

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

I have a friend who is basically a good guy. He would give you the shirt off his back, but he has one habit that is driving me crazy: He is a know-it-all and braggart. No matter what I say--or what anyone else says for that matter--Nick has been there, done that, and done it better and faster than any one of us could ever imagine. Over the years, I've watched people roll their eyes behind his back at his outrageous bragging, arrogance, and even outright lies. We've been friends since high school – more than twenty years ago – so I've been more than patient. But now even I am over it. I mean, Nick really doesn't have anything to brag about. He is an average guy with a mediocre job but to hear him talk, you'd think he was Brad Pitt with the ladies, with more money than Donald Trump, and could beat Tiger Woods on the golf course. I don't want to hurt his feelings, but his bragging is so constant that I can't take it anymore. Advice?

- Ready to Pop

Dear Ready,

Perhaps your friend Nick's life is so middling that he doesn't feel very good about it. He prefers to give the impression that he is successful in all areas, when in fact, he is measuring the success of his life against standards he is unlikely to ever achieve. After all, unless you are Phil Mickelson, how many of us even have the ghost of a chance of beating Tiger Woods on the back or front nine? Nick's constant, competitive one-upmanship suggests that he suffers from seriously low self-esteem. His bragging is an attempt to compensate, and to garner praise and admiration from other people. Poor Nick. If he turned around, he might notice that, rather than impressing people, he's making them gag. He will sense this, of course. There will no doubt be times when Nick sees people's true reaction to his bragging, which will only cause his self-esteem to plummet, which – you guessed it – will only increase his bragging and arrogance.

People with low self-esteem see themselves as unlikable, unlovable, incompetent, inadequate, and worthless. These feelings prevent the development of authentic trust in others, and seriously impair their ability to have deep and meaningful relationships. Thus, showing off and blowing their own horns become the way that they relate to others.

Healthy self-esteem, on the other hand, is not about believing that you are perfect, or better than others. It is the quiet assurance that you are worthy of love, respect, and acceptance. In a similar vein, bragging is quite different from sharing real accomplishments with friends. It's one thing to say, "I'm so happy that I earned that promotion at work." It's a whole different thing to toast oneself at a gathering by bragging about how exceptional you are: "I'm the greatest!" Muhammad Ali was the only person I can think of who could get away with that kind of hyperbole.

So, what to do? Luckily for Nick, you seem to be able to see through his obnoxious behavior, and still know that he is a good person underneath all the bravado. You are a true friend. I don't think that you have any other choice but to talk with him. Tell him that you see him as a good and generous person, but that his bragging and know-it-all attitude is driving you up the wall and, worse, it's costing him other friendships as

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well. Remind him that you've been friends for a long time, and that your reason for bringing up this difficult subject is because you care about him. Once you broach the subject with Nick, perhaps you can also agree on an unobtrusive signal you can give him in public when he climbs on his bragging soapbox. Though his behavior seems very obvious, it might be so habitual that it's almost unconscious for him, and your reminders may help him nip it in the bud. If he does change his behavior, it will be something he can be (privately!) very proud of!

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.