

Fixing a Fractured Friendship

You and your best friend seem to be seeing less of each other. When you do talk, you get on each other's nerves or argue about stupid things. Maybe you even avoid each other because when you get together, you don't have fun the way you used to—in fact, things are pretty tense.

Symptoms like these tell you that your friendship could be in serious trouble. You probably hate that it's happening, and you may wonder what you can do to keep it from dying. Whether you've had a simple spat or a no-holds-barred brawl, don't give up hope—because you can save a fractured friendship.

A friendship can take years to develop, yet it can be destroyed in a few careless moments. So don't let annoying pet peeves, thoughtless words, or actions ruin your relationship. As American historian Henry Adams said, "One friend in a lifetime is much; two are many; three are hardly possible." In the long run, most people have only a handful of good friends, so don't give them up without a fight.

Danger Signs

Like most relationship problems, the symptoms of a friendship in trouble are usually visible if you're willing to look for them. Here are a few kinds of behavior changes that can indicate trouble brewing. Chances are that your friendship may need some attention when behavior between you and your friend follows one of these patterns:

From:	To:
Cooperative	Argumentative
Dependable	Irresponsible
Open	Secretive
Patient	Intolerant
Appreciative	Demanding
Supportive	Critical

Fun		Tedious
Interested		Indifferent
Available		Always busy

Like children, pets, and plants, a friendship needs care and nurturing to thrive and grow. This means taking the time to be available for fun as well as to help out in a crisis. Friends who do things for each other, are supportive, and show interest in each other are reinforcing the bonds of friendship.

Nip problems in the bud.

Pet peeves and insidious irritations can creep up and eat away at the foundation of a friendship. However, if you identify problems early and deal with them, you can prevent these little annoyances from sucking the joy from your friendship.

The goal is to let your friend know how his or her actions or behavior affect you and make you feel. A true friend will do his or her best to make the needed adjustments.

Being assertive is the best way to keep these problems from ruining your friendship. If your friend is overcritical, complains too much, is too demanding, or always late, you have a right to say something about it.

If you don't, your friendship may pay the price. Left unchecked, habits like these can spoil just about any friendship.

Being Overcritical

If you've fallen into a pattern of criticizing your friend instead of lending your support, make an effort to stop before it damages your friendship. Even if the criticism is valid, if it's harsh and unsolicited, it can leave a friend feeling deflated and resentful.

Constantly Complaining

Does your friend expect you to sit for hours on end while he or she grumbles endlessly about a job or love life? Constant complaining about a lack of money, lousy health, work, an unsatisfying relationship, or just about anything else will eventually grind away at a friendship.

Sure, it's important to be a good listener and acknowledge your friend's feelings and problems, but don't let the bellyaching go on too long. Try these tips to stop a complainer:

- After listening for a minute or two, ask a few closed-ended questions—ones that call for short answers—to slow down the grousing and redirect the flow of conversation.
- You can offer a suggestion or two, but don't be surprised if they get shot down. Complainers are often looking for attention rather than solutions.
- If the complainer truly wants to change the situation, ask, "What are your options?" If not, say directly, "It seems like you're complaining a lot. It sounds like it's time to make some changes."
- Change the subject by saying, "Well, I'm sure you'll work things out. By the way, just to change the subject, I wanted to tell you about ..."

Taking Advantage

Some friends don't know when enough is enough, so they just keep on asking for one favor after another. While most people are more than happy to do a friend a favor or two, if you feel someone is taking advantage of your kind nature, it will definitely damage a friendship.

Favors could include lending money, covering for a friend at work, doing errands, or even telling lies.

Although doing favors for each other is part of a good friendship, there may be times when you'd rather refuse. Here are some tactful ways to decline:

- "Sorry, it's not a good time for me."
- "I'd like to be able to help you out, but I can't."
- "I really don't want to get involved in that."

When you ask a friend for a favor, be up front and direct. At the same time, allow your friend the opportunity to say "no"—and don't make a fuss about it or try to make your friend feel guilty.

If it's an urgent matter, make it clear. Hinting that you need help without coming right out and asking for it usually leads to misunderstandings.

When you ask for a favor, first ask yourself:

- Is this a reasonable request?
- Do I really need my friend's help or can I do this myself?
- Will doing this favor for me inconvenience my friend or create a hardship?

Being Late

Why is it that some people think that their friend's time isn't valuable or important? Being late is one of the most annoying bad habits, because it shows little consideration for the other person.

If your friend seems to run late chronically, try these tips to avoid having this pet peeve build from a major annoyance to a full-fledged war of words:

- Call the night before and remind your friend when and where you plan to meet.
- Don't be shy about saying, "Please do me a big favor and be on time."
- Pick a place where you can wait comfortably, such as a bookstore or coffee shop.
- Ask your friend to repeat the meeting time and place.
- Say, "If you're running late, please let me know."

Here are some frequently asked questions about friendship problems:

How do you say "no" to a friend who frequently asks to borrow money?

There will be times when you or a friend needs an emergency loan. Depending on the amount and the situation, a short-term loan may be fine. However, if a friend asks to borrow money often, your friendship may end up paying the price. Difficult as it may be to say, you can refuse a friend's request for money. You can say, "I'd rather not. Many friendships have parted ways over money, and I'd never want that to happen to ours."

My friend and I had a falling-out several years ago, but I'm not upset anymore. How can we patch things up and get our friendship back? Also, do we have to settle the issue that caused the original argument?

"Time heals all wounds" is only true if whatever caused you and your friend to split in the first place has lost its importance. Call or write your friend and suggest getting together to catch up. If your friend is willing to see you, you're on your way to renewing your friendship. You don't need to resolve an old argument unless it has some relevance to a present situation.

My friend is talking about me behind my back. What can I do to get him to stop?

A real friend won't say hurtful things about you to others. The best way to stop someone from talking behind your back is simply to say, "I'd really appreciate it if you don't discuss my personal business with other people."

Expect changes.

As people change and grow, so do their friendships. Most people go through lifestyle changes that have direct impacts on their friendships. These changes include falling in love, getting married, having children, taking new jobs, moving, or getting divorced.

One way to prevent predictable life changes from eroding your friendship is to be flexible and adaptable. It will be easier to maintain your friendship if you expect a certain amount of ebb and flow.

As British novelist and playwright David Storey said, "The essence of true friendship is to make allowances for another's little lapses."

About the Author

Don Gabor is a consultant and interpersonal skills trainer based in New York City. Gabor is the author of numerous books, including *How to Start a Conversation and Make Friends*, *Big Things Happen When You Do Little Things Right*, *Talking with Confidence for the Painfully Shy*, and *How to Talk to the People You Love*.