

The Power of Gossip

They Said *What?!*



This session shows students how normalized yet destructive gossip can be and how to develop strategies to stop it. By understanding this dynamic and its consequences, students are empowered to stop the damage they can do to themselves and others as well as to act in a more authentic and compassionate manner.

OBJECTIVES

- To define *gossip*
- To define *venting* so that students understand how to process their frustrating or confusing experiences with peers
- To understand why gossip “sticks” to some people more than others
- To demonstrate how gossip affects individual decision making and behavior
- To challenge the belief that someone’s embarrassment is acceptable as entertainment for others

MATERIALS

- Whiteboard or flip chart
- Three signs, reading *Strongly Agree*, *Agree With Both*, and *Strongly Disagree*
- Paper and pencils
- Index cards
- Poster board and markers

Session Outline

What Are We Doing Today?

We are going to learn all the different ways gossip can affect our lives.

Review It

Time: 5 minutes

Last session we talked about SEAL. What animal did you come up with to describe the calm, wise part of you? Did you apologize to someone?

ACTIVITY: Does Gossip Matter?



Time: 15 minutes

Purpose: To challenge the acceptance of gossip

Ask: Why do we gossip?

It's fun.

We're bored.

We need something to talk about.

Let's look at two quotes from students. (*Instructor note: Choose two students to read the following quotes aloud*):

It doesn't matter what people say. Sure, someone's reputation gets trashed for a few weeks, but then the gossip moves on to someone else. ("Ana")

I hate how people keep getting into my business and judging me before they talk to me and find out the real story. ("Michael")

Debrief

- Is Ana right? Is gossip meaningless?
- Can it be "good" to be gossiped about? If so, how?
- Is gossip always true? Does it matter? For example, is it wrong to gossip if it's true but embarrassing or hurtful to the person you are gossiping about?
- Can anyone relate to what Michael said? How?
- If Michael feels this way at school, how does it affect his day? For example, while he's in class?

Takeaways

Gossip has the power to affect the way people feel about themselves and whether they feel comfortable (or not) around their peers.

ACTIVITY: Some Definitions

Time: 10 minutes

Purpose: To create a foundation for students to understand definitions they will apply throughout the sessions



Put the words stereotype, gossip, and venting on the board. For each word, give a student an index card with the definition to read aloud.

Ask: What is the definition of stereotype?

A stereotype is a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing. There can be “negative” stereotypes and “positive” stereotypes, but both have some very important aspects in common: They don’t allow the person to be seen as their own unique person, and they can make the person feel boxed or labeled in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable or disrespected.

Ask: What are some examples of a stereotype?

(Instructor note: If you do the Box exercises, you can refer to them as a source of stereotyping.)

Ask: What is the definition of gossip?

Gossiping occurs when you share information with the purpose of increasing your social status, bonding with someone, or trying to make someone look bad. The *Owning Up* definition starts the same way, but it’s more complex:

Gossip is like money. The more you have, the more power and influence you can have over your peers. Gossip also connects the people who are gossiping because there’s an unspoken agreement among them that the person they’re gossiping about “deserves” it, or it doesn’t matter if they are hurt. The entertainment you’re getting from gossiping is more important than the person feeling embarrassed, alone, or rejected. Even if one of the people gossiping doesn’t actually agree with the gossip but says that they do, that agreement gives the gossip more power.

Ask: What part of that longer definition do you think is most important?

(Instructor note: While everyone, no matter their social status, can be gossiped about, gossip sticks to people in different ways. It sticks to people who are already socially vulnerable because of their race, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and/or gender expression. It “sticks” because our stereotypes about those identities reinforce the believability of the gossip. We see the target of the gossip less as a person in a particular circumstance and more as a reflection of the bias we already have.)

Ask: What is the definition of venting?

Venting occurs when you're mad at someone, and you talk to someone else about it to express your feelings and maybe talk about what you want to do about the problem.

Ask: Is there anything you want to add or take away from those definitions so we can make them our own?

Debrief

Is it easy for venting to cross into gossiping?

