DR JULIE SMITH

MILLION-COPY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

You need to believe in yourself

You're battling anxiety

Open When...

Coping Skills for Life's Twists & Turns

You're dealing with difficult people

Your inner critic is too loud

You're under pressure

You feel stuck

Copyrighted Material

You struggle to say no

'Absolutely extraordinary' MEL ROBBINS

PENGUIN BOOKS

Open When . . .

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Open When . . .

DR JULIE SMITH



PENGUIN BOOKS

Copyrighted Material

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com

Penguin Random House UK
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

penguin.co.uk



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published by Penguin Michael Joseph 2025
Published in Penguin Books 2026
001

Copyright © Julie Smith, 2025

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Further permissions can be found at the back of the book

Penguin Random House values and supports copyright.
Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes freedom
of expression and supports a vibrant culture. Thank you for purchasing
an authorized edition of this book and for respecting intellectual property
laws by not reproducing, scanning or distributing any part of it by any
means without permission. You are supporting authors and enabling
Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for everyone.
No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the
purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. In accordance
with Article 4(3) of the DSM Directive 2019/790, Penguin Random House
expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception

The information in this book is intended for general guidance only. While very effort has been made to ensure that the information is complete and accurate, it is not a substitute for medical or healthcare professional advice. Please consult with your GP or a qualified health professional before changing, stopping or starting any treatment or medication. All matters regarding your health require medical supervision. The author and publishers disclaim, as far as the law allows, any liability arising directly or indirectly from the use, or misuse, of the information in this book. Dr Julie Smith is a Chartered Clinical Psychologist registered with the HCPC and BPS

Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–241–66395–0

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future
for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from
Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

Copyrighted Material



For Sienna, Luke and Leon.

My wish is that you never need this book.
But I wrote it just in case.

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Contents

Introduction: A letter from me to you 1

1: When it's hard to be with other people

1: When you compare yourself and come up short 9
2: When your friends are not your friends 26
3: When you want to be less awkward around people 38
4: When you feel unwelcome and want to fit in 52
5: When you keep saying yes but you want to say no 62
6: When you're dealing with passive-aggressive people 80
7: When your parents got it wrong 92
8: When you get it wrong as a parent 104
9: When they don't love you back 118
10: When they love you, but you won't let them get close 126
11: When you want to win the argument 140
12: When it's hard to ask for help 154

Copyrighted Material

2: When it's hard to be with yourself

13: When your inner voice is your own worst critic 169
14: When you doubt yourself and want to feel more confident 184
15: When you are overwhelmed 198
16: When you hate who you've become 210
17: When you're scared of making the wrong choice 224
18: When you're short on willpower 234
19: When you must perform under pressure 248

3: When it's hard to be with your feelings

20: When you're overthinking everything 265
21: When fear shows up 276
22: When grief overwhelms you 286
23: When everything feels pointless 298
24: When you feel like an imposter 310
25: When you have done something you regret 320
26: When anger erupts too often 336

Appendix 353
Acknowledgements 371
References 375
Index 391

Copyrighted Material

Introduction

'Get busy with life's purpose, toss aside empty hopes, get active in your own rescue – if you care for yourself at all – and do it while you can.'

– Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 3.14

A letter from me to you

Despite the words laid out in front of you, I have never been a talker. Even as a child, I observed and absorbed, but rarely approached anyone in times of need. For that, I did what many quiet kids do: I turned to books. Looking back, I see my impulse to read as a kind of searching. I was asking of the pages what I was unable to ask of real people. I waded through book after book. Sometimes I found what I needed. Sometimes I didn't.

With that in mind and my current profession as a clinical psychologist, you would be forgiven for assuming that I want to promote inward-focused self-reflection. That is not the case. The inner world is like a sauna:

Copyrighted Material

there are benefits to being there, as long as you don't stay for too long. In the same respect, I strongly urge you, in challenging times, to connect with other humans in the real world wherever possible. That is where most of the answers lie to our naturally fluctuating mental health in the face of life's ups and downs. But I am also realistic enough to know that not everybody has a reliable and trustworthy person available to them at the most crucial of times. So when you find yourself working things out alone and you struggle to be the voice for yourself that you need to hear, this book is for you.

