

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

I have a friend I've known for over a year. When we started our friendship, I didn't have a boyfriend, but two months into our friendship, I started dating this one guy. A couple of months into the relationship, my friend became very disappointed in me, complaining that I no longer spend time with her. She analyzes the times I spend away from her, and is constantly wondering what I'm doing or where I am. She goes crazy if she can't get in touch with me over the phone. If I don't call her on Sunday, or miss her call, she will wonder why I didn't call. I'm finding this friendship dragging as the days go by, and finding myself running away from her the more she nags me for time. In other ways, she is a great friend, but I'm finding the emotional baggage overwhelming. How do I handle this situation?

-- Jessica

Dear Jessica,

I think you've got it right when you feel that your friend has a lot of emotional baggage. The truth is that none of us are "baggage-free." Based on our experiences, history, and our lack of healing or closure from old wounds, we all have insecurities and issues that hamper our ability to connect with others. Some people arrive on the doorstep of relationships carrying a normal amount of baggage – say a three-piece matching set – others pull up in an 18-wheeler fully loaded with luggage. I'm afraid your friend may be carrying more than the standard amount of emotional baggage.

You can be compassionate with her, of course, but you also must set clear and firm boundaries. Personal boundaries are limits that we set in a relationship to protect ourselves from being consumed by emotionally immature or needy people, while allowing the clear light of love and friendship in. Boundaries can be flexible. They allow us to get emotionally close when appropriate, but maintain distance when we are in danger of being consumed by the needs of another person.

Without those boundaries in your current friendship, you may become so frustrated that you will give her signals that you are about to end this friendship altogether. That will increase her insecurities, which will cause her to become even clingier, which will make you avoid her even more. Can you see that this is like a dog chasing her own tail, and is a process that just won't stop on its own?

All successful friendships require two people with a clear sense of their own identity and individuality. Good friends love and delight in each other, and that love is generous, not onerous. But you are not talking about real friendship here. You are describing an unhealthy enmeshment with an emotionally needy person.

Let your friend know that you care about her, but that she is suffocating you. Do not continue down the path you are on. If you say that you will call her, then do so. But let her know that you have no intention of calling her every Sunday whether she calls you

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12/8/04

or not. It might be that it is not convenient for you to call on her rigid schedule. Instead, keep in contact at times that are convenient for both of you. Gently encourage her to find other friends, and engage in interesting activities that have nothing to do with you. And finally, strongly encourage her to seek out a counselor or therapist to help her work through her insecurities.

Dealing with needy people is tough. It is especially difficult when they have many likeable qualities, and it sounds like this is the case with your friend. The best plan of action starts with an honest discussion, and the establishment of healthy boundaries.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2004 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.