

# Reveal your secrets

Confession seems an old-fashioned idea, but getting guilt off your chest can be good for your soul

WE SEEM TO have a lot to feel guilty about today, but maybe that's because we've become much more open to the outward expression of our feelings – even to strangers. While our parents' generation kept a stoical silence, we seem to unburden ourselves of our grief, fears and guilt with far more ease.

Some would argue that game-show hosts such as Jerry Springer, and confessional websites, trivialise religious practice. These days, you can even make your confession to punters in a nightclub – where you are rewarded with drinks for the most lurid – or to the entire internet, via a chat room. But the function is the same: getting something off your chest, revealing a painful secret, or trying to offload guilt. However you choose to unburden yourself, psychologists, doctors and religious leaders all agree that confession is not just good for the soul, it is also vital for maintaining our mental and physical wellbeing.

There are two halves to traditional confession: the expression of contrition for your sin and the penance you perform to be forgiven. In religion, this restores your relationship with God. In a secular context, similar practices boost wellbeing by lifting the weight of guilt.

This weight provokes the body into a stress response. As psychologist Pat Doorbar explains, "If you feel guilty, your body will externalise stress. Insomnia is common, as are panic attacks, palpitations and indigestion. You may even feel you're not fit to live." There are psychological effects too, such as lack of creativity, logic and a general 'woolly-headedness', which can feel like trying to unlock a door when there's a key jammed in the other side.

The way women react to stressful situations makes them more likely to need to

offload than men. "Women tend to be more self-critical and therefore vulnerable to thinking they've done wrong," says Doorbar. "As a result, they're twice as likely to suffer from depression as men."

Many religions feature the confession and forgiveness of sins. Protestant confession takes place through congregational prayer during Eucharist and can encourage reflection on personal shortcomings. Examining mistakes in a ritualised context makes the worshipper more conscious of them, which can help to avoid repetition.

The Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur, is one of the most significant Jewish holidays. It is a day set aside to 'afflict the soul'

## CONFESSION IS VITAL FOR MAINTAINING OUR MENTAL AND PHYSICAL WELLBEING

with fasting and other restrictions, to reflect upon the sins of the past year, make amends and seek forgiveness from God. These sins are against God, not other people. For sins against people, reconciliation has to be sought directly from wronged individuals before Yom Kippur.

For Catholics, there is the confessional. Lisa Jones, a 42-year old teacher and practising Catholic, finds confession incredibly liberating and empowering.

"I have a constant battle with my own sense of inadequacy as a wife, mother, daughter and colleague," she says. "I find that going to confession at church really helps me deal with that. It's a wonderful

feeling – the slate is wiped clean and you can get on and enjoy your life. Sometimes I feel quite euphoric when I come out."

So is the confessional the religious equivalent of the therapist's couch? Yes, up to a point, but the main difference between the two is the concept of absolution. Whereas divine forgiveness is the mainstay of religious confession, the working assumption behind therapy is that forgiveness must come from within. In other words, you can't move on until you have forgiven yourself and learned to accept who you are. Professor Alex Gardner, a psychotherapist who specialises in confessional practice, believes there are also clear parallels.

"Catholics often see the priest as a therapist. It is another channel by which to gain catharsis. If you don't have an outlet, all the tensions and stresses can undermine you, you can feel a huge build-up and something has to give. Confession is the act of letting it go."

For all of us, religious or not, finding a way to offload can provide an escape valve for the pressure cooker of sins and guilty secrets. But, like most things, too much confessing can be as bad as too little: constantly revisiting the past for the sake of it and without resolving the issues, can encourage individuals to create a psychological store cupboard of guilt over which to brood. It is not the assigning of blame or admitting guilt, but having the courage to simply let go of what is really bothering you that is healing.

There are other ways to go about this – the most obvious being face-to-face confession, either with a trained psychotherapist or with a trusted confidante. Women often use their friends and family as a support network and counselling service. Claire Taylor, 36, an account >