The moment I realized I needed to write this book was when I heard stories of how people were carrying around my previous book, *Why Has Nobody Told Me This Before?*, so they could refer to it in difficult moments. While these stories were often shared with me as a compliment, I couldn't help but think that it wasn't written for that purpose. It was the wrong book for the job. That book is filled with the concepts and skills that help people to work on their future mental health, often by looking back at difficult moments after they have passed. Not one of those pages contains the words I say to people as they sit in their most vulnerable moments, raw with emotion.

In the days before a hurricane, a hammer and nails are exactly the tools you need to arm you for what might

Copyrighted Material

lie ahead. But the moment that storm hits, the last thing you need to hear is how you could have been better prepared. In those moments, what we all need is someone to look us straight in the eye and bring the words we need to hear right now. Words that say, I'm here. Let's move forward together, I know a way through. You might say my previous book was the hammer and nails. This book is my hand reaching out to yours in the chaos of the storm, saying, come this way and let's get to work.

In moments of pain or confusion, most of us struggle to be the voice that we need to hear. Not because there is something wrong with us, but because we are all simply learning as we go. So this is the book for us all, for our children as they fly the nest, for our friends that live out of reach, for our family when we can't find the words to say, and for ourselves when we need to find a way through.

Through my own experience as both a reader and a clinician, I know that in dark times words can light the way, illuminating a new path you didn't know you were blind to. As I wrote these letters to you, which you'll find at the beginning of each chapter, I wished at times that I could read your mind and know precisely what you are dealing with and the words you need the most. An impossible task. I can't predict the details of the challenges you face. Instead, all I have are the gems

Copyrighted Material

I have discovered along my own path and a chance to lay them out on yours. So this book can serve only as a lighthouse. Unable to pull you from the water, but able to shine a light in this direction and that so you can work out which way is up when confusion reigns. Use that as you will, but the work of navigating towards calmer waters is all yours.

In the trials that lie ahead, I have high expectations for you because I can be sure of two things. First, that you have potential beyond anything you could comprehend from your current standpoint. Second, no matter where you are starting from, the path to all things better is always through new effort and willingness to learn. It is true for all of us that we don't know what we don't know. So please trust me when I say that you have no idea how much better things could get for you until you're there.

Kindest



Dr Julie Smith
BSc (Hons), D. Clin.
Psych., C.Psychol.

Copyrighted Material

Find out more

For anyone who would like to learn more about the subjects in this book, my YouTube channel, Instagram and other social media pages contain videos based on many of the ideas and themes covered here.

 @DrJulie

 @drjulie

 @drjulie

 @DrJulieSmith

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

1

When it's hard to be with other people

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

CHAPTER 1

When you compare yourself and come up short

'There is nothing noble in being superior to your fellow man; true nobility is being superior to your former self.'

– Ernest Hemingway

A letter from me to you

If you compare yourself to someone else and come up short, that can leave you in one of two places. You either feel inspired, energized and motivated to learn from what you have seen is possible, or you fall uncontrollably into a downward spiral. If your experience is the second one, then the problem is not you and all of your apparent inadequacies, it's your comparisons.

Copyrighted Material

If you have some underlying self-destructive beliefs about whether you are fundamentally good enough, then you will not be choosing comparisons that help your progress. You will be choosing comparisons that confirm those core beliefs, however damaging they may be. You will sit in full view of your own weaknesses and gaze at someone else's best show of strengths as if this is a level playing field. You will not see that person in a fuller, more real way that incorporates all the parts of their life that they don't put on show. Even if you get a peek at their imperfections you are likely to ignore it. You will put this person on such a pedestal in your own mind that the only way to lift yourself up will be to pull them down, turning you into the kind of person you never wanted to become.

If the people you compare yourself to are friends or family, then it can become a destructive force on your relationship. Comparison thwarts connection because it suggests that their success is your failure and carves out a path towards resentment and bitterness that comes between you. The more isolated you become from the people in your life, the more that feeds such comparison. But getting to know those people more deeply is a counterforce to the type of comparison that poisons the relationship. The more deeply you know someone, the less you make such superficial and false

Copyrighted Material

judgements. You can form a friendship in which you can recognize your common humanity and see yourself as a team that supports each other in your different endeavours. Then you can start to be happy for their personal victories and genuinely compassionate when they face setbacks. When you get to know an individual, you start to realize that they don't share the same intricacies of life as your own and therefore make a terrible control by which to measure your estimation of yourself.

