

Tell someone

A short book about carrying a heavy worry alone because
you think talking would burden people

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First edition

Written by AI with human guidance. It can
contain mistakes, which later editions correct.

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Before you start

This is a short book and you can read it in two or three sittings. It's about one habit. There's something heavy on your mind, a result you're waiting for, a letter you haven't answered, a marriage that's gone quiet, a child who isn't right, a mistake at work that nobody's found yet, and you haven't told anyone. Not because there's nobody. Because telling them would land it on them, and they've got enough, and you should be able to manage this yourself. So you've managed it, alone, for weeks.

I'm going to argue three things. The first is that carrying it makes sense from the inside. The people you'd tell do have enough on. You are a capable person. And there's a real fear that saying a thing out loud gives it a shape it didn't have. The second is that the belief that telling would burden them runs the wrong way, and there's research that measures how wrong. People underestimate how willing others are to help and how good it feels to be asked. They judge their own vulnerability far more harshly than anyone else does. And carrying a worry alone isn't a matter of keeping it out of conversation. It's a matter of the mind going back to it, dozens of times a day, and that going back is the thing that wears you down and that telling interrupts. The third is practical. When you've carried a worry for more than a week, you tell one person, in one sitting, and you let them help. Chapters 20 to 23 cover how.

This book doesn't ask you to tell everyone, to share things that aren't yours to share, or to stop being a private person. It asks for one conversation, with one person, about the one thing.

Three cautions, and please read them.

If the worry includes thoughts of ending your life, or of harming yourself, that isn't a habit and this isn't the book. It's urgent. Samaritans are on 116 123 at any hour, NHS 111 is there for urgent help, and if you're in danger now, call 999. Please tell someone today.

If the worry is about someone else's safety, especially a child's, the person to tell isn't a friend. It's the police or social services, and the telling shouldn't wait for the end of a chapter.

And if the weight has become a low mood that's there most of the day and has been for two weeks, or nothing has felt good for that long, see a GP, or in England refer yourself to NHS talking therapies without going through one.

The notes at the back give my sources and their limits. Where I'm giving my own reasoning and not a finding, I'll say so.

The thing you haven't said

There's a letter from the bank in the kitchen drawer that you've read four times. The number in it is one you can't make work, and you've been moving money around for a month to keep it from being visible, and it's still not working, and your partner thinks the account is fine because you've said it is.

Or it's a scan. The appointment was two weeks ago and the result is on Thursday, and you've told nobody, because nothing's certain and telling would make people worry about a thing that might be nothing. You've slept badly for a fortnight and said you're tired from work.

Or it's the marriage, which has gone quiet in a way you can't name, and your sister asked last week how things were and you said "fine". Or it's your son, who's stopped talking about school, and you've noticed and haven't said, to him or to anyone. Or it's the spreadsheet at work with the mistake in it that hasn't come to light and will, and you've spent three weeks waiting for the email.

These are invented, and I'd guess one of them isn't far off. What they have in common is that each is a real thing, of a size that would be hard for anyone to carry, and each is being carried by one person, in a house or an office full of people who'd want to know. And each time someone has asked how you are, you've said the word that ends the question.

Some words. I'll call the heavy thing **the worry**, whatever it is. Holding it alone I'll call **carrying it**. The thought that telling would load someone I'll call **the burden belief**, because it's a belief and I'm going to test it. The conversation in which you tell someone I'll call **the telling**, and the person you tell **the listener**. The worry as it exists in your head, unspoken, I'll call **the private version**, and what it becomes once said, **the spoken version**. The way your mind goes back to the worry through the day, on the bus and in the shower and at three in the morning, I'll call **the wander**, which is a researcher's word I'll credit when I come to it. Telling the whole thing at once, rather than in hints, is **one sitting**. What you ask the listener for, to listen, to advise or to do something, is **the request**. And the person whose worry it also is, usually a partner, is **the co-owner**.

Before you go on, do one thing. Write the worry down in one sentence. Then write how long you've carried it. Then write who knows. For most readers the third line is one word, and the second line is longer than they'd have guessed. Keep the page. The book is about getting a second name onto the third line.

Why carrying it seems right

I want to be fair to carrying it before I argue against it, because the reasons aren't foolish and the people who carry things alone are usually the kind ones.

They've got enough on. Your partner is stretched. Your friend has her own mother to worry about. Your colleague has a deadline. Adding your thing to their pile isn't kindness.

It's yours. The scan is your body. The mistake is your spreadsheet. The debt is your doing. A grown adult manages their own affairs and doesn't hand them round.

Saying it makes it real. As long as the result is unknown and unspoken, it's a possibility. Once you've said "I'm waiting for a scan result" to your sister, it's an event with a Thursday in it.

They'd worry. You'd be moving the worry from your head into theirs, and they'd have it for the fortnight too, and you'd have made two worried people out of one.

You should be able to cope. You've coped with things before. This is a thing. Coping is what you do.

It might resolve. The result might be clear. The mistake might not be found. The marriage might come back on its own. If you wait, you may never need to have said anything.

It's private. Some things are simply yours, and a person is entitled to an interior that isn't on display. That's true, and the book agrees with it, and the disagreement is only about which things belong in the interior and which have grown too heavy to keep there.

And you don't want to be that person. The one who's always got something. The one people brace for.

There are needs under all of this. To protect the people you love. To be competent. To keep the thing from getting bigger. Not to be a drain. Those are good needs, and the method later in the book is built to meet them. What I'll show is that carrying it meets them badly. It doesn't protect anyone, because the people close to you already know something's wrong. It isn't competence, because the thing isn't being managed, it's being hidden. It makes the worry bigger, not smaller. And the person people brace for isn't the one who tells them once. It's the one who says "fine" and clearly isn't.

"They've got enough on their plate"

Start with the belief that does most of the work, because there's research that measures it and the measurement is one-sided.

Xuan Zhao and Nicholas Epley, in 2022, ran a series of studies with over two thousand American adults on what people expect when they ask for help. Across scenarios, remembered experiences and live interactions, people who needed help consistently underestimated how willing others would be to give it, underestimated how good the helpers would feel about being asked, and overestimated how inconvenienced the helpers would be. The reason, the researchers found, was that people asking for help thought about it as a question of compliance, whether the other person would grudgingly agree, and missed the other person's actual motive, which was that they wanted to help and felt good doing it.

