

## FOCUS ON RESEARCH

### Disclosing Identity Information—Offline vs. Online

From the time most of us were toddlers, we were warned to be cautious around strangers. Researchers Gustavo Mesch and Guy Beker wanted to explore whether this kind of watchfulness extended into adolescence, both in face-to-face communication and through social media. They used data from the Pew Internet and American Life Project to analyze how, and how much, teens disclosed “identity information” to strangers—details like name, school, e-mail address, phone number, and photos.

The researchers discovered a significant difference between adolescents’ willingness to disclose in person and online. Both males and females were willing to reveal much more information about themselves through social media than in face-to-face settings. Not everyone disclosed equally: Older teens disclosed more information than younger ones, and there was a strong, positive correlation between the amount of time spent on the Internet and the amount of disclosure.

This study didn’t explore the consequences of greater disclosure via social media. It’s easy to hypothesize about both the risks and benefits of revealing personal information to people one hasn’t ever seen, let alone met. As researchers learn more, the nature of such disclosures will become clearer.

Mesch, G. S., & Beker, G. (2010). Are norms of disclosure of online and offline personal information associated with the disclosure of personal information online? *Human Communication Research*, 36, 570–592.

doesn’t mean that you are obliged to match another person’s revelations on a tit-for-tat basis. What’s important is that there is an appropriate balance of disclosure for maintaining each party’s investment in the relationship.

**Will the Effect Be Constructive?** Self-disclosure can be a vicious tool if it’s not used carefully. Every person has a psychological “beltline,” and below that beltline are areas about which the person is extremely sensitive. It’s important to consider the effects of your candor before opening up to others. Comments such as “I’ve always thought you were pretty unintelligent” or “Last year I made love to your best friend” may sometimes resolve old business and thus be constructive, but they also can be devastating—to the listener, to the relationship, and to your self-esteem.

### ALTERNATIVES TO SELF-DISCLOSURE

While self-disclosure plays an important role in interpersonal relationships, it isn’t the only type of communication available. To understand why complete honesty isn’t always an easy or ideal choice, consider some familiar dilemmas:

- You have grown increasingly annoyed with some habits of the person you live with. You fear that bringing up this topic could lead to an unpleasant conversation and maybe even damage the relationship.