

**Harvard
Business
Review**

Difficult Conversations

What to Do When a Work Friendship Becomes Emotionally Draining

by Amy Gallo

January 21, 2019



Summary. Having a close friend at work can make you happier, more productive, and less likely to quit. But office friendships can have downsides, too. When you're neglecting your responsibilities to tend to a work friend, it's a sign that something needs to change. But,... [more](#)

Having a close friend at work can make you happier, more productive, and less likely to quit. But office friendships can have downsides, too. What should you do if you've gotten too emotionally involved? How do you make sure that your relationship doesn't impinge on your ability to get your job done? What sort of psychological boundaries should you put up? And how do you establish them in a way that doesn't hurt your colleague's feelings?

What the Experts Say

Empathy is an important component of emotional intelligence and, thus, an asset in the workplace; it helps you connect with others in a meaningful way. But you don't want to "let your emotions take over" and become so involved in a work friendship that it depletes your energy and productivity, says Susan David, author of *Emotional Agility*. Annie McKee, a senior fellow at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education and the author of *How to Be Happy at Work* agrees. "It feels good to be needed but it can become a burden," she says. "It goes way beyond empathy if you're spending too much time helping someone figure out their problems or you get upset, worried, or maybe even scared about getting it right." If you feel like you and your coworker have gotten in too deep, here's what to do.

Watch for the signs

When you're neglecting your work to tend to an office friend, it's a sign that something needs to change. Other red flags include feeling like "you're on an emotional roller coaster" or like "you're more attached to the other person and their experiences than your own," McKee says. To assess whether your relationship is a healthy one, ask yourself a few questions: Is the relationship bringing me closer to the growth I want in my career? Are we both putting in the same amount of effort? Do I feel comfortable expressing thoughts and feelings that differ from my friend's? Can I see multiple sides to the problem the person is experiencing or just their own perspective? Unfortunately, says David, "there's no clear line in the sand of what's OK and what's not." But if you answer "no" to any of these questions, consider making changes.

Don't blame the other person

If you conclude that the friendship isn't serving you, it's normal to get angry or annoyed. "There's an instinct to blame the other person and think, 'You drove me to this.' But that's a disempowering position to take," says David. Instead, think about your own role in creating the unhealthy dynamic. McKee suggests reflecting on what initially drew you to the person. Was it their personality? A work challenge you faced together? A hobby you share? This will give you useful information to disentangle your current relationship and will help you avoid similar situations in the future.

Don't cut them off entirely

In most cases, there's no need to abruptly end the relationship. You don't want to go "from being their best friend to refusing to having lunch with them because you're at the end of your rope," David says. "You might be shutting down an important connection." McKee agrees: "People think to change an unhealthy dynamic, you need to break it. But you don't have to. Slight shifts can actually move the relationship in the right direction without making anyone feel bad."

Change the tone of the conversation

It's tough to tell a friend that you want to spend less time with them. "Sometimes the relationship is healthy enough for you to be that direct, but it's rare," says McKee. "If they're self-aware and capable of having a deeply reflective conversation, you can dip your toe in the water and attempt to have the conversation." But, in most scenarios, your strategy should be to "gradually shift" the way you speak with your friend. For example, "try to pick communication channels that are leaner," McKee says. "If you're spending a lot of time together in person, replace those interactions with phone calls. If you're spending more time on video or phone, replace that with a couple of emails." You want to create some physical distance and "tone down the intensity" of your interactions," says David. Whenever possible, "reemphasize your professional relationship" and talk about the importance of work.

Narrow the scope of your interactions

Decide where you want to draw the line. “Think about the problems your colleague shares with you and carve out one or two of them that you want to continue to help with,” says McKee.

Then “enable [the person] to take action” on the others. “Connect them with someone who can help, David says. She suggests saying something along the lines of, “I feel like we’ve been going in circles on this. You may benefit from seeing a coach.”

Hold strong

It will take time to find a new balance. Your friend might not let you go willingly. But don’t get sucked back in just because they push. If they ask you why you’re not available for lunch, McKee suggests saying something along the lines of: “I miss our conversations too. But you know what I’m up against at work. I’ve really got to focus.” Or use the opportunity to direct the person to the topic you want to discuss by saying, “Why don’t we get together and talk about X?” If they make it hard, remind yourself that the short-term unpleasantness of drawing boundaries is less costly than the long-term drain on your energy.

