

## Beware of energy suckers

How to deal with a friend or relative who saps your time and energy

■ By Pamela Haag



In the past decade, I've heard a lot of newfangled terms to describe an exhausting, overly demanding relationship. The culprit might be called a cling-on, energy vampire, stalker friend, needy, or a social vampire. The relative, lover, colleague, or friend who demands and asks too much of us and our time has come to appear socially pathological. We don't want too much weight to bear in a relationship these days. It doesn't fit with our 'No Strings Attached' world.

I'm not entirely comfortable with the proliferation of terms to criticise emotional neediness. They imply that a basic human craving for reassurance is an intolerable encroachment on another person's freedom, autonomy, or happiness. I talk about this in my book, *Marriage Confidential: Love in the Post-Romantic Age*. In a healthy relationship, the investment of time and attention feels reciprocal. This reciprocity separates *healthy need* from *pathological neediness*. Sometimes, we'd rather be laughing and having fun with a friend than 'processing' an issue with them, but we set aside that selfish preference. We make a deposit in the Friendship Bank that we'll someday withdraw ourselves, when we need help. It would be a cold, hard world if all yearning for reassurance were dismissed as neurotic and impermissibly annoying.

Having gotten that disclaimer out of the way, however, there is no doubt that there are indeed some relationships that are morbidly and impossibly needy, clingy, demanding, and exhausting. The clingy relationship could happen between lovers, friends, colleagues, or relatives. I'm going to treat the romantic and the non-romantic separately.

### You might be in a needy relationship if...

- Your heart sinks and your stomach gets in knots when you see the person's name appear on your phone, or calendar
- A pending social engagement gives you a case of performance anxiety, that you simply won't be adequately supportive, ingenious or clever in helping to solve whatever problem they're bound to dump in your lap
- You know more about this person's problems, issues, and opinions than you do about your own spouse's. You feel as if you have a front row, box seat to their life drama, even though you'd prefer to be way up in the bleachers
- You find that this relationship makes you feel frustrated, helpless, angry, and irritated
- You close the door with relief once the friend leaves
- Or, finally, the most basic litmus test: You might be in a clingy relationship if the relationship leaves you feeling persistently enervated and drained, rather than energised and rejuvenated.

In these cases, the term 'social vampire' is a harsh term, but apt.

The energy vampire relationship might be one of quantity or quality. In the first case, the energy vampire just gets in touch with you way too much. Quite simply, there is an excess of this person in your life. She calls, emails, chats, texts, pops in, or otherwise commandeers your time all day.

You might get dozens if not scores of calls or messages. There are certainly healthy relationships that involve a lot of daily contact, but this contact feels more unwelcome and intrusive. Other relationships might be vampirish in quality, not quantity. You might have a friend or relative whom you don't actually see that often, and who has good boundaries about contact, but, when you do see them, you spend hours doing little more than dancing through a minefield of her psychological, social, familial, spousal or work-related problems. Sometimes, the problems are so existential that you can't wrap your mind around them, but you feel that you're being implored to help.

### My experiences

I've had energy vampire friendships of both quantity and quality, and they're difficult to deal with. In my own case, I feel as if I could have done better. Looking back on my own experience, I'd advise you to do a self-diagnosis, and ask yourself candid, challenging questions about how you might be contributing to the enervating relationship. Rarely is a relationship absolutely one-sided, where one person is



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entirely right and the other entirely wrong. In my vampire relationship of 'quality,' I had to ask myself, what have I done to encourage this dynamic? I realised that I was taking some pleasure in being the friend's confidant. It made me proud that she trusted me with her problems. And, because I seemed to take such delight in dissecting them, she naturally assumed that I wanted to hear more.

In the vampire relationship of quantity, I never hesitated to respond promptly to the torrent of emails that my friend sent each and every day. Nor did I ever insist that my friend listen to something on my mind, rather than her own. No wonder, then, that the clingy relationship continued, until finally I became so hopelessly frustrated by my friend's narcissism and her unwillingness to acknowledge a major success in my career that I cut her off almost cold turkey. It wasn't the best resolution. We're still Facebook friends, but I could have managed things better.