So many people will tell you that it's simple: just stop comparing yourself to others. But it doesn't take long for you to try that and fail, and to see that it really is not that simple. Your tendency to compare is a built-in tool that is as helpful as it is dangerous. When used right, it can help steer you in the right direction, inspire you and help you push beyond your limits. When used in the wrong way, the damage it can do is far-reaching and long-lasting.

Comparing and coming up short does not have to be a bad thing. It does not mean that we should never have compared ourselves at all. If that comparison leads to constructive forward motion and a bolstered belief that we can become more than what we are today, then it served us well. If it leads to envy, resentment, bitterness and a loss of self-worth, then we are getting

Copyrighted Material

it all wrong and both our efforts and our attention have been misplaced in a way that could cost us heavily. What we need is to know how to use comparison to our advantage and to spot when it is self-destructive.

 Real-time tools

These tools go beyond the usual dismissal of comparison with a *'just stop doing it'* approach. The natural human urge to understand our place in the world by looking to others is as much a part of our nature as the intake of breath. So telling you to just stop comparing yourself will, at best, stoke the fire of positivity in your belly for a few minutes. A fire that will be easily blown out the next time you open your favourite social media app. Within seconds of walking into a room of peers, you feel a sense of your social or professional status in that room. The act of comparison itself is not always a set of thoughts. Your brain is working faster than that to establish how you should approach the situation you find yourself in. At the same time, you do not have to be at the mercy of the downward spiral that social comparison inflicts on your mind. There are things you can do to spot the destructive ways we compare ourselves and make a conscious effort to redirect towards comparisons that can genuinely serve you.

Copyrighted Material

What makes comparison destructive

Social media

It is difficult to self-evaluate without some level of comparison because we don't live in isolation. We live in communities that have norms and expectations of each other. It helps us avoid the humiliation, rejection and loss of social status that might happen if we blindly breached those expectations. It helps us navigate all our social interactions throughout life, helping us determine whether we are contributing enough, whether we are acting in ways that will be acceptable and helping us establish who we want to emulate and who we don't. How you measure up in your community matters if you want to navigate successfully within it. So your ability to engage in social comparison is not always your enemy. It's an essential life skill that you wouldn't do so well without.

But while it helps to consider your own surroundings as a part of self-evaluation, when you consult social media what you are looking at is not your real community. In fact, much of it is not real at all. It is a collection of carefully crafted, digitally altered images that a person or company wants you to see.

And within minutes of you indulging in some wildly unfair and deeply unhelpful upward comparisons, the algorithm has mapped exactly what will keep your attention and feeds you a never-ending stream of the content that will make you sick. So rather than any social comparisons that might help you live your life most effectively, you have the most corrosive, poisonous comparisons on repeat that leave you feeling dissatisfied

Copyrighted Material

with yourself as a person and with the life that you could be out there enjoying.

The psychological toxicity produced by this whole process is either turned inward on ourselves in the form of self-loathing and depression, or gets reflected outward in the malicious sabotaging of those other people we have come to feel so bitter and resentful towards. You don't need to scroll for long before you find hordes of keyboard warriors spewing their rage at another human being, picking at imperfections like hyenas at a wounded animal, with the attempt to bring them down a peg or two and to steer the perception of the group away from one of admiration for this person that dared do so well.

The urges to take someone else down online happen more than people will admit, but if you notice it in yourself, or the degeneration of satisfaction in your own life, it is time to turn away from social media and spend more time in real life with real people and real connections.

Comparing with loved ones

The most dangerous comparison you'll ever make is between you and the people who mean most to you in the world, for these relationships are the ones in which you have the most to lose. If you start comparing yourself to your siblings, parents or friends, the rot that sets in poses a risk to the whole relationship.

If you see your own self-worth or status as threatened by their personal victories, the inevitable jealousy and resentment will metastasize and do irreparable damage to the relationships

Copyrighted Material

that could have been the most positive forces in your life. You cannot feel like a team if you set up the game so that you cannot both win at the same time.

