

# Gossip

The Social Weapon That Uses Your Life To Entertain Others And Others' Lives To Entertain Yours



Is gossip just an inability to keep a secret? Or is it a desperate way to make a connection with others? Is it malicious chit-chat to get back at ones enemies? Or an intentional tool used to advance ones agenda? What propels someone to talk badly about people behind their backs? Is discussing someone's problems going to improve their already difficult situation? Is one an innocent bystander when talking about someone without their knowledge? Or is gossiping a clandestine bullying of a person who is not even there to defend themselves? **Mira Khreino** takes a 360-degree look at gossip.



*“I maintain that, if everyone knew what others said about him, there would not be four friends in the world,” Blaise Pascal, Philosopher and Mathematician.”*

**L**anguage is our main form of communication. We use it to express our thoughts, ideas, and emotions. This expression is used to bring us closer to each other and to help form relationships. We are communicating in ways previous generations would have never dreamed of. To add to classical face-to-face interaction we now have distant communication - phone calls, texts, instant messengers, emails, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to name but a few. More personal information is accessible to the outside world and therefore, we are more exposed. With social media so rampant, our social network gains 24-hour access to our intimate details. People see what we are up to, comment on it to us, and more often than not, to each other as well! The English Cambridge dictionary defines gossip as “conversation or reports about other people’s private lives that might be unkind, disapproving, or not true.” So, gossiping involves rumors and talk of a personal, sensational, or intimate nature about people’s private lives. Sometimes this talk is pure fact and has a solid base in reality, and at other times it is fictitious and lavished up for entertainment value.

### Positive Gossip: TAKING CARE OF THE WEAK

Engaging in behind-the-back talk can sometimes have meaningful social benefits. “Pro-social gossip” serves to warn others about dishonest or untrustworthy people. It therefore prevents the exploitation of those who are perhaps weaker in the group. Sociologically, this type of gossiping serves an important function, is driven by concern for others, and has positive social effects. Evolutionarily, linguistic practices like gossip helped maintain a harmonious and integrated society, allowing group members to track one another’s reputation as trustworthy interaction partners, even if they could not personally observe their behavior.

### Negative Gossip: OUTER FRONT- INNER REALITY

Every gossipier desires for their new piece of juicy information to be a headline with maximum satisfaction and entertainment value. The laughter and/or gasping that ensues after the delivery of information masks the malicious

intent and vindictiveness of the gossipier. In order to hide their malevolence, gossipers become skilled at appearing sympathetic to their victim while underhandedly slating and implicitly degrading and denigrating them. Self-deception is at the heart of this kind of gossiping. Most of the time the gossipier thinks they have a justifiable moral high ground over the person they are criticizing; that they are better in some way. In fact, there are unconscious efforts at play here. Often, it is precisely due to a lack of superiority that the unconscious mind seeks to equate the balance by bringing down the other. In order for the gossipier to feel at least equal if not better (more popular, more tasteful, more intelligent, more successful, more stylish, more religious etc.) they look to undermine the competition. A chief gossip monger may superficially seem very happy but in reality is often a sad character. On the outside gossipers may seem strong, interesting, popular, and in control, but in fact gossiping behavior is a desperate attempt to alleviate low self-esteem, jealousy, bitterness, envy, frustration, anger, and weakness.





## GOSSIP: IN THE WORK PLACE

It can be argued that gossip in the workplace is a force that ties social and business networks together. However, the flip side of this advantage is that it can hurt relationships and create a climate of fear and resentment in the office, all of which feed stress. Workplace stress, multiple studies show, causes problems ranging from a decline in productivity to a rise in illness and absenteeism. Rumors in the workplace are symptomatic of a greater underlying workplace ethic (or lack thereof). Often this is maliciously used as a way to get back at competition or advance oneself. This affects both group morale and general productivity.