Takeaways

It can be hard to know the difference between the two unless you are aware of and honest about your motivations.

ACTIVITY: What's the Difference Between Venting and Gossiping?

Time: 15 minutes

Purpose: To clarify the difference between venting and gossiping

Everyone take out your index cards and write on one side "venting" and on the other side "gossiping/backstabbing." I'm going to read a statement aloud, you're going to close your eyes so you can't see what other people are doing, and I'll give you 10 seconds to decide if you think I've just described venting or gossiping. Once you decide, raise the index card with the word that matches your choice. After each one, I will ask people how they decided.

You tell a friend the following:

- You are really annoyed at another friend because they put themselves down all the time and you want to avoid them.
- You are really frustrated at another person in your group because they invite themselves to everything you do.
- A kid in school got in trouble for (a dress code violation, getting into a fight, etc.).
- One of your friends is about to dump someone.
- A fellow student wore something to school that looked really bad on them.

Debrief

- Did anything surprise you about what happened in the activity?
- What did you learn from the activity?
- How did you feel doing this exercise?

Takeaways

If you ask yourself, just for a moment, why you're sharing this information with the other person, you'll probably be able to know which one you're doing.

ACTIVITY: Knowing What to Do

Time: 20 minutes

Purpose: To develop self-awareness and responses to different gossiping situations

Say: It's easy to say what we should do, but it's usually way harder in real life to stop gossiping. And how gossip can come to us happens in different ways. For example, someone is talking about you, someone wants to tell you information about someone else, or you see gossip on social media.

Let's picture or write what we think happens in our brains when we find out that people are gossiping about us. Remember when we came up with animals that described how we feel when we are angry? Let's do the same to describe what happens when people are talking about us—when maybe we feel vulnerable or insecure. What animal represents our feelings in that moment?

Say: Now, let's come up with some things people say that aren't helpful when you find out people are saying bad things about you.

Examples:

Don't let it bother you.
Why do you even care?
Let's get back at that person.

What are some things people can say that are helpful?

If you really want to get back at them, don't try to get revenge because then they're controlling you.
I'm really sorry. Is there anything I can do to make you feel better?

Debrief/Takeaways

You are always entitled to the feelings that you have. And you can't control your immediate emotional response. It's like someone popping a balloon behind you—you're going to be startled.

You don't have to become part of this power struggle. Understanding the motivation of gossip helps you consider what you say.

ACTIVITY: How to Make a Difference as a Bystander

Time: 15 minutes

Purpose: To take responsibility for stopping the cycle of gossip

Say: Close your eyes and raise your hand if you have ever gone along with the gossip/talking behind someone's back even though you really didn't agree or even though the gossip wasn't true.

When you are a bystander in a gossip situation, your goal is to help make the problem smaller, not bigger. Listening to the person and affirming their feelings makes the problem smaller. Wanting to help get revenge on the person who is gossiping makes the problem bigger. With that in mind, what would be a more helpful thing to say to support the person?

Here's a starting idea of what to say, but let's put in your own words:

I'm really sorry. Thanks for trusting me to tell me that. I'd be really upset if that happened to me.

ACTIVITY: What Happened on the Back of the Bus?

Time: 15 minutes

Purpose: To tie the lesson to scenarios the students can relate to

Read the following situation aloud, then discuss the questions.

There's a rumor circulating that a girl did something with a guy. She did do something with him, and she told her closest friends about what happened. Later, one of those girls tells a boy who's a friend of hers, and then he tells another friend. Within a day, everyone in the grade is talking about how this girl did something much more dramatic than what she actually did. The girl is really upset about the rumors. She tries to talk to the guy about it, but only on social media.

Debrief

- Is this situation realistic?
- Are there parts that are realistic? Why? Why not?

Takeaways

- People have the right to tell their close friends about important experiences.
- Those friends don't have the right to share that information.

ACTIVITY: Facing the Situation

Time: 20 minutes

Purpose: To help students develop responses for different dynamics around gossiping



What do you do if people are gossiping all around you?

