

# The FYI on TMI

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For generations, we've known maybe a little too much about the people in our office. If someone was chasing the secretary around, you can bet the entire staff knew about it. If somebody had a gambling or drinking problem, the co-worker at the next desk probably picked up some clues. But, judging from the tales we've all heard from our parents and grandparents, flaws and foibles weren't exactly advertised during the workforce of, say, the 1950s or even the 1970s.

Today, chances are, you know about your employee's hemorrhoid problem thanks to chatting about it on [Facebook](#); his wife's flatulence dilemma, courtesy of a comment he made on [Twitter](#); *and* his penchant for drinking late at night, thanks to his communications alerting everyone about the latest bar visited via [Foursquare](#).

[The Wall Street Journal](#) recently wrote an entertaining article about our over-sharing culture, calling it the "TMI phenomenon." As journalist Elizabeth Bernstein observed, reality TV and social networking websites have birthed "a culture where people are encouraged to share every sordid -- or boring -- detail of their lives. They have desensitized us to the idea that some things are meant to be private."

You could argue that this isn't necessarily a bad thing. After all, if society is increasingly open about the major and mundane details revolving around our lives, why shouldn't the office reflect that? It reflects just about everything else about society.

When Bernstein writes, "But we have to take responsibility, too, for mistaking our coworkers for friends," she then follows up, making the case why it's almost impossible for coworkers not to be friends: "It's understandable, as the line between office and home has blurred in recent years. We work more now, so we spend more time with our colleagues and clients, sometimes more than we spend with our families or friends, and we socialize with them outside of work."

So TMI between your employees, if it isn't a foregone conclusion, is probably a situation that's here to stay, just like the coffee break, cubicles and Casual Fridays.

So if you personally are uncomfortable with TMI and feel there's a line between sharing information and too much information, and you're increasingly wondering where that line is, here are some things to consider before opening your mouth or posting information where your employees and colleagues can see it.

**Consider who you're talking to.** "The thing I encourage people to think about is the level of personalization they include in their work conversations," says Donna Flagg, author of [Surviving Dreaded Conversations](#) as well as the founder of [The Krysalis Group](#), a business and management consulting firm in New York City. "Some people can handle it and be trusted and some can't. So I say err on the side of caution unless you are totally sure about the person with whom you are 'sharing.' Once it's out there, there is no taking it back. In the end, work is a professional setting filled with people who don't really know one another all that well. Getting too personal can be not only inappropriate, but risky too."

**Go with the one-size-fits-all theory.** If you're the sort who is squeamish about telling people too much, don't "tell anyone anything that cannot be shared with *everyone* in the organization," says [Linda Henman](#), who owns a strategic planning consultancy in Chesterfield, Mo., representing clients including Tyson Foods and Boeing, and the author of [The Magnetic Boss](#) and the upcoming [The Magnetic Executive](#). "In other words, if one person knows, you can bet that many others will, too."

Another way to think of it, says Henman: Don't offer "any information that you would not want to appear in a newspaper."

**Prioritize who is getting this information.** Jill Spiegel, author of the extremely successful [How to Talk to Anyone About Anything! The Secrets to Connecting](#), has one guideline for anyone concerned with offering TMI: "Withhold sharing personal information with your colleagues that you haven't shared with your spouse or immediate family."

For obvious reasons, you want personal information to reach your friends and family from you, and not your general manager, no matter how nice a guy he is.

If you find the conversation drifting into unfamiliar, possibly controversial territory, then Barbara Poole, founder and CEO of [Employaid](#), an online career resource, suggests you think ahead "and develop three or four questions you might ask in order to have the other person do the talking. This not only provides you with an opportunity to gain your composure -- it may well impress the new acquaintance, who will feel flattered by your attention."

But the main point is, if someone's going to overshare, let it be the other person, and not you.

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**Some topics will *never* be a good idea to discuss in the office.** Diane Gottsman, the owner of [The Protocol School of Texas](#), a San Antonio, Texas, company that specializes in corporate etiquette training, suggests you always steer clear from discussing:

- 1) Sex, divorce and politics
- 2) Plans to quit
- 3) Office romance of peers
- 4) Salary
- 5) Medications for depression you are taking.

True, you can probably come up with exceptions for most of these rules. The smaller the office, the harder it may be to not discuss a romance, and, hey it worked out so well for Jim and Pam (in the, uh, admittedly fictional TV series, *The Office*). Sometimes a staff, perhaps because they're close in age and temperament, can get away with a heated political discussion without everything blowing up.

But Gottsman is absolutely correct. If you want to stay on the safe side of appropriate conversation, the last thing you want to do is bring up is the bedwetting problem you're still trying to kick.

Religion, by the way -- still a wee bit touchy, too.

*Geoff Williams is a frequent contributor to AOL Small Business. He is also the co-author of [Living Well with Bad Credit](#), a book in which he certainly offers TMI.*