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EXCLUSIVE

The kind and cruel friend: How do we tackle the frenemies?

People who belittle you and cause pain can never be your 'true' friend

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Such relationships erode a person's self-esteem, and they continue carrying that trauma to other relationships, including romantic partnerships.

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Some old friendships feel like wounds that have never quite healed.

Thirty-five-year-old Pravita Ghosh, a former accountant based in Sharjah uses these words as she shares bitter recollections of a close childhood friendship that carried on till her late twenties. “I had the best times with her, but I was secretly terrified of her ‘jabs’, something I didn’t acknowledge till late,” she says. This particular friend would make ‘playful’ remarks about Ghosh’s weight, hair and manner of talking. “She would say it in front of others, and laugh. It affected me badly, but I didn’t want to acknowledge it, because she has been with me through everything in life. Those are the messiest friendships,” says Ghosh. “You can’t get away from them.”

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This phrase ‘you can’t get away from them’ seemed to be a constant emotion among many who had such ‘frenemyships’ as it is called now. There are many kinds of such friendships. “I had a close friend who was also my colleague. We stopped speaking after I learned that she was purposely trying to let me down in front of my manager, by always putting me on the spot about things that weren’t even my concern,” Harry McEwan, a Dubai-based 42-year-old American entrepreneur says. Another who prefers not to be named says that he was friends with a person who was close, but was actually spreading rumours about him behind his back at work. “Yet, he was always so sweet and helpful at work, I just couldn’t put my finger on it. Finally I confronted him in a really aggressive argument, and we never spoke after that,” he says.

These ambivalent friendships are often confusing. If a person’s outright terrible to you, it’s sometimes easier to pull away. It’s the ones mixed with this baffling set of negatives and positives that leave your brain in a pickle.

The romanticisation of the frenemy



Such people appear to care deeply for us, and they sincerely think they do, but they're actually doing more harm to you.

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We've romanticised this idea of frenemies, owing to films and Netflix, says Dubai-based psychologist Nusrat Khan. Most of us have grown up on the diet of romantic comedies or dramas where we enjoyed the idea of enemy-turned-to-friends. You can take a sweeping glance at most television shows, to see for yourself. Unfortunately or fortunately, life isn't Grey's Anatomy, and neither is it a Korean drama where a cold CEO turns out to be your benefactor.

It's where we got our ideas of 'tough love' and the 'bad boy with the golden heart'. In reality, it is a lot of toxicity to bear, says Khan. Such people appear to care deeply for us, and they sincerely think they do, but they're actually doing more harm to you. These friendships are harder to detect. "It's the people in our close friends circles and family, who often have the power to hurt us more than others," says Dubai-based psychologist Dennis Yudchitz. There are multiple reasons why people could choose to become 'a frenemy', and a lot is to do with their own insecurity, he explains. They could also see the person as a rival, in terms of school, career or their professional life.

Teenagers and adolescence



A frenemy situation can begin at a young age, making it harder for a person to pull away as they progress through life.

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I remember I had a close group of friends at the age of 14. My mother luckily, was more perceptive than I was. She didn't trust them ever since one of them invited me for lunch to their house and asked me to pay for the pizza that we ordered that day. Of course, there were other reasons too, as she saw that I was the center of all their jokes, which I used to valiantly laugh off. I finally saw the light when one of them called me to celebrate my birthday and told me to bring the cake to cut. I'm not quite proud to say that I did contemplate bringing the cake, but my mother put her foot down. "You're not going and neither are you buying a cake for them on your birthday, and that's that."

A frenemy situation can begin at a young age, making it harder for a person to pull away as they progress through life. "Most teenagers are struggling with this," explains Khan. "At that age, it's easier to trust people, and most of them just want to make friends and fit in," she says. "People tend to look for such friends who offer them that feeling of security, love and affection," adds Manisha Timothy, a life coach and holistic wellness expert in Dubai. "It's seen in those who are struggling with difficult homes and strict parenting, and need that kind of reassurance from others. Then, they grow emotionally attached to their friends and try to associate themselves with them, while seeking security," says Timothy. They don't want to see themselves as separate individuals, but as part of a clique.

Most teenagers struggle with these kind of 'frenemies'. At that age, it's easier to trust people and most of them just want to make friends and fit in. Parents need to evaluate



However, quite often, these friendships that are tinged with negativity are not seen as warning signs. Yet, this affects a person's mental health, severely. "There is a lot of depression and anxiety. This is something that parents need to observe carefully. They need to evaluate their child's social circle, and actually see what their child can't say," adds Khan. For instance, if a child is not doing well in academics or doesn't want to go to school, rather than chastising them and forcing the child, parents need to actually understand what's going on. Look at the words that they're using, she explains. The child won't mention their friends at first, they will say that they don't feel like studying, or just feel too tired for anything.

The vicious cycle of frenemies

If this vicious cycle of 'frenemies' is not addressed at the formative ages, it can get more difficult as the person grows older. They are unable to set boundaries. So we start letting others treat us this way, even though we are emotionally drained, says Yudchitz.

Moreover, when they meet these friends who want to compete with them at work and play down their achievements, it also gives rise to imposter syndrome, continues Khan. "Communication with such friends becomes toxic, as you are making an ally out of bullies. These are bullies in the garb of being friends," explains Khan.

Such relationships erode a person's self-esteem, and they continue carrying that trauma to other relationships, including romantic partnerships. More often than not, even when they realise the problems of their frenemies, they fall into a cycle of not trusting anyone, says Khan. "They keep hunting for more frenemies, as they fear the new and unfamiliar, and cling to the old comfort," she adds. Yet, the situation of such friends, is more often than not, a recipe for disaster, continues Khan. It's a relationship now charged with intense emotion and your brain continues to go into overdrive trying to assess whether this person is really a friend or not. Your brain starts feeding on that threat, and you are now permanently on edge all the time.

Do we break away from such friends?



It doesn't always mean you have to end the friendship; it's about how you address it with them too and see their reaction.

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If you need time to recover after being with a friend, that's the first alarm, according to Yudchitz. This back and forth is addictive. That's how you know something is off and that you need to address a problem. On how to tackle this deeply layered problem from frenemies, he emphatically says that there is no 'math' to it. There are different methods to go about it, and perhaps starting with building self-awareness he says. You need to acknowledge that you're in such a situation and why you are constantly gravitating towards a friend like that. Ask yourself several questions, whether being friends with such a person makes you happy, or gives you anxiety. Ask these questions to yourself over a fixed period of time, and assess how you feel, before making a decision.

Sometimes, understanding such a friendship involves a lot of reinvention and reflection, because even if you do end the relationship, you can still feel rather scarred, explains Khan. On the other hand, Timothy suggests categorising friends, such as ‘best’, or ‘on or off’, and those who you maintain for certain purposes. “Once you do this, your chances of ending up in a toxic friendship are reduced. Don’t trust every friend implicitly and treat them all the same way, and stop oversharing,” explains Timothy. This will help in reinstating your boundaries, as you prioritise what matters most to you in terms of friendships.

Categorise your friends. Once you do this, your chances of ending up in a toxic friendship are reduced. Don’t trust every friend implicitly and treat them all the same way, and stop oversharing”

- Manisha Timothy, life coach and wellness expert



You need to understand and accept that you aren’t defined by your friends, adds Khan. This is where the role of parents is crucial in the formative stages, she explains. “They need to help their child see what a real friendship filled with respect is, and what healthy boundaries look like, and listen to what their child is saying.”

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