Principles to Remember

Do:

- Watch out for signs that you’re putting too much time or energy into your friendship and that it’s hurting your

productivity or performance

- Shift how you interact so that you're spending less time communicating with the person
- Offer to connect them with someone who can help them with their problems

Don't:

- Place the blame on the other person; chances are you had a role in creating the unhealthy dynamic
- Cut them off entirely — that's often not feasible or pleasant
- Give in if they try to pull you back in; you need to hold strong to the boundaries you've set

Case Study #1: Encourage your colleague to reach out to other people

Aliyah Jones* was on a team with her colleague Carlos* for just over two years when the large accounting firm they worked for went through a merger. "As you can imagine, the whole thing was disruptive to everyone's life," Aliyah says.

Carlos regularly griped to her about the extra work that had been created. And Aliyah empathized with him. "I definitely got in on the complaining," she says. But once he realized that Aliyah was a

sympathetic ear, he complained to her about other issues as well. He was moving apartments and then his sister was sick. “He had a lot going on,” she says. “But it got off-kilter.”

The amount of time they spent discussing his personal life was “way too high,” Aliyah says and their “work wasn’t getting done.” She knew she had to pull back. But just as she was mustering the courage to do so, Carlos was involved in a car accident that kept him out of work for several weeks. Aliyah found herself worrying about how much help he would need from her as a result. “I already felt like he had overdrawn on his bank account of how much I was willing to listen to him, but my natural human empathy required me to be there for him,” she explains.

When another colleague pulled Aliyah aside to tell her that she was “really concerned” about how much time she was spending on the phone with Carlos and suggested she set some limits on her generosity, she knew it was time to make a change.

So she asked herself, “How do we dial it back?” The next time Carlos called, she encouraged him to reach out to a non-work friend and talk to his parents. “With his consent, I [also] spoke to his manager about him needing to take some time off,” which shifted some of the responsibility from her to the organization.

To Aliyah's surprise, Carlos didn't push back. "It definitely helped to have him reaching out to other people." When he eventually returned to the office, she also set new boundaries. She stopped picking up her phone every time he called and started sending email responses to his voicemails. If he stopped by her desk, she'd tell him she was busy trying to get work done and ask him to email her.

"I realized that his oversharing was about trying to make sure I was on his side, so now I just make sure he knows I am," she says. "It's a much more balanced relationship now. I think of him as stronger and he knows he can trust me."

Case Study #2: Use the direct approach if you think it'll work

Sophia Bland, the chief information officer of ResumeGo, a small business that offers career coaching and resume writing services, managed a close friend who she had known since college. Let's call her Carol.

"I had to juggle our professional relationship and our friendship on a regular basis," Sophia says. Sometimes this made it hard for Sophie to be objective. "There were instances where I let things slide for her that I didn't let slide for the other employees that I managed." For example, on a few occasions, she covered for Carol being late to work, delaying a morning group meeting without telling the rest of the team why.

In Sophia's view, Carol would take advantage of this "special treatment" and offer excuses for missed deadlines. "She'd tell me that she had such-and-such thing come up at home, or that she was having relationship issues with her boyfriend. I gave into the excuses at first."

But over time, Sophia saw that Carol's behavior was affecting her coworkers. "This was when I knew I had to put an end to the nonsense." Still, she wasn't sure how to handle it. "I had to find a way to convey to her that she had to get her act together, while at the same time keeping our friendship intact."

Sophia decided to take Carol out to dinner. "This gave me the opportunity to sit her down and really talk face-to-face about the issues." She didn't level accusations but she was direct. "I told her I empathized with the problems she was having in her life, but [explained] that it was unfair to [expect] the other team members to show up early and work harder because she'd been dropping the ball."

It was a civil conversation, and Carol seemed to get the message because she changed her behavior. The two women worked together for several more months before Carol found another job. "We're still friends," Sophia says. "Even though we no longer work together, we still see each other often and are on good terms."

Amy Gallo is a contributing editor at Harvard Business Review, cohost of the *Women at Work* podcast, and the author of two books: *Getting Along: How to Work with Anyone (Even Difficult People)* and the *HBR Guide to Dealing with Conflict*. She writes and speaks about workplace dynamics. Watch her TEDx talk on conflict and follow her on LinkedIn.

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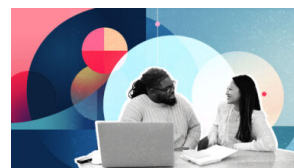
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