

*Free Your Secrets and Become Who You Are*

# postSecret THE SHOW

*Study Guide for High School Classrooms*

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Ashanti, TJ Dawe, and Justin Sudds

Study guide created by Matt Kridel

# Introduction

To the reader,

Thank you, and your school, for taking the time to participate in *PostSecret: The Show*. We hope that the performance and this study guide will be a transformative experience that encourages discussion about secrets, empathy, and mental health.

This study guide is meant to be worked through as a follow-up to the performance. Therefore, we hope you'll take the time to look through the study guide at the information, discussion questions, and activities within. Also, while the study guide is designed to be



worked through in order, it may be modified as necessary for your class. We also encourage you to share the information contained within, particularly the resources at the end of the study guide, with your friends and family.

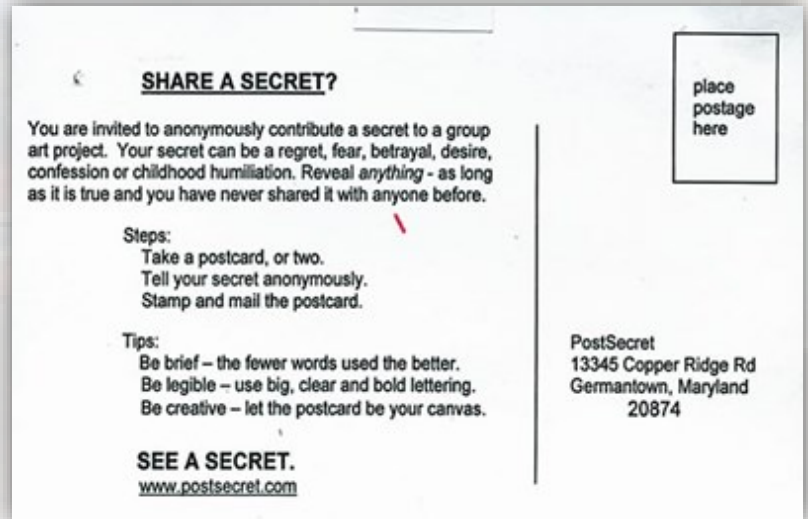
*PostSecret: The Show* often provokes strong thoughts and feelings and this study guide is designed to expand on those experiences. Because each person's reaction will be different, we ask you to remain open, patient, and empathetic as your class interacts with the show and the study guide. Also, while the resources at the end of the study guide are wonderful, we encourage you to become familiar with the mental health and support resources provided by your school and community, and to refer to these if necessary.

Thank you again for allowing us to share the power of *PostSecret* with your classroom.

-Frank Warren and the company of *PostSecret: The Show*

# The History of PostSecret and The Show

PostSecret began in 2004 when a dream inspired creator Frank Warren to begin placing blank postcards in various locations around his hometown of Germantown, Maryland. The postcards had instructions to anonymously share a secret on the postcard and send it back.



Since then, Frank has received millions of secrets from all over the world and every Sunday, he shares those secrets on his website, PostSecret.com. He has also released six books, two phone apps, and speaks all over the world about the impact of PostSecret on himself and on others.

*"When I started PostSecret I was curious about other people's secrets, but the epiphany came when I learned that I needed a safe place to share just as much as the people who were trusting me."*

*-Frank Warren*

In 2010, playwrights Kahlil Ashanti, TJ Dawe, and Justin Sudds approached Frank with the idea of bringing PostSecret to the stage.

Since then, the show has grown and changed to be the show you saw today. And with audience participation, every show is different.

## Discussion

- Why do you think PostSecret has compelled millions of people to share their secrets?
- What were your reactions to the show? How do you think the experience of PostSecret changes when it is put on the stage?



# Activity

Read the quotes and come up with your own definition of a secret. Then, compare your definition with the rest of the class.



CARTE POSTALE  
Andre Malraux  
"Man is not what he thinks he is, he is what he hides."

POST CARD

James Joyce

"Secrets, silent, stony sit in the dark palaces of both our hearts: secrets weary of their tyranny: tyrants willing to be dethroned."