Say: It's easy to feel trapped because it feels like whatever you say will be used against you.

What do you do if someone comes up to you and wants to tell you gossip?

Say: Take one moment and ask yourself, "Why does this person want me to know?" "Is this funny to me but really embarrassing to the person we're talking about?" "Why is this person telling me this?"

Does it matter if the gossip is true? Even if it is (and that can be really hard to know for sure), if you think there's a chance that the gossip is embarrassing or hurtful, then it's still wrong to talk about it. If you don't know if the gossip is true, not only are you contributing to hurting someone else, you are contributing to lies that will "stick" to them.

What if someone tells you someone else is spreading gossip about you?

Say: Take a deep breath, and then pay attention to what that person just told you. If they care about you and how you're feeling, it will show in the way they speak.

If they want to get you involved in the gossip or drama, they will ask you questions about what you are going to do about it.

If you have assessed that the person wants to drag you into the problem, what are some effective responses (online and in person)?

What if you tell a good friend a secret, they tell other people, and people are gossiping about you?

Say: You should be able to share with your close friends the things that are important to you. If you do and they tell other people, that can understandably feel like a really big violation of trust. So what do you do if you find out someone has violated your trust in this way?

If you confront the person who gossiped about you, what do they usually do?

Make excuses.

Blame someone else: "I only told that one person."

Distract . . . They'll try to help the situation.

Give a fake apology: "I didn't mean to hurt you."

What's the best response if they do any of the above?

Debrief

What are their tone of voice and body language telling you? Is it consistent or inconsistent with what they are saying?

Takeaways

It can be hurtful and confusing to have a close friend betray you. That doesn't mean you have to end the friendship, but you do need to ask yourself if you really can trust that person. This may be a time when you have to use SEAL to tell them how you're feeling about your friendship.

ACTIVITY: Student Pledge

Time: 15 minutes

Purpose: To have students choose one thing they want to change in their behavior and then try to hold themselves accountable

Give a student a large piece of poster board and a marker and ask him or her to record what you are writing on the board. Be clear with your students about where this poster is going to live, hang, etc. You can also do it as an online pledge as a Google doc or form.

Say: We are going to do a challenge—a kind of individual test. Who thinks your life would be easier if people did not do these kinds of things to each other? Do you think that's possible? Who would be willing to try?

Write: "We will . . ." at the top of the poster board.

Let's write down all the things you will try not to do to each other for a specific length of time, like "two hours after class" or "during lunch." We could even try for something huge, like "three days." If you're willing to try, you can write your name at the bottom of the pledge. If you don't think you can do it, then don't sign the pledge. We will appreciate your honesty.

Encourage students to be specific as to time and place, as in these examples.

We will not . . .

1. Whisper negative comments when we see someone walking down the hall.
2. Call anyone a bad, insulting name as we leave class today.
3. Gossip during lunch.

Debrief

Do you think it will be hard to stay true to the pledge?

Takeaways

Try your absolute best to stay true to the pledge. At the least try your best to remember what you pledged.

Since you are asking your students to be mindful about gossiping and to pledge to change their behavior, you should offer to do the same. Along with friends outside of the school, faculty, and family, add your name to the pledge and see if you can keep it.

CHECK YOUR BAGGAGE



Wrap It Up

Time: 5 minutes

- Gossip can control the things you say and what you do without your even realizing it.
- Being entertained or thinking something is funny shouldn't entail humiliating someone else.
- We think gossip is harmless until it's about us or someone we care about.
- If your friends can't support you for speaking out against gossip, then you need to review your standards of friendship. While it's true that you may lose a friendship for speaking out, your silence also comes at a price. You are in that friendship only if you go along with this messed-up system.
- If your friend speaks up for someone and you find yourself turning against the person, have the courage to look at your actions and hold yourself accountable.
- Your ticket out the door: Imagine that the feelings you've had during this session are colors. What colors have you felt during this session?

Carry It With You

Remember what you committed to stop on the pledge. Try your best to carry that pledge with you until our next session.