassment. These are the thoughts and feelings that need to be shared in order to be understood and hopefully transformed. The therapy office must be a haven where complete and frank disclosure can occur. To insure successful treatment, full confidentiality and privacy must be respected.” (Jaffe vs. Redmond, 1996)

Groups are easy places to forgo all of these rules. Some groups prohibit discussing anything that is learned inside the sanctity of the group outside of it. Some groups prohibit romance between the group members while it is active, with the knowledge that not only would that change the group dynamic, but it would also create a fertile opportunity for the gossip seed to take root. Just as in individual treatment, what is learned in any group, whether for professional or personal growth, without permission, just like that Vegas ad on TV, what is learned in the group, stays in the group. What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas. Even if we are confessing our sins, it is up to us to decide who gets to hear about them.