Dealing with Family Secrets

In many families, important parts of the family story are concealed, and some secrets can cause tension or anxiety. While respecting the privacy and dignity of every family member, it is still possible to learn more about the patterns of experience which make your family unique, and which help give your family its rich and mysterious power.

Kinds of secrets:
A family secret might concern events within your own lifetime, or several generations past. It might concern events that are extremely destructive (violence, addiction, or physical or sexual abuse), or it may concern matters which are still important, but less devastating (birth out of wedlock, infidelity, closeted sexual identity, and many other issues).

What if this secret concerns serious events within my own lifetime?
First: if you know or believe that someone in your family is being physically hurt, or is hurting someone, or has committed a serious crime, then talk to your doctor or your pastor, or contact child or adult protective services, before going further.

What if I just have a vague sense that something in the history of my family is not right?
Start by talking to the family member with whom you have the closest emotional bond, maybe a sibling. This person may have an important (and very different) perspective on events. Look at old family photographs. Who is missing, who is there, and what does their body language tell you? Does anything seem odd about stories the family handed down, or the jokes they told? Are there topics that were off-limits for discussion? Then speak with a family therapist.

What if there seems to be a secret concerning events long past?
Sometimes an older family member is naturally taciturn but is not really hiding anything, and some gentle encouragement may get them to open up. Try showing this person a few old photographs and asking about the people shown in them – you may find that this person has an interesting story after all.

What if my family member seems determined not to talk about some part of the past?
If you were not directly involved in the events being concealed, you should honor this person's wishes. Even if the events being kept secret are long past, and even if the reasons for secret-keeping are obsolete, try to respect your relative's right to privacy. The situation may be a little different if this person seems to be hinting that a part of them wants to tell a story. Even in this case however, you should proceed very gently. It might be appropriate to ask, "What would you need to feel sure of, so that you could feel O.K. to talk about this?" Your family member might need to know more about your own feelings, or about how this information would be handled.

How can I find out about the past, when the only person who knows anything refuses to talk?
It's common for people to assume that the secretive family member is "the only one who knows," but really, this is usually not true. For nearly every person who refuses to talk, there is someone else who knows about the events being concealed, and wants, even needs, to talk about these events. It might be a more distant cousin, or a friend or neighbor from long ago. Start from the assumption that someone out there knows, and wants to talk.

What if I have a secret to tell?
As therapist John Bradshaw notes, the goal of confronting and disclosing secrets is to restore each family member's dignity, and to set up an emotional climate in which sensitive information can be shared long afterward. With that goal:

If you have done something you are ashamed of and need to talk about it: Find someone to talk to. Take legal and moral responsibility for your actions. Try to make amends. And remember that forgiveness is possible.

If you have been the victim of family trauma or abuse: Find a therapist who can work with you. Go slowly and give yourself time to work through your hurt and anger. Warn any other person who might be victimized.

If you have learned a family secret but are not a guilty party or a victim: Not every secret needs to be told. But if you believe that telling this secret will release long-held tensions and create a more understanding family, then go ahead. Avoid creating family dynamics in which some family members are "in on" the secret and others are not. Avoid using a major event (such as a funeral) as an opportunity to tell a secret – this will interfere with the event, and your story will not get the attention it deserves. An everyday setting is probably best.

How do I find a good family therapist?
You can get a recommendation from your regular doctor, or from your pastor, or from a trusted friend. Check with your insurance network, and use your own instincts when you first meet with this person, to see whether he or she will be good for you.