An earlier study by Francis Flynn and Vanessa Lake, in 2008, found the same gap in the simpler act of asking strangers for small favours. People underestimated by as much as half how many would say yes. The askers were thinking about what saying yes would cost the other person. They weren't thinking about what saying no would cost, which is the thing the other person is mostly thinking about.

An earlier book in this series uses both studies for the habit of not asking for practical help, and I'm reusing them here because the burden belief is the same forecast pointed at a different request. When you decide not to tell your friend about the scan because

she's got enough on, you're doing what Zhao and Epley's participants did. You're pricing the telling by its cost to her and forgetting her motive, which is that she'd want to know, and would feel closer to you for being told, and would feel worse, not better, to learn later that you'd carried it for a fortnight within reach of her.

"They've got enough on their plate" is a sentence about their capacity, made by you, without asking them. The research says that when people in this position are asked, they don't experience the plate as full. They experience being trusted. The belief isn't a kindness to them. It's a forecast about them, and forecasts of this kind run in one direction, and it's the wrong one.

"It would burden them"

There's a version of the belief that isn't about their capacity but about the telling itself. Whatever their plate, the worry is heavy, and handing a heavy thing to someone loads them with it. That's what burden means.

Michael Kardas, Amit Kumar and Nicholas Epley, in 2022, studied what happens when people have deeper conversations than they'd normally risk. Across a series of experiments, people expected deep conversations with strangers to be awkward and expected the other person to care little about their disclosures. The conversations turned out less awkward and more connecting than expected, and the reason was that the other person cared more about what was disclosed than the discloser had predicted. The gap was largest for deep conversations, and it narrowed when people talked to close friends and family, whose care they already knew about. That last finding is a limit, and I'll say so. The study is mostly about strangers. But the direction is the one to hold. People expect their disclosures to be received as an imposition. They're received as interest.

Consider what being told actually is, from the listener's side. Your sister learns that you've been waiting a fortnight for a scan result. What she receives isn't the scan. She can't have the scan. What she receives is that you chose her, out of everyone, to say it to. That you trusted her with the private version. That's not a weight. It's about the most flattering thing one adult can do to another, and most people, on the receiving end, feel it as closeness and not as load.

There is a weight, and I don't want to pretend otherwise. She'll think about you on Thursday. She may sleep a little less well on Wednesday. But she'd have been thinking about you anyway, because sisters do, and the version she was thinking about was a version she couldn't help. The worry you'd be handing her is smaller than the worry she'd have carried on finding out afterwards that you'd been alone with it.

"It would burden them" imagines the telling as a transfer, like handing over a heavy bag. It's more like turning on a light in a room they were already standing in. They were in the dark with you. They just didn't know what the room was.

"I should be able to cope with this myself"

This is the belief that makes carrying it feel like strength. Other people tell. You cope. The difference is character.

I'd like to look at what carrying it consists of, hour by hour, because I think the picture of coping doesn't survive it.

Michael Slepian and colleagues, in 2017, studied secrecy in a way that changed how researchers think about it. The usual picture of a secret is a conversation in which you're hiding something, working to keep it out. Slepian's studies, ten of them, covering more than thirteen thousand secrets, found that this almost never happens. Situations that require you to actively conceal a secret are rare. What happens instead, constantly, is that your mind goes to the secret on its own. You're doing something else and it arrives. The researchers called this mind-wandering to the secret, and they found that people did it far more often than they ever had to conceal anything. Then they measured wellbeing. How often people had to conceal a secret didn't predict how they were doing. How often their mind wandered to it did. Independently of any hiding, the wander went with lower wellbeing, lower relationship satisfaction, less sense of being authentic, and worse physical health.

That's what carrying it is. It isn't a series of conversations skilfully managed. It's the letter in the drawer arriving in your head forty times a day, on the bus, in the meeting, at three in the morning.

Nobody is asking you about the account. You're returning to it anyway, and each return is a small cost, and the returns are the carrying.

Now look at the word coping. Coping would be the worry getting smaller, or getting dealt with, or at least getting quieter. What the wander does is keep it exactly the same size and bring it round again. The person who's carried a worry alone for a month has coped with it in the sense that they've not told anyone. They haven't coped with it in the sense of being any better off than the day it arrived, and Slepian's data suggests they're worse.

Apply the standard you'd apply to a friend. A friend tells you they've carried a scan result alone for a fortnight so as not to bother anyone. Would you call that coping? You'd call it a fortnight they didn't need to have spent like that. Say it to yourself.

"Saying it out loud makes it real"

Now the fear that lives under the others, and I'd like to take it seriously, because it's a fear about magic and it feels like one.

The result is unknown. The mistake hasn't been found. The marriage hasn't been named. As long as none of it is said, none of it has quite happened. Saying "I'm waiting for a scan result" to your sister makes the scan an event in the world, with a Thursday attached, and you'd rather it stayed a possibility in your head.

Two things. The first is that it's real already. The scan was taken. The letter exists. The marriage is quiet whether or not anyone's said so. Speech doesn't make things real. It makes them shared. What you're protecting by not speaking isn't the reality of the thing. It's your solitude with it, and chapter 5 is about what that solitude costs.

The second is that what the private version has that the spoken version lacks is size, and the size is the unreal part. In your head, the scan result is every outcome at once, and the worst one is the loudest. The mistake is a sacking. The quiet marriage is a divorce. None of those has happened either. The private version is a worry with no edges, and a worry with no edges fills whatever space it's given, and you've given it a month.

Stephen Lepore and colleagues, in 2000, showed two hundred and fifty-six students a distressing film and then had some of them talk about it, either alone into a recorder, or to another person who responded supportively, or to one who dismissed what they said,

while others didn't talk at all. Two days later everyone saw the film again. The people who'd talked, alone or to the supportive listener, had had fewer intrusive thoughts about it in the two days between, and felt less stressed when they saw it again. The people who'd been dismissed got much less benefit. The researchers' reading was that talking helped people resolve the thing cognitively, put edges on it, so that it stopped arriving uninvited.

A film in a laboratory isn't a scan, and students aren't you, and I'll say so. But the mechanism is the one I'd point at. Saying the thing gives it a shape, and the shape is smaller than the shapeless version. A room with the light on is a fair comparison for two sentences. In the dark it's any size. With the light on, it's a room.

