

SELF-IMPROVEMENT

Get rid of these toxic people in your life

Mike Peake | Dec 13, 2018

The first step is to spot them; next is to wave them goodbye. Our guide tells you how...



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We've all got one — one of those 'friends' who puts us down regularly for no particular reason. They are the ones who infect us with their misery whenever and wherever they meet us... even online. They rarely if ever see the glass as half full and expect us to hire out the best restaurant for their birthday when the best we can expect in return is something cheap that arrives a week late.

Toxic friends are everywhere, and if you're now mentally going through your list of buddies and struggling to find the bad egg, then perhaps you should stop — lest you come to the crushing conclusion that the rotten penny is you (just kidding!).

Part of the problem is the very concept of 'friends' in the first place; it's something, say experts, that has been corrupted by social media over the years.

Facebook and the like give us the illusion of having dozens or even hundreds of friends, when in fact, says international life, relationship and career coach Michelle Zelli, who has a number of clients in the UAE, we probably only really have four each. If you have four great friends who really are there for you, then you're extremely lucky, she says.

Most of the other people in your 50 or 100-strong list of social media pals are not going to race over to your house in an emergency or empty their savings account if you need emergency medical treatment.

Likewise, some of those 10 or 20 work colleagues who you consider to be friends are unlikely to be really there for you in your hour of need. It may hurt to admit it, but quite a few of the people you consider to be friends probably haven't really got your back at all.

'A friend is not meant to be perfect, but we would expect a friend to be constructive, to be positive,' says Michelle.

'We want friends to be cheerleaders.' They should also, she says, be brave enough to tell us when we're about to make a big mistake, but this is a completely different thing to constantly putting us down and undermining us.

'Toxicity in a relationship is where somebody makes you feel bad about yourself,' says Michelle. No one needs that.

The point of this article is not to encourage you to abandon every questionable friend you can think of, but to pause for a moment and to ask if there are people around you who you would actually be better not hanging around with any more.



Watch out for some 'friends' who can leave you feeling drained, cautions relationship expert Kate Mansfield

Kate Mansfield, a well-regarded coach and relationship expert, has a few ideas about the kinds of people these may be:

Energy vampires

These people are the exact opposite of those friends who leave you feeling energised, happy and positive: they drain you with their negativity, their neediness and their gossip. 'They will latch onto anyone that's available, really,' says Kate. 'You can literally feel the life being sucked out of you when you're in their company, and you'll leave feeling drained.'

Depressive people

A kind of Energy Vampire that is worth mentioning in its own right, depressive people are simply no fun to be around. They are doom-mongers who are often looking for someone — you — to dump their misery onto. 'They can end up making you feel depressed, too,' says Kate.

Domineering people

Your group's self-appointed decision maker, the domineering type will often use tactics to undermine you, says Kate, and make you feel stupid, or somehow 'less' than them. 'They generally have self-esteem issues,' says Kate, 'and are looking to make everyone else feel worse so they can then leverage that to feel better about themselves and feel more confident.' It's often a control thing as well, she says: they want things their way regardless of how it affects you. They want to be right more than they want to be happy.

Flakes

You agreed to meet at 8 and she shows up an hour later. He said he would take care of the birthday party and then dumped it back in your lap at the very last minute. 'It's good to remember with these types that the root of the problem is often that they don't feel worthy of the relationship or they have confidence issues,' says Kate. Equally, it can be that they have some kind of addiction and their lives are very chaotic as a result. 'The impact on you is that it can affect your confidence and self-esteem and it makes the relationship very difficult. It gets boring, really,' Kate adds.

Green-eyed monsters

The underlying issue with any jealous friends of yours is insecurity again, says Kate. 'Often people will do things to get a reaction to harm you or sabotage you, and jealous friends are generally not people to be trusted,' she adds. In a romantic relationship, she says, a partner who is very jealous for no reason can be exhausting — and can really destroy the relationship.

