

WHEN
GOOD
FRIENDS
ARE

TOXIC!

Feeling positive about your get-healthy journey is certainly easier when you have friends and family cheering you on. But what about that 'friend' who never has anything good to say about your weight loss? **Weight Watchers psychologist Deborah Smith** reveals how to spot a toxic friend, and **turn them into your No.1 supporter**

WORDS ROSALIND RYAN

You're going out tonight, but she's going to be there. Suddenly that evening out with the girls you've been looking forward to is no longer so appealing. While a true friend should be supportive of your weight-loss journey, this one's always dragging you down. Whether she's sabotaging your get-healthy efforts or making comments that knock your confidence, she's not being a good friend. Sometimes it's best to let those kind of relationships go. But at other times – with the right approach – you might be able to neutralise the negativity and turn your friendship around. Here's how...

1 SORTING THE TRUE FRIENDS FROM THE TOXIC ONES

The best way to determine whether a friend is toxic is to identify how they make you feel. Do you always feel uncomfortable, or on-edge when you're around them? They might not be overtly rude, but they could undermine your confidence in subtle ways, saying things like: 'Oh, you're going to wear that, are you?' or 'Why aren't you having pudding? Everyone else is.' They'll claim it's only because they want the best for you, but that's unlikely.

This type of behaviour can gradually chip away at your self-esteem and erode the confidence you have in your ability to succeed on your journey. It can even undermine your relationships with other people, so you could even find yourself losing real friends.

Toxic friends are sometimes angry about things happening in their own life and can

be very controlling. Take note of how they gossip about others – is it normal chit-chat ('Did you see so-and-so has a new job?') or more bitchy than that? A 'frenemy' will also happily divulge things people have told them in confidence. And you can bet that if they're talking that way about other friends or sharing their secrets, they're doing it to you too. Trust is key in friendship, so if you don't feel you can trust them, it's a definite red flag.



'MY FRIEND TOLD ME I HAD A FACE LIKE A FULL MOON!'



NOW

This is
PAMELA

**START WEIGHT**

13st 12lb

GOAL WEIGHT

11st

CURRENT WEIGHT

12st 3lb

Age 73**Height** 5ft 4in**Joined** August 2017**Meeting** Bingley,

West Yorkshire

Coach

Denise Walker

I used my friend's
negativity to spur
me into action

After knowing her for 30 years, I'd come to realise my friend wasn't very tactful. She says pretty much whatever comes into her head, without pausing to consider whether it might upset someone. But despite knowing what she was like, one of her comments really got my back up.

I've had a double hip replacement but over time they've become more painful. I knew that losing weight would be the best thing to do, so I resolved to go back to Weight Watchers, having been successful on the plan in the past.

Admittedly I put it off, always saying: 'I'll go next week.' But I was genuinely interested in doing it – eventually!

When I told my friend I wanted to lose weight she said: 'Are you going back to Weight Watchers? You've done that before and it doesn't work – you just need

discipline.' I laughed when she said it, but inside I was thinking, 'You cheeky cow!' Feeling determined, I went along to the very next meeting.

When I ran into her a few weeks later, she said: 'I can see you've lost weight because the last time I saw you, your face looked like a full moon.' I honestly think she believed she was giving me a compliment! And while she'd never blatantly offended me before, her comment made me realise she has no idea how hurtful her words can be.

I have lots of willpower, so I used her comments to spur me on to lose weight, and I'm now well on my way to goal. In a weird way, I owe her thanks, as she did give me the push I needed. But the next time she says something about my size, I'm going to stand up for myself!



THEN



2 TACKLING A TOXIC FRIEND

Toxic friends thrive on the power they hold over you, but as soon as you realise what's going on and refuse to play the game, you can begin to shift that power. The first step is to recognise a friend's behaviour, then talk to them about it. Find somewhere neutral to have this conversation (you want to break the power game, so avoid going to their home), and say, 'I really struggle when you do X' or 'It makes me feel X when you do Y.' By taking charge of the conversation, you can start to reclaim the power. This should make them see what they've been doing – and they could feel mortified – but be aware that this could cause them to become defensive (and accuse you of behaving badly too).

Hopefully, the conversation will shock your friend into making an effort to change their negative approach to you and your goals. But if they continue to behave badly, ask yourself if it's worth maintaining the friendship?