"I go over it enough on my own"

You might say you don't need to tell anyone because you think about it plenty. You've turned it over. You've considered the angles. Thinking is processing, and you've done the processing.

Slepian's finding in chapter 5 is the answer, and it's uncomfortable. The going over, the mind returning to the secret on its own, wasn't processing. It was the thing that predicted lower wellbeing. People whose minds wandered to their secrets more often were worse off, not better, and they weren't worse off because they were concealing more. They were worse off because of the wandering itself. Going over it alone isn't the cure for carrying it. It's the form carrying it takes.

There's a reason for that, and it's the difference between one mind and two. When you go over the worry alone, you bring to it exactly what you brought yesterday. The same facts, the same fears, the same worst case. Nothing new can arrive, because the only source of new material is you, and you've already been consulted. The wander is a loop, and a loop doesn't resolve, it repeats.

What's known about processing suggests that getting it out of your head helps, and getting it in front of another person helps more. Joanne Frattaroli, in 2006, pooled a hundred and forty-six randomised studies of what researchers call experimental disclosure, mostly writing about a difficult experience for a few sessions, and found a small positive effect on health and wellbeing. Small. Earlier books in this series say so and I'll say it again. Writing helps a little. Lepore's study in the last chapter is the one

that shows what talking adds. Talking alone into a recorder helped about as much as talking to a supportive person on intrusive thoughts. But it was the supportive person, in the researchers' account, whose validation mattered for how the stress was carried afterwards, and the dismissive listener took most of the benefit away. Another mind, responding well, does something a page can't.

So the going over you've done isn't wasted, exactly. It's just been round the same track a hundred times. The telling puts a second person on the track, and a second person brings a fact you didn't have, or a question you hadn't asked, or a plain "that sounds hard", and any of those ends the loop for a while, which is what processing is.

"I've read up on it, I don't need to talk"

There's a modern version of carrying it alone, and it feels like the opposite. You've researched the worry. You've read every page about the scan, the debt, the thing at school. You know more about it than your sister would. Telling her would be telling someone who knows less than you do, and what would be the point of that?

Look at what the reading does to the private version. It feeds it. Every page you read about the scan adds outcomes, and the outcomes you remember are the worst ones, because those are the ones that frighten you and fear is what makes things memorable. The reading doesn't put edges on the worry. It removes them, by supplying more of everything the worry could be, and at midnight the search history is a list of the things you've taught yourself to fear.

It's also alone. Reading is the wander with a screen in it. Slepian's finding was about the mind returning to the secret, and a person reading about their worry at one in the morning is returning to it with help. Nothing about the page validates you, in Lepore's sense. It doesn't say "that sounds hard". It doesn't ask when the appointment is. It doesn't notice that you're frightened. It gives you a forum thread in which someone's cousin had the same thing and it went badly, and then it gives you another.

The knowledge isn't the problem. Knowing about the thing is fine, and a debt adviser or a GP would rather you came informed. The problem is that reading has been doing the job telling was

supposed to do, and it can't, because the job wasn't information. It was company. You don't need your sister to know more about scans than you do. You need her to know about yours.

So keep what you've learned, and take it to the listener as part of the telling. "I've read everything and I'm frightened" is a good sentence. It tells them where you are. What it can't be is a substitute for saying it to a face, because the face is the part the reading leaves out, and the face is what changes the size.

"I'll tell them when I know more"

Here's a belief that sounds responsible. You'll tell them once you know. Once the result's in, once you've worked out the numbers, once you've decided what to do about the marriage. Telling now would be telling them a question. Better to tell them an answer.

Look at what the waiting consists of. The fortnight before the scan result is, for most people, the worst part of the whole thing. The result, whichever way it goes, is a fact to be dealt with, and people deal with facts. The fortnight is the private version at full size, every outcome at once, with no edges, at three in the morning. That's the stretch you've decided to do alone, and it's the stretch where a second person would have helped most.

There's a version of this that never ends, and it's worth naming. The scan result comes back needing another scan. The numbers get worked out and there's a new letter. The decision about the marriage turns out to be several decisions. "When I know more" is a horizon, and horizons move, and a person who's waiting for enough certainty to tell can wait for years, because there's always more to know. The mistake in the spreadsheet is the clearest case. You'll know more when it's found, and when it's found the telling will be an explanation to a manager rather than a confidence to a friend, and it'll be a worse conversation for having waited.

There's also what the waiting does to the eventual telling. A worry disclosed on the day it arrives is a worry shared. A worry disclosed after a month, with a result in hand, comes with a second thing attached, which is that you carried it for a month without saying.

The listener hears the result and hears the month, and the month is the part that hurts them. "Why didn't you tell me?" is the question you're setting up by waiting for the answer.

Tell them the question. "I've got a scan result on Thursday and I'm frightened." "There's a letter from the bank I can't make work." "Something's wrong at home and I don't know what yet." Those are complete sentences, and they're the ones that get you company for the fortnight, which is when you needed it.

"They'll think less of me"

Some worries are about things you did. The mistake in the spreadsheet. The debt that was your doing. The row that started the quiet in the marriage. For those, the burden belief has a second belief riding on it, which is that telling would show you as someone who makes mistakes, and the person told would see you differently afterwards.

Anna Bruk, Sabine Scholl and Herbert Bless, in 2018, studied this directly, across seven studies, and gave the finding a name, the beautiful mess effect. When people imagined themselves showing vulnerability, confessing feelings, admitting a mistake, asking for help, revealing something about their body, they judged it negatively. Weak, inadequate, exposing. When they judged the same act by another person, they judged it positively. Courageous, honest, admirable. The same confession, viewed from inside, was a mess, and viewed from outside, was something they respected. The researchers traced the gap to how concretely people picture their own situation compared with someone else's. From inside, you see every detail of the exposure. From outside, you see the act. One of the studies found the effect in a real situation, not just an imagined one.

Take the spreadsheet. From inside, telling a colleague about the mistake is a picture of your face as you say it, of what they'll think of your competence, of the word "careless". From outside, which is where the colleague stands, a person saying "I've made a mistake and I'd like your help sorting it before it goes further" is a person

behaving well. That's how you'd see it if they said it to you. You'd think more of them, not less, because owning a thing early is what competent people do and what careless people don't.

The belief that they'll think less of you is the view from inside the mess. Bruk's studies say that view is systematically harsher than the view from anywhere else. If you want to know what your friend will think when you tell them about the debt, don't consult your picture of yourself saying it. Consult your picture of them saying it to you. That's the accurate one.