POST CARD

"A picture is a secret about a secret, the more it tells you the less you know."  
Diane Arbus

Frank Warren

"There are two kinds of secrets: The ones we keep from others and the ones we keep from ourselves."

Post Card  
"If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility."

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

"A secret is a feeling you're afraid to share because you feel like you're the only one who has that feeling."

Kahlil Ashanti

"Secret (n): A fact or piece of information that is kept hidden from other people."  
Merriam-Webster Dictionary

"Nothing makes us so lonely as our secrets."

Paul Tournier

UNION POSTALE UNIVERSELLE  
CARTE POSTALE

"The best way of keeping a secret is to pretend there isn't one."  
Margaret Atwood

# How do secrets affect us?

Imagine that everyone is carrying an invisible backpack and inside are invisible books. Some of the books are big and some are small. But the more books that are inside, the heavier the backpack gets, and the more the person hurts, physically, mentally, and emotionally. Sometimes people share books with other people, and their backpack gets a little lighter. But some people never share any books, even the smallest ones, so their backpacks remain heavy for a long time.



Secrets work the same way. The more we carry and the less we share, the more we hurt. Research shows that keeping secrets can affect us mentally and emotionally, and even make us more likely to be sick.

If keeping secrets makes us hurt, then it seems obvious that sharing those secrets would make us feel better. However, there are some ways we can share secrets that will make us feel better than others. Research suggests that sharing secrets is most positive when we can trust the person we tell to be confidential and to be nonjudgmental. In addition, sharing a secret should result in new insights and not just a venting of emotions.

Maybe this is why so many people have participated in PostSecret. When people feel like they don't have someone they can trust with their secret, they instead share it through an anonymous, artistic option.

## *Discussion*

- Think of a “smaller” or more minor secret you’ve kept. How did it affect you emotionally? Mentally? Physically?
- Now think of a “bigger” or more major secret you’ve kept. Did it affect you differently?

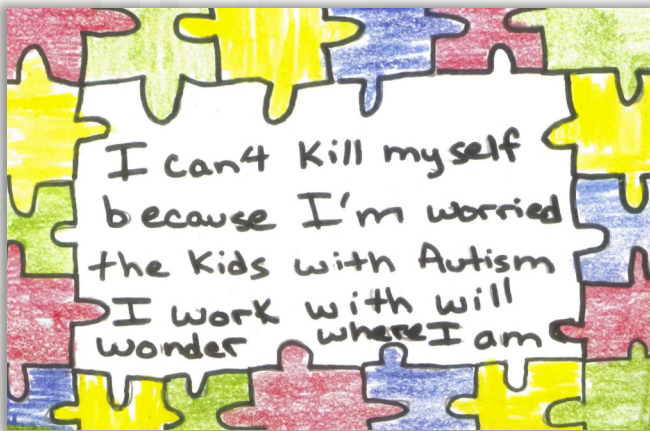


# Themes of Secrets

Millions of secrets have been submitted to PostSecret, each one unique. Here are some common themes and facts about them, accompanied by actual secrets submitted to PostSecret.

## Mental Illness

- One in four people will experience mental illness at some point in their lifetime, with most mental illness starting in young adulthood.
- Mental illness is treatable, but many don't get help they need because they are afraid of what others will think.

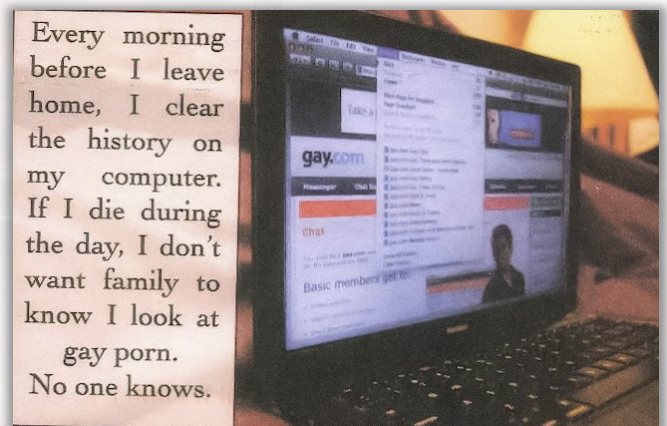


## Suicide

- Suicide is the second leading cause of death for ages 15 to 24.
- Most people will tell someone if they are thinking about suicide and almost all those who survive an attempt are glad they did.

