

# Here's the Skinny on Gossip

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Who can resist the temptation of spreading or listening to juicy gossip? Most of us can't make it through a day without engaging in gossip of some form. Despite this indulgence, gossip has long been viewed by psychology researchers as unreliable and unworthy of serious study. Psychotherapists have typically viewed gossip as destructive to relationships, especially in the form of malicious rumors and unwarranted character slurs.

Recent studies (reported in the *New York Times*), however, suggest we find gossip irresistible because it actually serves a social purpose. It helps define group membership and enforce the rules that keep people working well together. Although it may blemish the reputation of the one being gossiped about, it also serves as a way for newcomers to feel included in a group and as a safety net for members who feel in danger of falling out.

When two or more people share inside information about another who is absent, they are often spreading important news. According to some biologists, they may be enacting a mutually protective ritual that may have evolved from early grooming behaviors.

Long-term studies of Pacific Islanders, American middle-school children and residents of rural Newfoundland and Mexico, among others, have confirmed that the content and frequency of gossip are universal: People devote anywhere from a fifth to two-thirds or more of their daily conversation to gossip, and men appear to be just as eager for the skinny as women.

Surveys find that sneaking, lying and cheating among friends or acquaintances make for the spiciest material and that most people pass on their juiciest nuggets to at least two other people.

Gossip serves the purpose of helping to keep people from straying too far outside a group's written and unwritten rules. Because of this, some believe that gossiping too little may be as harmful as gossiping too much. The high value we place on scuttlebutt may be seen in how fast a good scoop spreads like wild-fire through a room, as those in possession of the dirt can hardly contain themselves. They feel powerful when they're the bearers of sizzling news that everyone wants to know.

Gossip is of such great interest that when we're not spreading it first hand, we're bombarded by it through the media shows devoted exclusively to dishing up the goods on celebrities, newsmakers and the rich and famous. Throw in magazines and the online sites trading in the currency of gossip and you're left with the impression that our most fascinating social preoccupation is hearing the revolting and compromising behavior of others.

Despite its value as a group cohesive, don't overlook the destructive side of gossip. In its mean-spirited forms, gossip-mongering does more harm than good for everyone involved. Putting others down by spreading unsubstantiated rumors or just being critical of them behind their back when you don't like their behavior may lead to lost friendships or work relationships.

Be mindful of using gossip to feel superior to others. Being critical of those you feel competitive with by making them the butt of a joke behind their back is an artificial way to boost your own ego. Resentment is sure to follow when the target of the tidbit eventually finds out that she has been badmouthed. And how does she find out? By more gossip that gets back to her!

Before you spill the goods about others or offer sensitive self-disclosures, don't forget: That same dear friend in whose ear you will be whispering that tantalizing tidbit about Jennifer may soon after be bending Jennifer's ear about you. As they say, "What goes around, comes around." So be careful with whom you choose to share your gossip and how you choose to divulge it. Pass it on.