"They can't do anything about it anyway"

This is the belief that makes telling seem pointless rather than costly. Your sister can't change the scan result. Your friend can't pay the bank. What would be the point of loading them with a thing they can't fix?

The point isn't fixing. Very few worries get fixed by the person you tell, and if fixing were the test, nobody would ever tell anyone anything. What a listener does is three things, and none of them is fixing.

The first is the thing in Lepore's study. A supportive listener took a distressing thing and, by hearing it and responding as though it mattered, reduced how often it came back uninvited and how stressful it was to meet again. The researchers called the response validation, and it's a plain thing. "That sounds frightening." "No wonder you've not been sleeping." A person who says that has done nothing about the scan and something about the fortnight.

The second is the size. Chapter 6 said the private version has no edges. A listener gives it edges, by asking questions you haven't asked yourself, by not reacting the way the private version predicted, by being a second person in a room that had one. The scan result is still Thursday. But it's Thursday now, and not every Thursday at once.

The third is the request, and it's the part that people who carry things alone forget exists. You can ask the listener for something specific, and the specific thing is often available. Come with me on

Thursday. Look at this letter with me. Ring me on Wednesday night. Tell me if you think I'm mad about the marriage. None of those is fixing and all of them are help, and Zhao and Epley's finding is that the person asked will be gladder to do it than you expect.

There's a fourth thing, quieter than the others. A listener knows. From the moment of the telling, there's one person in the world who, when they see you tired at dinner, knows why, and doesn't need to ask, and can put a hand on your shoulder without a word. That's not fixing either. It's the difference between being alone in a room and being alone in a room with someone who knows what the room is.

So "they can't do anything about it" is true about the scan and false about you. The scan is one thing. The person waiting for it is another, and the person is the thing a listener can do something about, and it's the person who's been alone for a fortnight.

"I don't want to be the one who's always got a problem"

Here's an objection I want to give its full weight, because it has something true in it. You know people who always have a problem. Every conversation is their latest crisis. You've felt yourself brace when their name comes up. You don't want to be that, and not telling is how you make sure you aren't.

There's a body of research going back decades on the fact that sustained distress can wear on the people around it. James Coyne, in a 1976 paper on depression and the response of others, set out the idea that people in persistent distress can, over time, draw responses from those around them that make things worse, as the others tire. I haven't read that paper, only its title and the tradition it started, and the notes say so. I mention it because the fear in this chapter isn't baseless. Being told the same thing, many times, with no request and no change, does wear on a listener. That's real.

But look at what that describes, and look at what this book asks. The person you're afraid of becoming tells everyone, repeatedly, in fragments, over months, without ever asking for anything or doing anything. That's not telling. It's venting, and it's a different act with a different effect. What this book asks is the opposite in every particular. One person. One sitting. The whole thing, with a request in it, and then a follow-up. A person who does that isn't the one people brace for. They're the one people feel trusted by, and Kardas's finding is that the listener comes away feeling closer, not more tired.

The person everyone braces for, in my observation, is usually a person who never tells anyone properly. They leak. The worry comes out sideways, in hints and moods and "fine" said in a voice that isn't, across every conversation, because it's never been said straight in one. That's what carrying it alone tends to become, given time. The telling is what prevents it.

There's a related habit worth a paragraph, which is asking the same person for reassurance about the same thing every day. That does wear on people, and it's not what the telling is. The telling asks once. If the worry needs more than one conversation, and some do, the second conversation has something new in it, a result, a decision, a step. It isn't the first conversation again.

So keep the fear. It's pointed at a real thing. It's just pointed at the wrong act. The act it fears is the one that carrying alone leads to. The act this book asks for is the one that stops it.

"They'll take it over"

Some readers hold back for a reason that isn't about burden at all. It's about control. Tell your mother about the scan and she'll ring every day. Tell your friend about the debt and he'll have a spreadsheet by Friday. Tell your brother about the marriage and he'll have a view of your partner that he'll hold for ever. The worry is yours. Once told, it isn't.

Three things, and the method handles all of them. The first is the request. Most of what people fear from a listener is the listener guessing what you want and guessing wrong. The daily phone calls, the spreadsheet, the opinion. Those are guesses. A listener who's been told "I don't need anything done, I just needed one person to know" mostly doesn't do anything, and a listener who's been told "help me with the numbers on Saturday and then leave it with me" mostly helps with the numbers on Saturday. Chapter 21 is about saying the request. It's the part of the telling that stops the taking over, and people who carry things alone tend to skip it, and then find their worry has been adopted.

The second is choosing. Chapter 20 is about the listener, and one of its tests is whether the person will hear the whole thing before doing anything about it. Your mother may not be that person for this worry. Your friend may not be for that one. Choosing a listener for their ability to leave the worry where it is, once heard, is allowed, and it's not disloyalty to the ones who can't.

The third is what taking over usually is. It's care with nowhere to go. The mother who rings every day is a mother who's been told a frightening thing and given no job. Give her one. "Ring me Thursday evening, after the result." Now the care has a shape and a time, and the ringing stops being a flood and becomes a thing you asked for.

There's a version of this fear that's about the worry getting out. The brother who tells the cousin. That's a real risk with some people, and the answer is the same as chapter 16's. It's a fact about that person, and the listener is chosen for being someone it isn't a fact about. If nobody in your life can hold a confidence, a professional can, and chapter 24 says which.

"I don't know how to start"

For some readers everything above is agreed, and the thing that stops them is the first sentence. How do you begin a conversation like that? At what moment? With what words?

The words are simpler than you think, and there's one sentence that works for nearly every worry. "I've been carrying something and I'd like to tell you about it." That's it. It announces that a telling is coming, so the listener can stop what they're doing. It says the thing has weight, so they know not to make a joke. And it asks for nothing yet, so there's no pressure in it. Then you say the thing, in a sentence, as plain as the one you wrote in chapter 1. "I've got a scan result on Thursday." "There's a letter from the bank I can't make work." "Something's wrong between me and Sam and I don't know what."

The moment matters less than you'd think, and more than "never". Not at the door as they're leaving. Not in front of the children. Not at eleven at night when both of you are done. A walk is good, because there's no table to sit across and the silences have somewhere to go. A car is good for the same reason. The kitchen at ten with the washing up done is good. The moment doesn't have to be right. It has to be one where the listener can stop, and you can finish, and neither of you has to be anywhere for an hour.