As Alain de Botton put it, 'There are few successes more unendurable than those of our close friends.' Before you know it, you go from viewing yourself as someone who would always be happy to see friends succeed, to finding it excruciating to be around them. Whether you avoid them, start excluding them from a wider group or isolate yourself, the outcomes are dismal for everyone. These are the dark places where careless and non-constructive comparisons can lead us.

When you avoid that particular friend, what you are really doing is avoiding the feelings their success has brought up in you. If you are brave enough, look at those feelings with curiosity, rather than trying to eliminate them by bringing your friend down or avoiding them altogether, then you stand a chance of regaining a clear perspective and salvaging your relationship. It is possible to feel genuinely happy for your friends when things go well for them. But if your sense of self-worth is dependent on feeling superior to your friends and family in some way, take that as a sign, not to reject them, but to re-evaluate your own life. If you have your own values clear in your mind and you are living in line with them, then superficial signs of apparent success or failure are less earth-shattering than they might otherwise be.

So when a friend finds a path to move up in the world, or is knocked for six fighting their own demons, and if that brings up in you some very uncomfortable feelings, which it will, do

Copyrighted Material

not act with impulse to push against them, but instead listen to the feelings and ask yourself with genuine curiosity what those teach you about yourself. Sometimes it will be just fleeting emotions that pass and allow you to come back to feeling satisfied with your life. At other times it could spark some positive changes. But for that to happen, the comparison usually needs to be constructive. So I've included some ideas for how to make comparisons helpful to you.

How to make comparison constructive

Turn envy into inspiration

When we use comparison in the correct way, we can take advantage of its power to influence how we feel and behave. Let's say you're working to improve your skills in your favourite sport and you know that you have a specific weakness that holds you back. In this scenario, some upward comparison with a player who has managed to master that skill offers you a huge opportunity to learn from them and improve your own skills in the process. But for that to happen successfully, your comparison needs to get these three elements right:

1. Keep a clear focus on the specific skill you envy in their performance. Be laser-focused on specifics and do not be tempted to make a global comparison between your whole self and theirs. You don't want to be that person,

Copyrighted Material

but there is something in the way they do things that you want to take on board and benefit from in your own life.

2. Prime yourself with a growth mindset. This means keeping in mind that you have agency in your own life and can learn and improve at most things with effort. This mindset will lead to positive action towards your own goals, as opposed to a more fixed mindset that assumes your abilities are unchangeable and some people are just lucky. That mindset will likely lead to more destructive comparisons, bitterness and fractured relationships.
3. Your self-worth remains non-negotiable at all times. It should never be on the line. This is absolutely essential. If your estimation of yourself as worthwhile is measured by others, this is the rogue ingredient that will turn everything sour. Turning envy into inspiration is no problem at all as long as you are not measuring your self-worth by how other people seem to be doing. We can all find someone who is doing better than us at something. But that says nothing about your fundamental worthiness as a human being. If that is never in question, then that gives you a core stability that renders you strong enough to use comparison to your advantage. When the slightest indication of not being the best yet is used as justification in your mind for the belief that you are worthless and doomed to inadequacy, it becomes impossible to work on yourself.

Copyrighted Material

> The prospect of looking into the eyes of your own imperfections becomes too threatening and too painful. So performance is always workable, but worthiness is a constant. Do not mistake it for self-indulgence. In fact, it demands a complete lack of entitlement. The tendency to assume that good fortune has been simply gifted to others by the universe and the world owes you the same because you are worthy too is more likely to lead to bitterness and resentment rather than the action required to get you there.

To keep this work constructive and not let it dissolve into global criticisms of the self, it requires that we ask questions like:

- What do I feel envious of specifically?
- What specific skills do they have that I would like to have also?
- Would learning those skills help me with achieving my own goals?
- How did they get there?
- Can I imitate any of that process to help me get closer to my personal goals?

This process turns envy into inspiration rather than a tool to hit yourself over the head with. Then comparison becomes a valuable part of the learning process.

Copyrighted Material

Choose your subject with precision

The most helpful upward comparison that inspires us to act on our goals is when we compare ourselves to individuals with a similar skill level in the discipline we are invested in mastering, rather than people who differ greatly to us. That is another reason not to use social media for this. Even if the content is real, you are rarely looking at people who are in the process of honing their craft. The algorithm throws you extremes, so you will be comparing yourself to the best in the world who are much further along their journey than you.