## Love and Sexuality

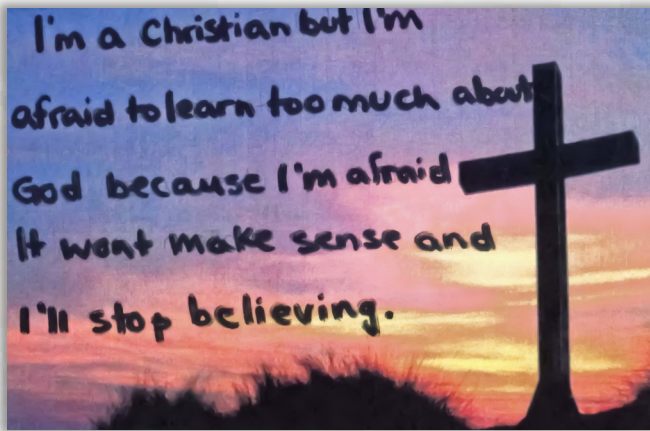
- It is estimated that between three and ten percent of the population identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.
- Being in love can make us feel better physically, but falling out of love can literally hurt.



# More Themes of Secrets

## Social Media

- 90% of adults ages 18-29 use a social networking site. In 2005, it was 9%.
- Research suggests that social media is making us feel more lonely. Feeling lonely doesn't depend on the number of friends we have, but rather, the quality of our relationships.

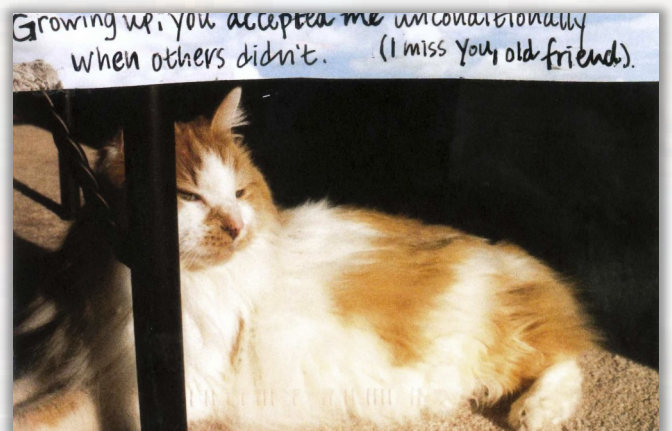


## Death and Religion

- Approximately 76.5% of the U.S. identifies as having some religion or spirituality.
- Thanatophobia, or the fear of death, is one of the most common phobias in the world.

## Pets

- Petting an animal, and especially owning a pet, significantly reduces stress and increases lifespan.
- Many people only tell some of their secrets to their pets. Why might that be?



## Discussion

- What other themes did you notice in *PostSecret: The Show*? Any guesses as to the most submitted secret ever? (Turn over to find out.)

It's "I pee in the shower." Really!



# Understanding Others

As PostSecret shows, many people have secrets, and many of those secrets have similar themes. We also learned on a previous page that sharing secrets makes us feel best when the person hearing our secret is confidential and non-judgmental. Therefore, to allow others to be able to share their secrets with us, we need to learn how to practice empathy.

**Empathy:** The ability to recognize and share another person's thoughts and feelings.

Research distinguishes between two components of empathy: Cognitive empathy is understanding what a person feels and why they feel that way. Affective empathy is actually feeling what another person feels. Empathy is often confused with sympathy, which is caring for how another feels but not necessarily sharing or understanding their feelings.

There are many theories as to why we experience empathy. Research suggests that empathy is an innate ability, evolved from a need to interact with other human beings. Studies have also linked empathy to mirror neurons, cells in the brain that react the same way whether we perform an action ourselves or watch someone else do it. And humans are not the only species that feels empathy; just as we can experience empathy for animals in pain, animals show behavior similar to empathy towards us and each other.