What comes after the sentence is the part people fear, and it's the part that takes care of itself. The listener will say something, and it'll almost certainly be a question or a "God, since when?", and you'll answer it, and you'll be in the conversation. The dreaded

moment is the ten seconds between the opening sentence and their first response, and ten seconds is how long it takes. Chapter 21 goes through the whole shape, but the shape is mostly this. One sentence to open, one to say the thing, and then answer their questions until you've said all of it.

If you can't say it, write it. A text that says "I've been carrying something and I'd like to tell you about it, can we talk tonight?" is a telling that's started, and the hardest part is done before you've seen their face.

"It's their worry too, I'm protecting them"

Some worries have a co-owner. The bank letter is about the joint account. The quiet marriage is your partner's marriage too. The son is their son. And here the burden belief has its strongest form, which is that telling wouldn't be sharing a worry, it would be creating one, in the person it's about, who's happy now and wouldn't be.

Two things. The first is that "protecting them" is a decision made about their life without consulting them. You've decided that your partner is better off not knowing about the account they share, or the quiet they're living in, or the change in their son. That might be true. It might not. What's certain is that it's not yours to decide alone, because the thing is theirs as much as yours, and deciding for another adult what they can bear is a kind of managing that most people, told about it later, don't thank you for.

The second is that the co-owner isn't happy now. They're living with a partner who's been quiet and tired and moving money around and saying "fine" for a month. They don't know what's wrong. They know something is. The not-knowing is its own worry, and it's often worse than the thing, because it has no edges and no Thursday and no way to help. You haven't spared them a worry. You've given them a different one and taken away the means of doing anything about it.

There's a fairness point too. A worry about the joint account, carried by one person, is one person doing the arithmetic at three in the morning while the other sleeps. Telling the co-owner doesn't

double the worry. It halves the night. Two people looking at a letter is a different experience from one, and the difference isn't only that it's shared. It's that two people looking at a letter is how letters get answered.

The co-owner is the first person to tell, before the friend, before the sister. Chapter 20 says so and says how. If the thing is between you, if the quiet marriage is the worry and the partner is the co-owner and also the cause, that's a different conversation, and an earlier book in this series is about raising a difficulty with the person it's about. The telling in this book is to a third person, and the co-owner of the marriage worry might be a friend rather than the partner. But for the account and the son, the partner is the co-owner, and protecting them by silence isn't protection.

"Last time I told someone it went badly"

You may have tried this before. You told someone and they made it about themselves, or gave advice you didn't want, or said "I'm sure it's nothing", or told someone else. The telling made it worse, and you learned not to.

Lepore's study has the answer to this one too. The students who talked to a dismissive listener, one who treated what they said as unimportant, got much less benefit than those who talked to a supportive one, and less than those who talked alone into a recorder. A bad listener is worse than no listener. Your experience was real and the research agrees with it.

But notice what that finding is about. It's about the listener, not about telling. The same students, with a supportive listener, got the full benefit. What went badly last time was the choice of person, or their day, or the moment, and none of those is a fact about disclosure. It's a fact about that conversation.

So the lesson from a bad telling isn't "don't tell". It's "choose better", and chapter 20 is about how. The person who said "I'm sure it's nothing" is not the only person you know. The one who made it about themselves has a sister who doesn't. The one who told someone else has taught you something about them, and the telling did its job, which was to find out who can be told, at the cost of one bad evening.

There's a version of this belief that generalises further, from one bad listener to all of them, and I'd ask you to notice the shape of that. One person responded badly, and you concluded that people respond badly, and stopped, and the worry has been carried alone since. That's a large conclusion from one data point, and it's the kind of conclusion people draw when the data point confirms something they wanted to believe anyway, which is that carrying it alone is the safe option. It isn't. Chapter 5 is about what it costs. The bad listener cost you an evening. The conclusion has cost you every worry since.

"It's not how I was brought up"

A lot of readers will recognise the habit from a house. Nobody in your family talked about things. Worries were carried, quietly, and you found out about the big ones afterwards, if at all. Your father's health, your mother's money, the trouble with your brother. All handled, all silent, and the silence was what a grown-up looked like.

I'd separate two things. What the house taught you about worries, and whether it was right.

What it taught you was that a worry is a private matter, that telling is weakness or imposition, and that capable adults handle their own. It taught you by demonstration, over years, and you learned it well, because children learn what's demonstrated. That's not a character. It's a training, and trainings can be looked at.

Whether it was right, you already know, because you were on the other side of it. You found out about your father's health afterwards. How did that feel? Most people, asked this, don't describe relief at having been spared. They describe hurt, and something like exclusion. The silence that was meant as protection arrived as distance. You know, from the receiving end, that the house's method didn't do what it was supposed to, because you were the person it was supposed to be protecting and it didn't feel like protection.

That's the most useful thing about having grown up in such a house. You have direct evidence about what carrying it alone does to the people it's carried from. You've felt it. The question this chapter asks is whether you want to be the parent, or the partner, or the friend, whose worry the people around you find out about afterwards, and feel about the way you felt.

The house isn't destiny. A habit learned by demonstration can be changed by a different demonstration, and the first person to tell in a silent family is usually surprised by how much everyone else had been wanting to. Silence in families is rarely unanimous. It's usually a thing that everyone is doing because everyone else is, and one telling shows the others that it can be done.

What carrying it costs you

I've argued the mechanism. This chapter is the bill, and it's paid mostly at night.

The wander. Slepian's participants whose minds went most often to their secrets had lower wellbeing, worse relationships, less sense of being themselves and poorer physical health, and the wandering did that independently of any concealing. Forty returns a day, for a month, is twelve hundred small costs, and you've been paying them alone.

The sleep. The private version doesn't keep office hours. Three in the morning is when it's largest, because there's nothing else in the room, and a month of three in the mornings is a month of days lived tired, and the tiredness gets explained as work.

The distance. You've been saying "fine" to the people closest to you for a month. Each "fine" is a small door closed, and they can hear it close. The people you're protecting are the people you've been most distant from, and they've felt it, and they don't know why, and they may have concluded it's them.

The decisions made alone. The letter has been answered, or not, by one person doing arithmetic at night. The scan has been waited for by one person. Whatever you've decided about the marriage, you've decided it without the one other adult who has a say. Decisions made alone in a bad month are worse decisions than the same person would make with a second mind on a Tuesday afternoon.