However momentarily inspiring or intriguing that may be, being bombarded with such extremes can be more likely to cause feelings of inferiority and depression rather than inspired learning of your next steps. It can also lead to the justification of self-sabotage. We zero in on extremes that seem so unattainably superior that we save ourselves from the discomfort of trying and failing to be the best.

So if you notice you are making comparisons with extremes and feeling discouraged or disheartened by it, make a firm intention to seek out inspiration from someone just a few steps ahead. The boost you will experience from then achieving that will fuel your drive to keep working and improving.

From resentment to gratitude

Hand a child a sweet and see their face light up. Hand the child next to them two sweets and see their face change to instant dissatisfaction with what they felt so pleased with just a moment ago. The risk of focusing on what others have that you

Copyrighted Material

don't is the creation of deep dissatisfaction with a life you could have loved. It no longer matters what I have, only that you have more. It is OK to want better for yourself, but if that comes from a place of resentment, then everything you achieve and accumulate will never feel enough. You will never get there. Your life will be marked by a repeated moving of the goalposts and shifting of who you compare yourself to.

Resentment is not a reflection of what the world owes you. It is a sign of what you need to work on. You can see this as you look around at people who have more than most to be grateful for, but who are living in bitterness and resentment. This is something that can happen so easily when we make comparisons that don't serve us. If you are making comparisons that are not helpful to you, then you'll be wishing you had been dealt someone else's hand.

So listen to resentment. It might mean that you need to start putting in effort on your own behalf and speaking up for yourself. Or it might mean that you need to exercise gratitude by taking control of the focus of your attention in a way that serves you better.

Gratitude as a practice is often dismissed as too simple or insignificant. But if it was as easy as it sounds, there would be much less bitterness and resentment to witness. So strengthen your ability to turn your mind towards gratitude by making it a part of every day. Just two minutes each day reflecting on what you have to feel grateful for can be transformational and can remedy some of the damage done by unhelpful comparisons.

Why not immerse yourself in deep gratitude that you had

Copyrighted Material

the chance to see something wonderful achieved and that you live in a time when you have the freedom to work for something similar, should you so wish? Deliberately find gratitude for the opportunity to try and the joy you can experience as you work on it. Doing this dissolves the need to match up to your comparison before you can feel satisfied with your life. In any case, we are comparing ourselves to people who are further along in their journey, so measuring success by our ability to catch up with them is not a good strategy. It keeps our own satisfaction with life always in the future, as we never reach the illusory destination. It forever remains somewhere up ahead.

Comparing downward is incredibly helpful for accessing a sense of gratitude. In the lowest of moments there is always something to be grateful for, but finding it can be difficult. So comparing your situation to the countless people who have it worse helps to shift that downward spiral and level off your perspective (unless you are using it to invalidate your own problems, which is less than helpful. Other people having it worse is not a good reason not to help yourself).

Reconnect with your values

If you are stuck in a pattern of destructive comparison, you will undoubtedly have lost touch with some of the things that matter most to you in your own life. When this happens we look in the wrong places for a measure of ourselves.

We look outward towards a world that is trying to sell us the fantasy that we would feel enough if only we had more stuff, extreme wealth, fame and an appearance that can only

Copyrighted Material

be bought from a surgeon. This feeds more negative comparisons because the only way to know if you are keeping up with the Joneses is to examine them and see how you compare. Taking these marketing tools as your own values puts you at greater risk of depression, anxiety, addiction, narcissism and the rest. So don't wait to be told what matters to you. It doesn't take long to reconnect with the things that are guaranteed to bring a more deeply meaningful experience to your life.

I have located the exercises that help with this in the appendix (see page 353), partly because it is relevant to every one of life's problems. Knowing who you want to be before you look too deeply at others gives you a rudder to steer your life in the direction that best suits you.

The most useful comparison to you

The best comparison you can make is with yourself. Ask yourself if you have made today that tiny bit better than yesterday. This allows you to witness your own progression. But don't stop there. Next, take a look at the comparison between where you are now and where you want to be tomorrow, next month and next year. Are you doing things today that are taking you in that direction? What does that tell you about the actions you need to take now?

If you trained yourself to notice when you were engaging in self-destructive comparisons and replaced them with comparisons focused entirely on your own goals, imagine what you could achieve in just a year. Imagine how differently you could feel about yourself and your life. There is only one way to find out.

