

Health check your friendships

Friend or frenemy? Aoife Stuart discovers the antidote to poisonous pals

When an intimate relationship falls ill, you don't think twice about calling in the emotional doctors - usually sympathetic girlfriends or mother dearest. For those untreatable relationship woes, often there's nothing else for it but to put the relationship down. It's sad, but you know, in the long run, less hurt will be caused to both of you. Whatever the prescription, you certainly wouldn't sit back and do nothing.

Why then, when a friendship starts to turn sour, do we not address the malady with the same rational approach? A friendship is no longer fulfilling your emotional needs, but still you'll carry on as if everything is okay. There's no get-out clause in a friendship after all, is there? Yes, actually, according to the experts, who say we should treat the negative friendships in our life as we would treat a bad relationship. But how can you salvage a friendship gone bad, and when is it time to dump her? Here's our guide to ridding your little black book of frenemies...

FREEMY NO. 1: The change-resister

She's been one of your closest pals since you were 15 - the trouble is, she wants you to be the same person you were when you were teenagers. Your world has got bigger: you want to travel, meet new people and explore new friendships. She still wants to visit your old haunts and talk about the cute guys you went to high school with. Not only is she resistant

to change, but she criticises your need to spread your wings.

"My best friend from school came out to visit me in Dubai," says Emily* 28. "She resented all the new friends I'd made. She seemed angry when I suggested a group of us went out for dinner. 'You've changed,' she would moan. She saw my new friends and my new life as a personal attack on her and would snap, 'Suddenly I'm not good enough for you?' She couldn't understand my longing to meet new people when I had a perfectly good friend in her."

The prescription: "The first rule of thumb

is to show compassion," says Tamera Daun, author of *Absolute Bliss: A Woman's Guide to Relationship Happiness* (Dhs110, Trafford).

"This type of friend is just scared of getting left behind and of being left out. They need to know that they are cared about. Explain to her that you're not changing your core self, but simply trying to develop in more positive ways."

And, just like in romantic relationships, sometimes time apart can help a friendship too. "This time apart could act as a catalyst that leads to development for the Change-Resister," explains Tamera. "They'll have time to get to know themselves and their own needs and they may then be able to

understand your need for development." **Dump her or keep her?** Keep her: you should take a time out, but don't delete her number just yet.

FREEMY NO. 2: The competitor

Anything you can do, she can do better. From your new haircut to your promotion or your new man - anything you've got, she has to have more. You got a fab new job, but instead of congratulating you and being happy for you, she immediately launches into a monologue about how much better her job

"Just like in romantic relationships, sometimes time apart can help a friendship too"

is than yours, or worse, why you shouldn't be feeling so pleased with yourself because actually your new job is not really that fabulous. "I'd just met a new man and was feeling really loved up," says Clare*, 30.

"Immediately my friend started picking his faults. She kept comparing him to her own husband and was adamant my new beau wasn't as handsome/charming/rich/successful as her husband.

"It seems that she can never be pleased for me, congratulate me or share in my successes. She tries to turn every achievement in my life into a competition."

The prescription: "An overtly competitive friend like this needs to be confronted." →

says Patti Criswell, author of *Friends: Making Them and Keeping Them* (Dhs37, Barnes and Noble). "A simple, 'Whoa, you didn't just say that, did you?' could work. Or try using a little humour like 'Ouch!' or 'I'm so glad to hear you're not attracted to Brian, I couldn't see myself with your guy either'. Whatever technique you use, you need to point out the competitive behaviour to your friend and set boundaries with her. No one can stomp on you, unless you let them."

Dump her or keep her? Keep her, but only if you're willing to call her on her cattiness.

FREEMY NO.3: The negativity spreader

She moans about her weight, which reminds you you need to lose a few pounds. She's bored of the clubs you go to and moans every time you go out, so you end up not having a good time either. She's homesick in Dubai and goes on and on about it so much that you start pining for home too. Negativity breeds negativity so when she is down, it brings you down too. "My best friend complains so much about everything that I end up joining in and complaining," says Rashmi*, 29. "Even though I still secretly like the same old clubs and restaurants in Dubai we go to, when she starts bitching about them, I can't help joining in."

The prescription: "Negativity is definitely contagious," says relationship expert Mira Kirshenbaum (www.mirakirshenbaum.com). "We often get sucked into relationships because we feel sorry for these people, and even more seductive, we feel we can help them. But negativity is their agenda. It's sad, but this kind of relationship will just take from you, without giving anything back."
Dump her or keep her? Dump her, unless you want the life drained out of you by this positivity-sucking vampire.

FREEMY NO.4: The enabler

You know your weaknesses, and so does she. But she does little to discourage you away from your bad habits. In fact, she actively encourages you to get involved in things you both know are bad for you. Up to your eyes in debt on credit cards? Why does she insist on dragging you to the mall? "You have to buy them," she urges about those shoes you cannot afford - or resist.

"I was having trouble losing the weight I'd piled on over the summer," says Mia*, 19.

"Instead of encouraging me, my friend would insist I meet her at brunches or for tea and cakes, even though she knew I was trying to diet. Instead of helping me stamp out my bad habits, she's was going out of her way to make sure I kept them up - why?"

The prescription: "No one is making you spend time with the enabler," says Christina Eckert, author of *Winning Against the Wackos in Your Life*, (Dhs55, Larstan). "You actively spend time with her and then complain about it. The best thing you can do for your own self-preservation is to let her know that you need to spend time away from everyone who indulges in your weaknesses - be it credit card spending sprees, smoking or bingeing. That way she won't feel like she's being singled out. Keep it short and sweet or you will be on the phone for hours trying to explain your position without 'hurting her feelings'."

Dump her or keep her? Dump her, along with the bad habit you're trying to shake.

FREEMY NO.5: The self-obsessor

You've begun to realise that

every time you meet, the conversation is all about her. Her man troubles, her successes, her woes... You don't mind lending a sympathetic ear, but after a week of late nights listening to her cry over yet another break-up, you really need to talk about the huge row you've just had with your man. But within minutes, she's turned the conversation back round to herself. "My friend does nothing but talk about herself," says Mary*, 34. "One time I put the phone down for six minutes and left the room, when I returned she was still talking about herself."

The prescription: "Some highly self-obsessed people can't seem to grasp that the rest of us also have lives, interests and concerns. If you do manage to get a word in edgeways, you can count on the self-obsessor to ignore your comments and proceed with her chosen topic," says Christina. "The way to take control is to stop playing host to this type of parasite. That's why caller ID was invented."

Dump her or keep her? Dump her: hang up the phone before her hang-ups take over your life. ●

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