After these evaluations, the next step is to recognise that you are not heroically and single-handedly going to cure or transform your needy friend. Therapists will tell you that a pathological need for affirmation comes from deep feelings of insecurity and deprivation. There's not enough love in the world for the truly needy. It's like the Sisyphean task of futilely rolling a boulder up a hill, or trying to fill a bucket with a large hole in the bottom. You fill it up one day and, the next day, you need to do the whole thing over again. So the best that you can do, and hope for, is a friendship where

you're able to assert healthier boundaries, which will hopefully salvage the relationship, and improve it.

To achieve this, use modern technologies to help. Use a **screen and wean** tactic. Do not answer every text, phone call, or email that your friend sends. Don't feed the beast. Wean your clingy relative out of the cling by being very selective—use technological resources to screen them.

Rest assured, you're not being impolite when you put her on a texting diet. Instead, you're being a grown-up, who firmly but kindly sets boundaries.

You might also consider **playing a zone** against the clingy friend rather than playing man-to-man: In other words, find some new people, outlets or friends for her. Today, luckily, this might include online communities. You might scope out some good online communities that seem to address problems and interests that your friend has, and say to her, "I found this interesting community online, and thought that you might enjoy it. It's a place to discuss some of those issues you were talking about yesterday, and they'd probably give you better insights about the issues than I can [hint, hint]."

If your friend demands too much of your attention, consider seeing him only in settings where you're with other people, such as parties, or where excessive talk isn't an option—at movies, for example, or the theatre. This makes it more difficult for him to hijack your time. Or, make sure to set firm limits on the amount of time you have ["I can meet for coffee for an hour today, but I absolutely must leave by 1pm for another appointment"]. If these subtle boundary-setting tactics fail, then you might need to be blunter. You might consider saying something along these lines [rehearse it beforehand, so it comes out the way you want it to!]: "I'm sorry. I value your friendship, but I can't be in touch this frequently. I need some space. I know that you understand."

Throughout, resist the little white lie that is expedient in the short run, but damaging in the long run. Don't get embroiled in laborious apologies for your silence or boundary-setting .

### When your lover is the vampire

The above guidelines might help with a needy and clingy relative, colleague, or friend. But I'd be remiss not to devote special attention to the clingy, needy, romantic partner, particularly an ex-lover or jilted boyfriend. I think that different rules, and far more serious rules, apply in these cases.

Women, do not follow the feminine script of wanting to be 'nice' or excessively polite when dealing with a cling-on boyfriend. In these situations, the clinger can morph into the stalker. This can be the case with ex-girlfriends, as well. When you intend to break up with someone, break up with them. Or, as Napoleon said, "If you start to take Vienna, take Vienna." When the clingy ex-lover continues to pester you, don't surrender to the impulse to feel as if it would be mean or rude not to respond to the ex's fawning desperation or pleas. That's a sexist, constraining view of femininity speaking to you. Instead, trust your instincts. Do not let them get drowned out by concerns about social manners that you're being mean. If his communication with you feels too clingy, demanding, draining and needy, then it is.

It's not difficult, if we trust our instincts, to distinguish between a harmless, tender continuation of contact and a disruptive, potentially harmful situation of a lover's refusal to let go, to face reality, or to take your 'NO' for a serious answer.

The sad reality is that it's still a courageous moment when a woman takes the initiative to break up with a needy boyfriend. Remember, this man is not entitled to your love, attention, or affection, which is yours to give as you like, and choose. He is not entitled to an intricate explanation for your feelings. The only empowering and safe choice with a clingy ex, as opposed to a clingy relative or friend, is to pull the bandage off as quickly and mercifully as you can. I've focused on ex-boyfriends here, but this applies to ex-girlfriends as well. Make clear in kind, firm terms that you will not be in contact, and that you wish him the best. Then, stick to your words. Be reassured that it isn't nasty to say what you mean and want. In fact, it's an act of having enough respect for the ex-lover not to ply him with false hope when you have no hope to give.

Any effort to placate, explain why you're breaking up, or why you need distance on the clingy-stalky lover fuels his hope to get you back: He will stubbornly misinterpret all appeasing gestures on your part as signs of your romantic ambivalence, lingering interest, or receptivity. In contrast, if you break up cleanly, your ex-lover stands a better chance of recovering, understanding that you mean precisely and exactly what you say, and of moving on expeditiously to a new relationship, with someone who can love him as he wants and deserves to be loved.




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