Copyrighted Material

Takeaways

- If you compare yourself to someone else and come up short, you either feel inspired by what is possible and motivated to learn, or you fall into a downward spiral of dissatisfaction with your life and yourself. If your experience is the second one, then the problem is not you and all your apparent inadequacies, it's your comparisons.
- It is never as easy as just deciding to stop comparing yourself. Your ability to do that is a built-in tool that is as helpful as it is dangerous. When used right, it can help steer you in the right direction, inspire you and help you push beyond your limits. When used in the wrong way the damage it can do is far-reaching and long-lasting.
- Comparing yourself to people on social media or in your most cherished social circle will do damage to you and your relationships. When you notice yourself doing it, act fast and remind yourself of the essential components of helpful comparison.
- Keep any comparisons goal-specific and directed towards your own improvement and how you intend to get there.
- Keep self-worth out of it. This is not indulgence, it is necessary for learning.

Copyrighted Material

- Choose someone whose current level of ability is a challenge but achievable with effort.
- When comparison has left you resentful, call a stop to it and turn back towards your own life, putting your energy into reconnecting with a sense of gratitude for everything that matters to you.
- Don't compare yourself to someone whose values do not reflect your own.
- Look at where you were yesterday to feel the thrill of your progress, and look at where you want to be tomorrow to keep you on course.

Copyrighted Material

‘Resentment is not a reflection of what the world owes you. It is a sign of what you need to work on.’

Copyrighted Material

CHAPTER 2

When your friends are not your friends

'Better an honest enemy than a false friend.'

– German proverb

A letter from me to you

There are times in life when you start to feel differently about certain people. Maybe even friends you've had for years. Nothing big or dramatic may have happened but you have this gut feeling that you're not entirely welcome here any more. If that is you, then there are a few things to get straight in your mind.

First, we have an incredible tendency to ignore that gut feeling. You might not remember every detail of the occasional raised eyebrow or the praise that felt more like poison, you just know you felt tense and on edge

Copyrighted Material

in their presence, not safe to be yourself. Maybe you notice that every time you see them you now come away feeling drained and wondering if they like you. These emotional imprints of the interaction can last longer than memory for the details, so don't discount how those people make you feel. It might not be the definitive answer to all your questions, but it is information not to dismiss.

Second, when a friendship is dependent on you bringing something other than yourself in order to be acceptable, that is not friendship. You might notice that to be included you have to keep your mouth shut about all the good things going on for you, since they appear to be seen as a threat by a particular person. You have to shrink down until you are small enough for them to tolerate. It's a risky business taking responsibility for someone else's ego in this way. It is essentially playing their game and losing every time just to have a chance to play again.

Third, when a so-called friend is treating you in a way that hurts you, it is not OK. And you do not have to suffer through that, even if you have been friends for years. You are not obliged to stay in a friendship that is not healthy for you. This is something that many of us battle with for years before we finally pluck up the courage to say enough is enough. We find ourselves

Copyrighted Material

fixed to the spot by a lifetime of greetings cards that tell us 'friendship is forever'. But not only are you free to choose your own friendships, you are also duty bound to do the best by yourself, which includes making careful decisions about who you spend your time with. It is not just friendship that is crucial to a healthy and fulfilled life, it is good-quality friendship.

Fourth, when a friend reveals themself to you with anything along the lines of jealousy, contempt or deceit, watch and learn. If the sharing of a personal victory is met with dagger eyes and a dose of stonewalling, watch and learn. And if the sharing of bad news is quickly minimized or one-upped by something 'much worse' that happened to them years ago, squashing your bid for support as they fight for the spotlight, watch and learn. Learn to clock those signs that someone does not have your best interests at heart.

Once they have proved themselves to be someone you cannot trust, you have a decision to make. And as you think about it, keep in mind that you cannot force anyone else to be a better friend. You can only control who you spend your time with. But when the person who is treating you badly has been your friend for years, the story in your mind says, if I could just try a bit harder, be a little more this and a little less that, then maybe they would like me. Then I'd fit in. And maybe that's

Copyrighted Material

true. But do you want to fit in when it demands you be someone other than yourself? Fitting in is not the same as belonging. When you belong, it's because you are accepted exactly as you are.