Narcissists

This final group is unique in that Kate says narcissistic friends are the only ones that you have little hope of 'fixing'. Narcissism is quite a complex disorder, she says, pointing out that narcissists are often abusive and will try and deny your reality in order to get out of taking responsibility for their own bad behaviour (this is known as 'gaslighting'). 'People around narcissists often end up feeling like they have something wrong with themselves,' says Kate.

There are other types of toxic friends, and it's important to understand that not everyone in this rogues' gallery necessarily needs to be abandoned outright. Kate says relationships with people in the first five of the above groups may be salvageable. The way to begin is to explain to them that you don't like their behaviour and that you are setting new boundaries. You might put a time limit on things,' she suggests. 'If someone is always half an hour late you could say, "Listen, if this happens once more, I don't want to be in this friendship any more".'

What's interesting, adds Michelle, is that we often didn't actually choose toxic friends: things showed over time, almost without us noticing. 'But as well as that, if we are used to humiliation and shaming in our childhood, then we will actually normalise that kind of behaviour and therefore may have friends that are not supportive and are toxic. So we can collect toxic friends and know right from the outset; others catch us unawares.'

Michelle has a check-list of tips to help you deal with toxic friends, and, ultimately, strike the worst offenders off the list so that you can concentrate on spending time with people you really like and who, in turn, like you back:

Step 1: Get into the right place

What you want to avoid, says Michelle, is a kneejerk reaction. If, upon reading this, you suddenly realise you have a toxic friend and want to eject them from your life, you should sleep on the idea first. 'Get yourself into a place emotionally and mentally where you are OK to either accept the behaviour, or set out to change it — and be prepared to walk away if you don't get what you want,' she says.

Step 2: Make your move

Michelle says some toxic friends may redeem themselves if you give them that chance. So speak to them about the aspects of their behaviour that you don't like. 'They may actually value that input,' says Michelle. 'Make sure you clearly communicate your feelings and your hopes for how you want things to change.'



Michelle says building an exit strategy is important when preparing to junk toxic friends

Step 3: Build an exit strategy

If you've given someone a second chance and they've failed to observe the line you drew in the sand, it's probably time to walk away — but you need to consider how you are going to deal with the potential void they may leave (something especially true if it is a family member you're about to sever ties with). 'Know what you are getting into because if you do break up, then you may miss them,' Michelle warns.

Step 4: Prepare for the worst-case scenario

Once you're committed to making a clean break, Michelle says it can be helpful to consider the worst-case scenario. 'Once you have a strategy for dealing with that, you can release a lot of the fear and the pain,' she says.

Step 5: Do it

Say the words. Walk away. Move onto a new chapter in your life. 'Your emotions will come in waves,' says Michelle. 'You'll likely go through anger, sadness, fear and guilt — and they will pass.' One thing that most people will also have to get used to is a number of awkward social situations. Friends you have in common may want to know what's going on; you and your ex-pal may end up being invited to the same parties. 'Don't share the story, don't get into 'he said/she said', because then you're getting into drama and gossip,' says Michelle. If an event comes up that you'd rather not be at, she suggests saying: 'That's not an energy that's working for me at the moment, so I'm going to pass.'

So what will it all feel like a few months down the line? When you don't have to deal with the feelings of dread that used to come with the arrival of your toxic former friend — the one who used to make you feel miserable, or small, or annoyed? The biggest plus, says Kate, should be a feeling of freedom. 'If you've tried to fix a friendship and it's not worked, then you have to put yourself first. Once free, you're not going to have all the negative side effects of being around that person.'

Time is a resource hugely undervalued in society, she adds. We can waste our time and energy in toxic relationships when we should be having fun doing something nice. 'Life is short and you shouldn't spend a minute with people who don't value and respect you and love you when you're offering those things in return,' she says.

'By breaking up a toxic friendship, you're also helping that person by letting them see the impact of their behaviour,' says Michelle. 'What they do with that is not your business. What is important now is how you run your life — and the minimum standards you insist upon.'