

Toxic Friendships

by Amy Lloyd

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I once read that it wasn't kind to cultivate a friendship just to have an audience. Reading that is helpful, living it is more. Witness my story.

My new friend Kathy was great fun. It had been a particularly pathetic time in my life, what with getting dumped by my boyfriend, working at an idiotic job and enduring the usual city dweller stupidities. In short, I readily welcomed some female bonding and Kathy provided it. We shopped, we drank, and we took a vacation together to Savannah, where we practiced very bad Southern drawls. Six months later, I noticed, our bond started to shift. Good friendship, like any medicine, should act as a tonic, ingested slowly and with great care. I was patient getting to know her until I saw our friendship was becoming uneven. Plans were made only on her schedule, phone calls unreturned, and all of this was cheerfully explained by Kathy saying, "Well, you know how I am." And so I accepted it.

Kathy often asked for my help with organizing her bills and cleaning the house. It struck me a little odd that she forgot to pay her mortgage seven times, but I rationalized it: She was a single mom and besides, I liked to be helpful. Still something didn't feel quite right with my new friend. As much as we laughed and engaged in Ethel and Lucy-esque adventures, (a trip to Home Depot and a faulty electric drill springs to mind) I often found myself drained after spending time with her. Only in retrospect did I see that she dominated every conversation. At no time did I have my turn. It appeared I wasn't really a source of advice- only a captive audience. The truth of this "friendship" was emerging.

The final episode came a year later when Kathy called me hysterically crying and begged me to come over. She was extremely distraught over a failed relationship and I was worried, so worried I enlisted another friend's help. We spent the night comforting Kathy at great length, offering extensive counsel on how to get through her break-up. It took hours and hours and left us exhausted. In the end Kathy was neither grateful nor better for it. The stinging truth was she wasn't interested in taking our advice. She merely wanted to feed off of our energy, basking in the glory of our undivided attention.

It is said that people who are abusive and manipulative are unconscious, which is forgivable. It is also said the people who allow this abuse are equally unconscious. It was time for me to wake up.

Toxic friendships are emotional violations. They are also impossibly frustrating. Through her eyes I could never give enough. My own needs in this friendship had been way laid for far too long. The "good friend" role I believed I was assigned to play became less important. The "honest friend" role came first. Finally. Once I stopped coming to her emotional rescue, she stopped calling me. I ceased being her audience; she had no need for me.

A toxic friendship like any poison does its damage. It pollutes our thinking, our energies, and our self worth. The sinister thing about toxic friendship is the second word, the fine print on the bottle of medicine. If it were purely poisonous we would never drink it. We naturally assume its benefits. Of course people so seldom read the warning label. I know now to pay attention to the signs. I am detoxing from my final toxic friendship and I feel lighter, and better than I have in years.