



Do Tell / Don't Tell

THE SECRET SHAME

BY ELIZABETH SCHUMAN

On the surface, Zach Snitzer seemed to have everything going for him — a loving family, friends, activities at Owings Mills High School and at the Rosenbloom Owings Mills Jewish Community Center. In short, Zach seemed to be a typical, suburban Baltimore teenager.

Except he wasn't.

Snitzer had a secret: He was a drug addict.

At age 12, Snitzer used pot. By high school, he was using prescription painkillers and had tried heroin.

Finally, after more than a decade of drug use, including stays at inpatient rehabilitation programs, he became clean eight years ago. Today, Zach, 36, helps other addicts and their families as co-founder of the Maryland Addiction Recovery Center, which offers family-focused treatment.

His personal and professional experiences add weight to his perspective. “No parents think their child will become an addict,” he says. “It’s a natural human instinct to want to keep it quiet. Parents think that the addiction is a reflection of their

parenting — that they are to blame.

“Addiction impacts the family as much as the addict,” he adds. Parents, siblings and the entire family want to keep the problem quiet.

Denial, shame and guilt underscore secrecy’s pull in families and the community, whether it’s about a child with an addiction, infertility, financial struggles, mental illness or another seemingly taboo subject. No one wants to appear a failure.

“Everyone has secrets,” says Howard Reznick, LCSW-C, senior



Howard Reznick and Mimi Kraus of JCS both explain that women value relationships and men value careers and when either suffers, one feels shame.

manager, prevention and education for Jewish Community Services (JCS) and a licensed therapist for 38 years. “Those things that are most dear to us are also the most impactful. As the 12-Step recovery process explains, ‘We are only as sick as our secrets.’”

While one might believe that a secret is fairly innocuous, they have power and weight, continues Reznick. “It takes a lot of energy to have a secret. Secrets do not allow us to be fully present with ourselves in the world.”

Then, there are societal pressures. “All of us want to put forth our successes. Problems such as depression or unemployment show that we are not functioning well,” explains Mimi Kraus, LCSW-C, associate senior manager of therapy, JCS. Even a subject such as infertility may cause feelings of inadequacy or failure, especially when others ask seemingly innocent questions about when a young couple will start a family.

“People may feel ashamed, humiliated or embarrassed. We’re social creatures and care what others think of us,” says Kraus. “We want to present as successful.” She and Reznick explain that conventional wisdom suggests that women value

relationships and men value careers — and when either suffer, one’s first thought is shame.

In the Jewish community, especially, there is pressure. “All of our successes and failures are magnified,” says Snitzer. “There is definitely a stigma about mental health and addiction from Orthodox to Reform. The first action is always to keep it quiet — to keep it in the family and not share with others.”

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— MINDY DICKLER

He adds that addiction has a biological component, much like diabetes or cancer. “You would talk with others if your child had a disease or husband had a heart attack. Hate the addiction, not the addict.”

No matter the cause, it’s often difficult to come to terms with a new reality. Mindy Dickler, co-founder of JQBaltimore, a group for Jewish LGBTQ individuals and their families, admits that when her son told her he was gay four years ago, she needed time to accept it. “Just as

a child comes out, it’s a coming out process for the parents,” she says.

Dickler found herself altering her expectations of her son’s future — and her family’s future. “At the beginning, I wasn’t comfortable sharing because I was afraid of others’ reactions. I am much less cautious now,” she says, citing sweeping changes in public opinion and national and local governments that have brought gay rights to the forefront.

Talking about the issue is cathartic. Both Kraus and Reznick point to the value of support groups. “The benefit of a support group is that what might be outrageous in one social context — a child stealing, taking out a second mortgage to pay for rehab, a spouse in jail — is the norm. Others have been there.”

The opportunity to share a secret and not be judged is critical. “Once you share your ‘secret shame,’ it’s no longer a secret,” says Reznick. “You are no longer alone.”

Last fall, more than 2,000 young people shared their secrets online in a Millennial Voices project through

the IfIKnew website that invited young adults to complete the sentence: *If you knew me, you would know ...* Responses encompassed friendships, sexuality, fears and secrets. “The project showed what’s on young people’s minds today,” says Reznick.

In the real world, it’s helpful to confide in a close, trusted friend. “Remember that the amount of disclosure is commensurate with the level of trust and intimacy in the relationship,” advises Kraus.

“Friendship is based on knowing a person’s vulnerabilities.”

One caveat? Not everyone is accepting. Dickler recalls telling friends about her son. While most were supportive, one friend responded, “Do you think it’s a phase?” Recently, that same friend asked, “Is he still gay?”

Acceptance runs both ways. A friend entrusted with a secret may want to ensure that his or her friend finds outside support, such as a therapist or support group, and seeks help for any symptoms, such as depression. Regardless of the secret, what matters is sharing — being transparent — with a trusted friend, a therapist, or in a support group.

“It’s very difficult for the addict, alcoholic, family or community to get better without transparency,” believes Snitzer. “Once you realize there is a problem, you can ask for help. When people admit that need, they discover that they are not alone.”



When she found out her son was gay, Mindy Dickler, co-founder of JQBaltimore, had to alter her expectations of her son’s and her family’s future.



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