

# Gossip: Verbal Terrorism\*

If you have been the victim of gossip, you know it can be both cruel and destructive. Malicious gossip has shattered many people's lives and careers.

Gossip is a type of verbal terrorism. "To destroy somebody's good name is to commit a kind of murder," says Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, author of *Words That Hurt, Words That Heal*.

## The Ethics of Gossip

Gossip is anything negative you say about someone to someone else - whether the information is true or false. However, some people believe it's OK to talk about others if what they say is true. While it's legal to spread truthful information about someone, it is still gossip and still unethical. Obviously gossip causes damage because it can ruin a person's reputation. Spreading rumors about someone else's personal life can lead to the breakup of a relationship and family.

## Why People Gossip

Spreading secret information, especially something negative, makes people feel important. It also adds a bit of intrigue to the same old boring day.

"For most of us, exchanging critical evaluations about others is far more interesting and enjoyable than exchanging good news," explains Telushkin.

## Complaining Is Gossip

This type of gossip happens all the time. One person gets mad at another so the disgruntled person complains to a third party to vent his or her feelings.

This type of triangle damages reputations for the following reasons: Nothing gets resolved between the two angry persons. A third person becomes involved and must take sides. Pretty soon the entire community gets caught up in an undercurrent of damaging gossip with everyone choosing sides. The resulting tension however lowers morale and affects community unity and individual productivity.

## What You Can Do About Gossip

If you're the target of gossip, or if gossip is a general problem, you can take positive action to agree that:

- ◆ Gossip about anyone's personal life is unacceptable

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\* Adapted and Twisted from Harriet Meyerson's interview with Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, author of *Words That Hurt, Words That Heal*, Quill, 1998. From *Vitality*, Vol. 16, No 9, 2002.

- ◆ If two people cannot resolve a problem between themselves, it is their problem and they need to resolve their problem themselves
- ◆ A person upset with someone else should talk directly with that person and not with anyone else
- ◆ People who violate the "rules" should suffer consequences - if nothing more than community pressure to stop the gossip

### **What If You've Done It**

Notice how often your talk unintentionally drifts toward discussion of other people. Next, notice how often you're a willing recipient of gossip. **If you listen to gossip, you're guilty as well.** A listener must complete the gossip connection.

"If you have publicly said something cruel and regret it, call the victim of your remarks immediately and apologize," advise Telushkin. "Gossip spreads like wildfire, and you have not control over which direction it heads or how much damage it leaves in its path."