The size. Chapter 6 said the private version has no edges. A month of carrying it has let it fill the space, and it's now larger than the thing itself, and you're frightened of a thing that's partly your own month.

The help not had. Every worry has a step in it that a second person would have seen sooner. The debt adviser. The appointment. The question to the school. Carried alone, the step gets taken late or not at all, and the lateness is a cost that compounds. The letter unanswered for a month is a letter with a month's interest on it, and the interest was the price of the silence.

The self. Slepian's participants reported feeling less authentic, and I think that's the plainest word for it. A person who's saying "fine" and isn't, for a month, is living as two people, and the one who's talking isn't the one who's awake at three.

None of this is the cost of the worry. The worry has its own cost, and the telling doesn't remove that. This is the cost of carrying it alone, on top, and it's the part that one conversation takes away.

What it does to them

The burden belief says the people around you are protected by your silence. This chapter is about what they're actually living in.

They know something's wrong. Not what, but that. A partner who's lived with you for years can read a month of tiredness and short answers and the account being checked at odd hours, and what they read is that something's happening that they haven't been told about. That's not protection. That's a person watching someone they love go through something with the door shut.

The not-knowing is its own worry, and it's a bad one, because it has nothing to hold. They can't help, because they don't know what with. They can't reassure, because they don't know what about. They can only watch, and guess, and the guesses run the way guesses run, toward the worst, and toward themselves. A fair number of people whose partner is carrying a worry alone conclude, after a month, that the worry is them.

What "fine" teaches is that they're not to be told. Say it enough and the partner stops asking, not because they've stopped caring but because the question has been closed so many times that asking has become an intrusion. Then, when you do finally tell them, the telling comes into a relationship in which asking has already been trained out, and the first thing they feel is not relief but the month.

The children notice too, and they learn from it. A child in a house where a parent is carrying something learns that worries are carried alone, that the right answer to "are you all right?" is "fine",

and that grown-ups don't tell. They'll take that into their own worries, and one day they'll carry a scan result alone for a fortnight because that's what the house taught them, which is chapter 17 from the other end.

And the friend, the sister, the colleague who'd have wanted to know. They find out afterwards, as you found out about your father. They feel what you felt. The silence you meant as a kindness arrives as the news that you didn't think they could be told, and that's a harder thing to hear than the worry would have been.

Choose the listener

The next three chapters are the method, and the method is one conversation. This chapter is about who it's with.

One person. Not everyone, not the group chat, not a post. One. The telling is a private act and its power comes from being chosen. You're not broadcasting the worry. You're handing it to a person you've picked.

The co-owner first, if there is one. If the worry is the joint account or the shared child, the partner is told before anyone else, because it's theirs, and because telling a friend before the co-owner creates a second secret. If the worry is the partner, the co-owner is a friend, and the earlier book in this series on raising a difficulty covers the conversation with the partner themselves.

Someone who has listened before. Think of a time you told this person something small and difficult. What did they do? If they asked a question and waited, they're the listener. If they told you about the time it happened to them, or said "I'm sure it's fine", or gave you a plan before you'd finished, they may still be a good friend and they're not the listener for this. Lepore's dismissive confederate is the person to avoid, and you already know who in your life responds like that.

Someone who won't rush to fix. The person who reaches for solutions is often the kindest person you know, and they're hard to tell things to, because the telling becomes a project meeting. The

listener is someone who can hear the whole thing before saying what to do about it, and who'll ask "what do you want from me?" rather than assume.

Someone with a stake, or without one. Both work, differently. The co-owner has a stake and needs to know. A friend with no stake can hear the marriage worry without being in it. What doesn't work is someone whose stake is in a different direction, the friend who dislikes your partner, the colleague who'd benefit from your mistake. Choose someone who's on your side and not on a side.

Not the group chat. A worry told to six people at once is told to nobody, because nobody's been chosen, and the responses arrive as a scroll of "oh no" and a heart. The telling needs a face.

Someone available. Not the friend who's abroad, or the sister in the middle of her own crisis. Someone who can sit for an hour this week. If the ideal listener isn't available, the second-best listener this week beats the ideal one in a month.

A professional, when the worry needs one. Some worries need a GP, a debt adviser, a solicitor or a therapist as well as a friend. Chapter 24 says which. The friend is still the listener. The professional is the request.

Say it in one sitting

You've chosen the person. This chapter is the conversation, and it has a shape you can follow.

Open with the sentence. "I've been carrying something and I'd like to tell you about it." Then stop, and let them stop what they're doing. If they can't now, "can we find an hour this week?" and hold them to it.

Say the thing, plainly. The one sentence from chapter 1. "I've got a scan result on Thursday and I've been frightened for a fortnight." "There's a letter from the bank I can't make work and I've been hiding it." Don't build up to it. Don't soften it into a hint. The private version has had a month of build-up and the spoken version doesn't need any.

Say all of it. This is what one sitting means. Not the headline with the rest held back for another day. The whole thing, including the part you're ashamed of, including how long you've carried it. A telling with a piece missing is a telling that has to be done again, and the second time is harder, because now there's the piece and the fact you held it back.

Say the request. "I don't need you to do anything, I just needed one person to know." Or, "would you come with me on Thursday?" Or, "can you look at this letter with me, I can't see straight." Or, "tell me honestly whether you think I'm imagining this." Say what you

want. A listener who doesn't know what you want will guess, and the guess is usually advice, and advice may not be what you needed.

Let there be silence. They'll be quiet for a moment. That's not a bad sign. It's a person taking in a thing that matters. Don't fill it. Don't apologise for having said it. Wait.

Answer their questions. They'll have them. Since when. Who else knows. What happens next. Answer plainly. The questions are the listener putting edges on the thing, and edges are what you came for.

Don't manage their reaction. They may be upset, or shocked, or cross that you didn't say sooner. Let them. You've carried the worry for a month. You don't also have to carry their first five minutes with it. If they say "why didn't you tell me?", the honest answer is the one in chapter 2. "I thought you had enough on. I was wrong."

Time and place. An hour, a walk or a car or a kitchen table, no children, nobody due anywhere. If the worry is the scan on Thursday, the conversation is this week, not the week after the result.