Perhaps an essential part of the journey towards finding a sense of belonging is learning along the way that none of us can ever be liked by everyone. And if we don't trap ourselves with the idea that all friends are forever, then that becomes easier to accept and we're free to make different choices if a friendship turns out not to feel like friendship at all.

That doesn't make it easy to move on from old friends, even when their behaviour is harmful to you. But surrounding yourself with people who bring out the worst in you or bring you down is not going to add to your life. It will only take away.



Real-time tools

According to greetings cards and slogans on mugs, true friendship lasts a lifetime, no matter what. But it's hard to square that with real life. It's normal to have ups and downs in friendship, but how do you know when a friendship no longer qualifies as a friendship at all? And when is it OK to say, this isn't for me? Of course, these are decisions that only you can

Copyrighted Material

make, so here are a few things to take into account as you reflect on them.

Deciphering the difference between constructive and cruel criticism

If your friend has become critical of your choices or actions, it is tempting to conclude that they are not a true friend. That stems from the assumption that friends should support us through everything. But that is also assuming that all the decisions you make are good ones. Many of us act out destructive patterns of behaviour at some point in our lives and convince ourselves that we are doing the right thing. When a friend criticizes those actions, is it right to assume they are no friend of yours, end the friendship and carry on? What if that friend has been a voice of reason that you have valued and respected over the years? What if there is more than one friend saying the same thing?

Friends are not there only to offer an echo chamber. But so many friends do this to each other. Through fear of offending or disrupting the friendship, they agree with things they know all too well sound like excuses or justifications. A true friend will remind you of your values when you seem to have lost your way. Wanting the best for you means calling you out on your poor decisions and being brave enough to have the uncomfortable conversation that encourages you to hold yourself accountable when you get into destructive patterns. It takes some courage and skill to disagree with and reality-check a friend who is not taking responsibility for their actions or is playing games with people.

Copyrighted Material

It always runs the risk of rejection because nobody wants to hear that they are not doing themselves proud. But there is a certain level of self-betrayal inherent in saying things you don't believe in order to keep the connection. That is not showing up as you truly are. It is acting out a particular version of yourself that feels acceptable to the other. Genuine friends can disagree and yet still maintain love and compassion for each other. But if someone is not telling the truth, do you even really know each other?

So not all criticism is created equal. Some friends will come to you with painful but honest words aimed at helping you to keep sight of your values. Others will criticize to bring you down and to minimize whatever threat they see in you.

The time to start ignoring criticism is when it comes laced with contempt. When you start to realize that, despite having known each other for a long time, that person does not have your best interests at heart. When it is not clear, it is worth asking yourself honestly and gently, is this warranted? Could this help me do better? Or is this actually about them?

Deciding when enough is enough

Deep grief is always going to follow the ending of a friendship that was once special to you. So decisions to end friendships should not be made lightly, but with great thought and consideration. And there is no clear hard-and-fast rule that makes those decisions for you. For example, many viral one-liners spout that if a friend cannot celebrate your successes with you, ditch them, as they're not your friend. But how do you

Copyrighted Material

apply that to a more complex, real-life scenario? Imagine two friends: one is ten years into a fertility battle and the other gets pregnant. It would be rather self-absorbed to expect that first person to skip into a baby shower ready to celebrate. Life is full of situations like this one, marked with depth and complexity, that call for nuance in our approach, gentle compassion from both sides and a difficult but crucial conversation about how to navigate all the very natural emotions that arise as we work hard to stay connected and look out for each other.

On the other hand, a friend who appears to quietly compete with you, talks negatively about you in your absence and excludes or ignores you when you achieve positive things for your life, is not likely to be a keeper. If you notice that you often feel good about yourself, but not in their presence, that is a feeling that needs listening to.

Fear of being alone

Holding on to a harmful or unhealthy friendship for fear of not having many other friends is normal but can often keep you unnecessarily trapped. This is similar to the way some people convince themselves to stay in destructive romantic relationships, over-generalizing that, because this one hasn't worked out, no others will either. But, for the most part, the choice is not between unhealthy friendship and loneliness. The choice is between unhealthy friendship and a new (albeit scary) challenge to find new friends.

Staying in a damaging friendship to avoid loneliness is not a great strategy for your mental health in the long term. Good

Copyrighted Material