

Why emotional vampires suck

They lurk in the corners of every office, pose as your BFF and always draw you into their dramas. Here's how to stop vampires in their tracks – without the garlic

HERE'S THE thing about emotional vampires – they walk among us, but they don't have fangs that reveal their soul-sucking true selves. However, they do have one special power: they can burst your bubble without even trying. We've all felt it: that lurch in your stomach when their number flashes up on your phone; that drained feeling you're left with after a catch-up; and the sense that every interaction has become a chore.

"A vampire's effects can stun like a sonic blast or make you slowly wilt," says psychologist Judith Orloff, author of *Emotional Freedom* (Random House, \$26.95). "Your intuition may register this as sadness, anger, fatigue or a cloying feeling."

If you're experiencing these kinds of emotions, chances are your friend is an emotional vampire. Despite being otherwise charming, they're likely "very negative, blame others for their situation and refuse to take responsibility for their own lives," says Jacqui Marson, psychologist and author of *The Curse of Lovely* (Hachette, \$29.99).

"Every helpful suggestion is met with a long, negative explanation of why that may work for others, but couldn't possibly work for them. They're often (but not always) needy, demanding, bitter, envious of others, and frequently say various versions of 'it's not fair!'"

Or, you may be dealing with someone who seems upbeat but is never there when you need her. "Users are emotional drains, too," says Susan Shapiro Barash, author of *Toxic Friends* (susanshapirobarash.com). "They find you useful and they're impressed with you in some way, such as lifestyle or career or status, but they're

insincere in their reasons for the friendship and they take without giving back."

Under the spell

Despite feeling like something's not right, victims virtually offer themselves up on a plate, thinking that the neediness and negativity is all part of true friendship. "The people I call 'lovelies' are often drawn to emotional drainers," says Marson. "On some level, often subconsciously, we want to rescue them and make them feel better, which may mirror a relationship with a dysfunctional parent in childhood. Vampires hook into this and manipulate the Lovelies into meeting their endless emotional needs, often guilt-tripping with their 'poor me', hard luck stories, and a sort of insidious, envious comparison, for example, 'Oh, you are so lucky, you have X, and can do Y. I will never have that.'"

Despite your best efforts, tolerating an emotional vampire may be doing the both of you more harm than good. Researchers at UCLA's School of Medicine in the US have found that negative interactions with friends increase inflammation in the body, responsible for conditions including high blood pressure, risk of heart disease, cancer

and depression. "You can end up feeling trapped, depressed, helpless, angry, drained and resentful in these kinds of relationships," adds Marson.

We're not held in some kind of death grip, though – so why do we repeatedly listen to how their colleague is being favoured over them? According to Barash, we're scared of the consequences of cutting them off. "Women often tolerate unhealthy friendships because they're afraid of losing their group of friends and social life if there's an altercation." And if you have low self-esteem, a fear of asserting yourself or an addiction to people pleasing, you could be at even more risk of becoming attached to an emotional vampire. Even if you don't fit that bill, it's not an easy thing to be faced with.

"Emotional draining is a touchy subject," Orloff points out. "We don't know how to tactfully address our needs without alienating others, so we ignore the SOS from our gut that screams, 'Beware!', and we don't speak out because we don't want to be seen as difficult or uncaring."

Stop the drain game

Even though you feel trapped, you're not, and fighting back doesn't involve anything as dramatic as a wooden stake. "You can change the beliefs that make you feel you have no right to say no and the behaviour that makes you an endlessly accommodating friend," Marson reassures.

"Remember, emotional vampires are probably blissfully unaware of their own draining ways, so it's up to you to make the changes."



Are you a victim?

These signs will tell you if you're being sapped dry by an EV:
 You're not sure if her comment, "Wow, you look so much better in photos", is a compliment or insult.

You'd rather have a closed-door meeting with your scary boss than answer your friend's phone calls.

After catching up with her, all you want is to go into a carb coma.

You've never thought "That was fun!" after spending time with her.

It takes you longer to reply to her emails or texts than it does to complete your tax return.

Misty couldn't help but feel her friend was stealing her style

If you've decided you'd like to salvage the friendship, "take responsibility for that decision and the way you respond," Orloff advises. "Ask yourself, 'How can I stay in the relationship and not feel oppressed?' This means concentrating on the good and accepting someone's limitations."

Remember that they're probably blissfully unaware of their own draining ways, so it's up to you to make the changes. "Experiment with being just 1 per cent different," says Marson. "Maybe don't be so sympathetic next time they moan, [or] set new boundaries about when you'll take their phone calls or how often you meet."

According to the experts, things will shift once you take the reins. "If you change your behaviour, then the nature of the relationship will change," says Marson. "They will either drift away from you towards others who'll meet their needs, or you may decide you enjoy some aspects of the relationship once you have empowered yourself to be more real, more honest and set boundaries that suit you." And if they don't like it, they can fang out with someone else. **W**