It's important to be empathic because it makes our relationships with other people stronger. When people feel like we understand their feelings and why they feel that way, they feel better about talking to us. Thankfully, all people can practice getting better at empathy.



# Practicing Empathy

These exercises are designed to help you understand and practice empathy. Try them with a classmate (preferably one you don't know very well).

**Getting to Know You:** Working with your classmate, find as many similarities between yourselves as you can in 5 minutes. The similarities can be obvious (e.g., eye color) or not so obvious (e.g., life experiences). Discuss what you found. Were any of your findings surprising? How do these findings make you view each other differently?

**Learning to Listen:** While you tell a story (it can be about your day, a recent vacation, etc.), your partner should write down as many animals as they can think of. When the story is finished, your classmate should try and tell the story back. How accurate were they? How does it feel to not be listened to? Take turns being the storyteller and the listener.

**Feeling Finder:** While your partner listens, tell a story about a time where you felt strong emotions (the emotions can be happy, sad, frightened, etc.). After the story, your classmate should guess how you felt using this format: *"I think you felt [feeling] because [reason for that feeling]."* Discuss if they were accurate or not. The listener should also share how they felt hearing the story be told. Take turns being the storyteller and the listener.

The first exercise is meant to help you humanize your partner by showing how they are similar to yourself. The second exercise illustrates the importance of listening to practicing empathy. And the third exercise shows a structured way of practicing empathy, by recognizing a person's feelings and the reasons behind them. We suggest you continue to practice these skills in everyday life.

# Moving Forward

By seeing the show and completing this study guide, you have discussed with your class what it means to have a secret. You have learned about the many different secrets one can have, and perhaps shared a secret of your own. You have discovered similarities between you and your classmates. Lastly, you have learned how to practice empathy towards others and their secrets. Though the show and this study guide are complete, we hope you will continue to use these lessons and skills in your everyday life. Here are four ideas for moving forward:

1. **Practice empathy.** Use the skills you've learned in everyday conversations. Teach them to a friend, family member, or significant other.
2. **Know the resources.** The resources on the next page are great national organizations, but we encourage you to learn about the mental health and wellness resources at your school and in your area.
3. **Continue the conversation.** Join or start a mental health advocacy club at your school. Check out [ActiveMinds.org](http://ActiveMinds.org) for some ideas.
4. **Submit your secret.** Head to [Postsecret.com](http://Postsecret.com) to see even more secrets and find out how to send in your own.

These are only a few ideas for how you can continue to carry the spirit of PostSecret forward, and we encourage you to come up with your own. To inspire you, we leave you with one of Frank's favorite secrets:



"We are all part of something bigger and we are all part of it together."

-Frank Warren and the company of PostSecret: The Show



# Resources

## Suicide Prevention

**Hopeline:** 1-800-422-HOPE (4673) *or* [www.imalive.org](http://www.imalive.org)

**National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** 1-800-273-TALK (8255) *or*  
[www.crisischat.org](http://www.crisischat.org)

**Note:** In an emergency, always call 911.

## Mental Health

**NAMI HelpLine:** 1-800-950-NAMI (6264) *or* [www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)

**National Eating Disorders Helpline:** 1-800-931-2237 *or*  
[www.nationaleatingdisorders.org](http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org)

**SAMHSA Treatment Referral Helpline:** 1-800-662-HELP (4357)

## Rape, Abuse, and Domestic Violence

**Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network:** 1-800-656-HOPE (4673) *or*  
[www.ohl.rainn.org/online/](http://www.ohl.rainn.org/online/)

**National Domestic Violence Hotline:** 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) *or*  
[www.thehotline.org](http://www.thehotline.org)

## LGBTQ

**The Trevor Project:** 1-866-488-7386 *or* [www.thetrevorproject.org](http://www.thetrevorproject.org)

**Gay, Straight, and Lesbian Education Network (GLSEN):** <http://www.glsen.org/>

## Other

**7 Cups of Tea - Online emotional support:** [www.7cupsoftea.com](http://www.7cupsoftea.com)

**Active Minds - Student mental health advocacy:** [www.activeminds.org](http://www.activeminds.org)

