



Are you oversharing?

It can be easier to offload fears, worries, and doubts to strangers than people you're close to, but it's a good idea not to share too much

In years gone by, a confessional moment with an acquaintance or stranger was just that—a moment in time. If you accidentally said too much, you could laugh it off, profusely apologize, or ask for understanding or discretion. Granted, there would be no guarantee that you'd get empathy or kindness, but there'd be little-to-no evidence that you'd ever shared the confidence.

But if you say too much online, there's a chance it could have long-term repercussions. Even if you delete a social-media post or text message, someone could have taken a screenshot. And what's out there on the worldwide web can take on a life of its own. The thing is that, no matter the medium, it can feel freeing to share personal thoughts, feelings, opinions, and information with others. The difficulty lies in knowing what to say, to whom, and when. For instance, you might feel seen when you offload to someone you've just met about your work woes, but then exposed when you realize that they're highly influential and could tell everyone about your self-confessed fails. So, why do people overshare?

Human impulse

To understand, it's helpful to look at the psychology of sharing. Claire Plumbly is a clinical psychologist, author of *Burnout: How to Manage Your Nervous System Before It Manages You*, and director of the Good Therapy Team, which offers online and in-person psychological therapy and well-being workshops in the UK. She says: "Sharing means to let people in, so you can get to know each other. Humans are built with the inner chemistry for connection, so sharing nurtures this connection and closeness. It establishes your in-group and gives you a

sense of belonging. It helps you find the people whose values you align with."

Not all sharing is healthy, however, and it comes down to how well you know someone and whether the conversation induces regret. "In a friendship or relationship, this might take the form of dwelling on the conversation later. Or you might be asked follow-up questions by the person and wish you hadn't said anything because you don't want to talk about it any more," says Claire, who specializes in anxiety, burnout, and trauma.

With strangers, healthy sharing is about keeping information on a need-to-know basis. "It's about sharing a little about topics—thinking about breadth rather than depth," Claire says. Yet, there are many social situations that create the illusion of intimacy. Who hasn't been in the back of a taxi or at the hairdresser's or nail salon, and inadvertently spilled the beans about an aspect of their life? If you feel uncomfortable sitting in silence or in social situations with new people or distant acquaintances, it's tempting to start talking—or you might feel under pressure to share. "Oversharing can result in an exciting response from the listener, such as animated facial expressions and surprised reactions, which can be rewarding for someone sharing, especially if this isn't something others give them," says Claire.

Context is key

You can feel a sense of camaraderie from sharing the ins and outs of relationships, home decor, illnesses, nights out, medical treatments, and trips abroad. But not everyone will have your best interests at heart. Some



might wince at your revelations and others could use the information to gossip about you or spread rumors. “Oversharing can leave you open to being taken advantage of or create situations where someone tries to win one over on you,” says Claire. “For instance, a person might loudly ask how tricky a problem was, in front of others. This would lead you to feel embarrassed, weak, or exposed.”

There’s no one-size-fits-all reason why people overshare—it depends on the person and the context. “You might be seeking more than closeness and connection; perhaps you’re looking for reassurance or to be validated,” says Claire. For some, it’s a reaction to early childhood experiences in their family. “People who have struggled in the past with close connections, especially with their primary caregivers, might get a strong urge to overshare in a bid to quickly build a connection. This is ultimately something we deeply crave. Essentially, the oversharing is an attempt to rush the relationship-building stage. They may not have had good modeling, growing up, of what’s appropriate.”

These behaviors are also linked to strong emotions. “Anxiety creates a feeling of insecurity, and oversharing can get you reassurance and social support,” Claire says. “Meanwhile, happiness can cause you to become less inhibited and want to share. People often feel compelled to overshare with strangers because they worry less about what the person thinks, or that they’ll be judged.”

Digital divulgence

When it comes to online sharing, research has found that revealing information from behind a screen lowers people’s inhibitions. Being online creates a sense of invisibility—if the communication is text-based, you can’t see one another. This gives people the courage to express themselves. And when people are relatively anonymous, they feel less vulnerable as they can separate their online selves from their real-life selves.

“You might be in the comfort of your home on social media or in chatrooms, feeling connected to like-minded people, and forget that you don’t know them,” says Claire. “There are also games that do the rounds that

lead to oversharing, such as ‘First pet name’ and ‘Favorite food.’ You might not realize that you’re oversharing by participating.”

Take heart if you wish to change your sharing behavior, though, because it is possible—and you don’t have to go it alone. A counselor or psychologist can, of course, help you to develop some personalized strategies that you can put into practice, but there are tools you can start to employ immediately. “Try to develop your awareness of why you overshare, then see if there are other ways to meet those needs,” says Claire. “If you get an urge to overshare that’s linked to strong negative emotions, then learning tools to calm emotions down is important. The aim is to slow down enough to notice the urge to start oversharing before everything has slipped out of your mouth.

“It’s not easy, but try looking at recent instances when you overshared. Who was it with? What had just happened? Where were you? Can you see a pattern? Spend some time thinking about what aspect of sharing felt appropriate and what felt too much. Then think of a tool you could use to remind yourself to slow down. You could carry a small stone in your pocket and hold on to it to remind yourself that you have a choice about how much you share. You might also want to practice a slow-breathing or grounding exercise to help anchor and soothe yourself.” (See opposite for more suggestions from Claire.)

Finally, remember that despite all this, it’s still good to talk. The barriers that have been broken down thanks to people having frank conversations about mental health is just one positive example. Take the time you need to develop discernment, and gently move your life forward.

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To find out more about Claire, visit drclaireplumbly.com

If you need additional support, contact your doctor or a qualified counselor or psychologist. Help and support is also available via several charities.

DIVULGING TOO MUCH INFORMATION?

Here, Claire offers two options to change the pattern

Moving away from an in-person conversation.

If someone asks you about a personal subject you’d rather not discuss, but you find it difficult to express this explicitly, use subtle nonverbal cues to drop hints. Let go of eye contact, start to busy yourself or make an excuse to leave. Alternatively, set a boundary by saying: “I understand this topic is important to you, but it’s slightly outside my comfort zone. Can we talk about something else?”

Curbing your urge to overshare online. Spend some time looking at patterns as to when, where, and with whom the oversharing happens. Try to understand what might be going on. When you write something online, wait 10 minutes before pressing submit. Go and do something else, then come back and read it. Ask yourself: How will I feel tomorrow with this message going live?