If you've been clear about boundaries – stating what you think is acceptable behaviour, and what isn't – and they still don't respect them, it might be time to call it a day. Say something like, 'Give me a call if you choose to acknowledge what I'm saying'; then move on. You must respect yourself enough not to put up with bad behaviour, and they should respect you and your friendship enough to make changes.

Finally, don't waste time worrying or brooding about what someone has said to you. Instead, make the conscious decision to use that energy to achieve your goals and prove doubters wrong.

Photography: Alamy, Lifehack

'MY FRIEND WOULDN'T ACKNOWLEDGE MY WEIGHT LOSS'



I was surprised by my usually supportive friend's silence

This is
DIANA



START WEIGHT
12st 8lb
GOAL WEIGHT
9st 11lb
CURRENT WEIGHT
9st 7lb

Age 48
Height 5ft 7in
Joined
February 2017
Meeting
Online

She's seen my weight fluctuate over the years, but when my friend had nothing good to say about my latest weight loss, I felt hurt. She's normally supportive and always has something positive to say, so her silence was surprising.

My husband, Tom, and I joined Weight Watchers, eager to get healthy for good. I lost 3st, going from a size 16 to a 10 and felt better than I had in ages. So when my friend asked me to stay with her, after not seeing each other for six months, I hoped she'd say 'Wow, you look great!' but when I arrived she said nothing. In fact, she seemed eager to sabotage my new healthy



lifestyle. If I asked for a small portion, she got annoyed and said if I didn't eat it all, it would go to waste.

I even joked about it going to my 'waist', but she didn't get it. Keen to keep up my fitness routine, I suggested going for walks, but she resisted and even asked, 'What's become of you?'

Upset by my visit, I sent a text later to ask if all was okay, but she brushed me off. I've since realised she'd planned a boozy, foodie weekend, so perhaps it was me who'd been selfish and inflexible rather than the other way round. I'm staying with her again soon, so hope to meet somewhere in the middle.

3 TURN YOUR FRIEND INTO A CHEERLEADER

Your friend has decided to change their behaviour? That's great news, but they're going to need your help to really turn things around. First of all, tell them what your goals are, as well as your plans to achieve them, and ask them to help you. For example, do you want to go to the gym more often or make healthier food swaps? Rather than keep these goals secret, you've made yourself accountable to that person – if you tell them you plan to go swimming, but then can't be bothered, you're more likely to go anyway as you know someone will be asking you about it.

At the same time, be mindful and appreciative when friends encourage you to achieve your goals. You'll know who your true supporters are; rather than berating you for not eating a pudding, they might sit that course out too or when they call you, it won't be to talk about themselves but to hear about your achievements – and they won't be jealous or bitter if you're doing well. A real friend will take pleasure in your success as, in a way, it's their success too, because they have been there supporting you all along.

However, don't worry if you find yourself sliding back into a toxic friendship pattern – it can take time to change. But the next time you catch yourself agreeing with negative comments, say something like: 'Yesterday I was being really negative and I'm sorry about that.' Then find something positive to say. For example, if you were at a party together and your friend said it was boring, you could say, 'I know you didn't enjoy yourself, but it was nice catching up with everyone.' This instantly makes your conversation more positive.

'I USED TO BE A "FRENEMY"'



My 'frenemy' and I met as teens. She was always dieting and

complaining I was thinner.

While at uni, she lost a lot of weight and I was no longer the 'thin' one, which made me very jealous. Before our annual meet ups, I'd try to lose weight or buy new clothes to look better than her. We'd also exchange barbed emails. If she'd stayed for the weekend, she'd thank me and mention how she wasn't used to the rich food I ate. I'd ask if she was planning to lose weight before a holiday...

Eventually we lost touch, but when I found her on Facebook and saw she'd gained weight, it made me feel like I was 'winning'.

Then, I bumped into her one night and was surprised she was so friendly and finally comfortable with her weight. It made me think of the years we'd wasted competing with each other. Now when I see lovely pics of her and her family on social media, I smile rather than panic that I need to look better.

Rosalind Ryan, 42, from Brighton

What about online 'frenemies'?

If you put yourself out there on social media, or blog about yourself and your life, you might attract the attention of a different type of toxic person – an online troll who leaves negative comments on your photos or belittles your achievements. If it's easy enough to block them, do that. But if you don't want to ban them entirely, you can choose to screen out their little digs. Instagram recently launched a clever filter that blocks certain comments or words on posts – find it in the settings menu – so you can happily post your pics without fear of being criticised.