Let them help

The telling has happened. This chapter is what comes after, and it's the part people who carry things alone are worst at, because it's the part where help arrives and has to be accepted.

Accept the specific thing. If you asked them to come on Thursday and they said yes, let them come. Don't text on Wednesday to say you'll be fine on your own. Zhao and Epley's finding is that the helper feels good about helping, and the person who withdraws the request after making it takes that away from them and puts the worry back where it was.

Take the help they offer, even if it's not what you'd have asked for.

The friend who can't come on Thursday but offers to cook on Friday is offering what they've got. Say yes. Help doesn't have to be the exact shape of the need to do the job, which was never the scan. It was the company.

Let them ring. A listener who's been told will want to know how Thursday went. Let them. Tell them. That's the follow-up, and it's the difference between one telling and a telling that became a relationship in which the thing can be mentioned. It's also the thing that stops the worry going back into the drawer, because now someone will ask.

Tell the co-owner, if you told a friend first. If the worry has a co-owner and you started with a friend because it was easier, the co-owner is the next conversation, and soon. The friend can help you

plan it. A friend who knows and a partner who doesn't is a stable arrangement for about a week.

Take the professional step, if there is one. If the listener says "you need to ring the bank" or "you need to see the GP about that", and they're right, do it this week, and tell them you've done it. The listener's most useful act is often to say the obvious thing you couldn't say to yourself, and their second most useful act is to ask whether you did it.

What help isn't. It isn't the listener fixing the thing. It isn't them carrying it instead of you. It isn't a daily check-in about the same worry, which is the venting from chapter 12 by another route. Help is a second person on the track for as long as it takes to put edges on the thing and take the next step. After that, the thing is yours again, smaller, and you know who to tell when the next one comes.

The decision

You've got the argument and the method. What's left is to decide, and I'd like the decision to fit in one sentence.

When I've carried a worry for more than a week, I tell one person, in one sitting, and I let them help.

Three parts.

The first is the week. A week is long enough to know the worry isn't passing and short enough that it hasn't filled the room. If you've carried it longer than that already, the week is up.

The second is the telling. One person, chosen as chapter 20 says. The sentence, the thing, all of it, the request, as chapter 21 says.

The third is the help. Accept it, follow it up, take the step, tell the co-owner.

There's a form of planning that helps with rules like this, and it's been tested many times. Peter Gollwitzer and Paschal Sheeran reviewed ninety-four studies of it in 2006. You decide in advance what you'll do and when, in the form "when this happens, I'll do that", and people who plan that way follow through much more often than people who only hold the intention. So write three.

When I notice I've been carrying something for a week, I'll write it in one sentence and name the person I'll tell.

When I've named the person, I'll send them "I've been carrying something and I'd like to tell you about it, can we find an hour this week?" the same day.

When they ask what I need, I'll say one specific thing, and when they offer it, I'll say yes.

What to expect. This is my expectation and not a finding. The message will be the hardest part, and you'll draft it three times and send it on the fourth, and the reply will come within an hour and be some form of "of course". The hour itself will be shorter and less awful than the month you've spent imagining it. There'll be ten seconds after the opening sentence that feel very long, and then a question, and then you'll be in it. Somewhere in the middle you'll say the part you were most ashamed of and watch their face not do what you'd predicted. Afterwards, the same evening, the worry will be exactly as real and noticeably smaller, and you'll sleep better than you have in a month, not because anything's been fixed but because you're no longer the only one who knows. In the following days the wander will come less often, and when it comes it'll have edges. And the person you told will treat you, from then on, as someone who trusts them, which is what you'll have become.

Health scares, money, marriages, mistakes at work, children and when to get professional help

The rule holds for every worry. Some kinds need a paragraph, because the listener isn't always enough.

Health scares. Tell someone before the result, not after. The fortnight is the hard part, and it's the part company helps with. Ask them to come to the appointment if you'd like that. And if the worry is a symptom you haven't taken to a GP, the listener's job is to make you book it, and yours is to book it. An earlier book in this series is about putting off the doctor.

Money. Tell the co-owner first, because a joint account is theirs. Then, if the numbers don't work, tell a debt adviser, who is a professional listener with tools. StepChange, Citizens Advice and National Debtline are free and confidential, and the letter in the drawer is exactly what they exist for. A month of arithmetic at three in the morning can be replaced by one phone call.

Marriages. If the worry is the marriage, the co-owner is also the subject, and that's a different conversation from the telling in this book. Tell a friend first, one who's on your side and not on a side. Then the earlier book on raising a difficulty with the person it's about is the one to read. Relationship counselling exists and isn't a last resort.

Mistakes at work. Bruk's finding in chapter 10 is the one to hold. Owning a mistake early looks, from outside, like competence. Tell a trusted colleague first if you need to rehearse, and then tell the

person who needs to know, this week, before it's found. The conversation is worse every day it's delayed and never as bad as the private version.

Children. If the worry is your child, the co-owner is the other parent, and the school is often the next listener, because they see the child for six hours a day and may already know something. If the worry is the child's safety, from anyone, that's not a friend's job. Tell the police or social services. If the worry is the child's mental health, the GP and the school are the routes, and telling them is not overreacting.

When the worry is about you. If the low mood has lasted two weeks, or the worry has become a constant anxiety about everything, or you've had thoughts of harming yourself, the listener is still worth telling and isn't enough. See a GP. In England you can refer yourself to NHS talking therapies. Samaritans are on 116 123 at any hour, and 111 is there for urgent help. The friend can sit with you while you make the call, and that's a good request.

The person who can't be told. Some worries are secrets that involve someone else's confidence, or that would harm someone to disclose. The rule still asks that one person knows, and the person can be a professional, a counsellor or a GP or a helpline, who is bound to keep it. Carrying it alone isn't the only alternative to telling a friend.

When you've carried it another month

It'll happen. You'll read this book, agree with it, choose the listener, and not send the message. A month later the worry will still be in the drawer and there'll be a second worry, which is that you've read a book about it and done nothing.

A month isn't a life. What's happened is that the burden belief is old and the book is new, and the belief got the month. The worry is a month older and so are you, and the message is exactly as sendable as it was.

Tell late. The telling works after a month as well as after a week. It works after a year. The only thing that changes is that "I've been carrying this for a month" becomes part of what you say, and that's a sentence the listener will understand, because most people have carried something for a month.