### Gossip: Men Vs. Women

It is often thought that women gossip more than men do. In actuality research indicates time spent gossiping among the sexes is more similar than previously thought. The difference lies in what the sexes talk about, the content, rather than the frequency or duration of the chat. Studies show that women use a larger range of intonation, talk more about social inclusion, moral alignment, and people's intimate lives, whereas men talk about politics (governmental and business/professional) and who's "up" and who's "down." Men talk about competition and focused action while women chat about emotions and social

*"The media (newspapers, magazines, television news) flourishes and thrives on gossip. Our fascination with knowing about other people's lives has made broadcasting celebrity downfall and misfortune a multi-billion dollar industry."*



relations. Women tend to bond over feelings as opposed to men who bond over activities, with limited intimacy. More often women are heard saying "did you see how she behaved," as opposed to the masculine "did you see what car he just bought."

So, it's not that women gossip more than men do, it's just that they do it differently. Women are also more willing to admit to gossiping. Men refrain from using the "feminine" term and call the same act

"networking" or "shooting the breeze."

### GOSSIP: BEHAVIORAL FUNCTION- WHY DO WE DO IT?

- It helps people find common ground, share discussions and develop relationships. Talking about mutual friends, co-workers, and acquaintances helps people form a connection. By sharing information, one demonstrates a level of trust in the other, this

*“Anthropologists believe that throughout human history, people have used gossip as a way to either bond with others or as a tool to isolate those who aren’t supporting the group.”*

confidence assumes that the other will not repeat the relayed information.

- It is a form of camaraderie. People want to engage with others who share common opinions, no matter how snarky. The discussion may not be deeply personal, but it demonstrates that two people can have fun together; furthermore, it shows they are both on the “same side.”
- It establishes that one is in the know. That nothing happens behind one’s back. This is akin to being chief in a small village and chief means clout, prestige, status, and social standing.
- It creates a dichotomy. If one is part of the perpetrating gossip team then one is safe from attack at that moment. Therefore, the alliance formed is an act of self-preservation, which directs malicious intent away from oneself and onto a victim. It re-enforces the age-old saying “keep your friends close and your enemies closer.” Instead of being on the victim side of the dichotomy one joins the safer perpetrator camp.
- It is a method to shift attention away from one’s own mistake or vulnerability and onto another. In order to underplay and minimize the self-damaging effect of one’s own errors, one diverts talk to someone who (ideally) has made a bigger faux-pas.
- It can mask the real dynamic between two people. If a friendship is socially beneficial for both parties, that friendship becomes valuable, even though the people involved may not have much in common. Gossiping can create a mutual enemy, this in turn creates a closeness.
- It makes people feel included, part of the flock, accepted, and valued as members of a social circle. Participating in the ongoing conversations one’s peers have is an element of one’s favorable reception in the flock.
- It strengthens social status of the recipient. When information is entrusted to another, the recipient is given clout and value, as they now hold a secret that others are not privy to. An advantageous alliance is formed, and as a result the



recipient has more social stability.

- It is a form of “social capital” a secret weapon to use on others if or when needed. Merely having the information puts one in a position of power, even though one may have no intention to use it.
- It is an indirect way of taking revenge on someone who has slighted or hurt you. If one feels like one cannot stand up for oneself in a particular situation, for example confronting an aggressor face to face, an easier (and perhaps more socially damaging) form of attack would involve the circulation of a malicious rumor.
- It is an attempt to assert superiority over the other. People who judge or put others down sometimes do so with the aim of making themselves appear more worthy.
- It protects one from one’s own self-hatred. Jealousy can be a huge motivator for gossip. Even though the gossip will try every attempt to mask jealousy, their actual incentive is fuelled by envy.
- It is used as an aid to those who want to climb up the social hierarchy.

Gossiping is a demonstration of being status-conscious.

- It is a tool to advance a good opinion about oneself to those who are deemed socially or professionally useful. In order to improve reputation, one not only does good deeds, one also ensures that others are aware of this benevolence. This public knowledge is essential to the improvement of one’s “social impression.” The act of self-promotion is often coupled with comparison to others.

## GOSSIP: A LAST NOTE

If you don’t mind others talking about your misfortune, spreading vicious rumors, ruining your social or professional reputation, or lavishing in your bad luck, then by all means continue to bad mouth people behind their backs. However, if you would rather that people not talk about you, then be prepared to curb your gossiping and become more mindful of what you say about them. Remember the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” ■