Work out which belief got through. Was it "they've got enough on"? Then chapter 3, and remember who you'd want to be told by. Was it the first sentence? Then chapter 14, and write it as a text. Was it the fear of being the one with a problem? Then chapter 12, and notice that a month of "fine" is closer to that than one telling would be.

No streaks. Don't count worries carried alone as failures against a rule. Count tellings. The first one is the one that matters, and it doesn't matter when it happens, as long as it does.

One more thing about the month. It's had a cost, and the cost is the point of this book, but it's also had a use, which is that you now know what carrying it feels like from inside, in a way you'd have

forgotten if you'd told someone in the first week. Use that. When the next worry arrives and the burden belief says "they've enough on", you'll know what the alternative is, because you've just lived a month of it.

And send the message tonight. Not because the book says so, but because the worry is a month older and the drawer hasn't helped.

The thing you've said

You told your sister on a Tuesday, on a walk, because the walk was where the silences could go. You said the sentence, and she stopped, and you said the thing, the scan, the fortnight, the sleeping badly, the "fine". There were ten seconds. Then she said "since when?", and you were in it, and you said all of it, including the part where you'd decided she had enough on, and she made a face at that, and you understood the face.

She came on Thursday. She sat in the waiting room and read a magazine upside down and didn't say anything helpful, and it was the most helpful thing anyone had done in a month. The result was what it was. You dealt with it, the way people deal with facts, with a second person in the room.

The letter came out of the drawer the same week, because once one thing had been said the others were easier, and your partner read it at the kitchen table at ten and did the arithmetic with you, and the arithmetic was bad and the night was better than any in the previous month, because it was two people doing it. You rang the debt people on the Friday. It took forty minutes and they'd heard it all before.

The worry is real. It was always real. It's smaller now, in the way that a room with the light on is smaller than a room in the dark, and it has edges, and it has a Thursday that has passed and a plan that has a date. The wander comes less. When it comes it finds a thing with a shape, and a sister who knows, and a partner who did the sums, and it doesn't stay.

None of this is a transformation. There's a thing about work you haven't told anyone yet and have carried for nine days, and you know that, and you've named the person, and the message is drafted. You still say "fine" sometimes when you're not. But you know now what the word costs and what it saves, and you've found out that the people you were protecting were the people who wanted to be told, and that being told is what they'd have chosen.

If you take one thing from this book, take this. Write the worry in one sentence, name one person, and send them this tonight. "I've been carrying something and I'd like to tell you about it. Can we find an hour this week?" That's the whole method. Everything else is detail.

Notes

This book gives general information about an everyday habit. It isn't medical, financial or psychological advice, and it's no substitute for a GP, a debt adviser or a therapist who knows you. The services I mention are for England as I found them in September 2026.

I've kept sources out of the chapters where I could so they read easily. Here they are by chapter, with the limits I'm aware of. Unless I say otherwise, I read the published summary of each paper and not the full text. I checked each paper for a retraction or correction notice in September 2026 and found none. Where a chapter isn't listed, it rests on my own reasoning. That includes chapters 1, 2, 9, 13, 14, 15, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22, 25 and 26. The scan, the letter, the marriage, the son and the spreadsheet are invented.

Before you start. The Samaritans number, the 111 line and the self-referral route are from the NHS pages on stress and on depression, as verified for earlier books in this series.

Chapter 3. Zhao and Epley, "Surprisingly happy to have helped: underestimating prosociality creates a misplaced barrier to asking for help", *Psychological Science* 33, 2022, pages 1708 to 1731. American adults. Flynn and Lake, "If you need help, just ask: underestimating compliance with direct requests for help", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 95, 2008, pages 128 to 143. Both are used in the earlier book *Could you hold the ladder*, about asking for practical help. The extension from asking for help to disclosing a worry is mine.

Chapter 4. Kardas, Kumar and Epley, "Overly shallow? Miscalibrated expectations create a barrier to deeper conversation", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 122, 2022, pages 367 to 398. Mostly conversations between strangers, and the finding that predictions were more accurate with close others is stated as a limit. Used in the earlier book *Ring them first*. The account of being told as trust is mine.

Chapter 5. Slepian, Chun and Mason, "The experience of secrecy", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 113, 2017, pages 1 to 33. Ten studies, over 13,000 secrets. The word "wander" for the mind returning to a secret follows their term "mind-wandering to secrets". The claim that carrying isn't coping is mine.

Chapter 6. Lepore, Ragan and Jones, "Talking facilitates cognitive-emotional processes of adaptation to an acute stressor", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 78, 2000, pages 499 to 508. Two hundred and fifty-six students and a distressing film, which the chapter says. The account of the private version's size is mine.

Chapter 7. Slepian and colleagues as above. Frattaroli, "Experimental disclosure and its moderators: a meta-analysis", *Psychological Bulletin* 132, 2006, pages 823 to 865, with an effect size of .075, described as small, and used in two earlier books in this series. Lepore and colleagues as above.

Chapter 8. Slepian and colleagues, and Lepore and colleagues, as above. The reading of searching as the wander with a screen is mine.

Chapter 10. Bruk, Scholl and Bless, "Beautiful mess effect: self-other differences in evaluation of showing vulnerability", Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 115, 2018, pages 192 to 205. Seven studies including one real-life situation.

Chapter 11. Lepore and colleagues, and Zhao and Epley, as above. The three things a listener does are my description.

Chapter 12. Coyne, "Depression and the response of others", Journal of Abnormal Psychology 85, 1976, pages 186 to 193. I haven't read this paper. It's named as the source of a long tradition of research on how sustained distress affects those around it, and no finding or figure is attributed to it. Kardas and colleagues as above. The distinction between telling and venting is mine.

Chapter 16. Lepore and colleagues as above, for the dismissive listener.

Chapter 18. Slepian and colleagues as above. The rest is mine.

Chapter 23. Gollwitzer and Sheeran, "Implementation intentions and goal achievement: a meta-analysis of effects and processes", Advances in Experimental Social Psychology 38, 2006, pages 69 to 119. The rule hasn't been tested as a package, and what I say to expect is my expectation and not a finding.

Chapter 24. The NHS pages on stress and depression as above. StepChange, Citizens Advice and National Debtline are named on the NHS page on financial worries, as verified for earlier books. The earlier book on putting off the doctor is Get it looked at. The earlier book on raising a difficulty with the person it's about is Say it this week. Bruk and colleagues as above.