

## Boundaries

Adolescence is often a turbulent time. Lots of you haven't sorted your shit out yet. You are struggling. Those who have had difficult attachment relationships may particularly struggle in adolescence and can end up manipulating others to get their needs met. You may meet some of these on your friendship journey. You may not recognise it at first but in time, you realise that they are being toxic towards you. They may not be toxic all the time (or they may be), but right now they are being horrible and they are being horrible to you.

In friendships, there should be mutuality – give and take, listening and talking. If that never happens or every conversation leads back to them, try to give them a wide berth. Warning signs might include them trapping you in interminable conversations about their angst in the middle of the night, posting their self-harm online, creating imaginary friends that you never meet, threatening to kill themselves if you don't stay on the phone to them. Listen to those warning signals: remove yourself from these relationships. Cutting off a friendship you find damaging is not failing as a friend: it's you *surviving*. We all have to put on our own oxygen masks before we help other people.

Mental health problems can actually be contagious, as the desire to belong means a groupthink can develop where not eating or self-harming become normalised. Remember, it's never a friend's job to treat mental health problems. That would be unethical to do even if you were a trained therapist. For our close friends, associates, enemies, we are just too close. I would never see someone I knew socially in my therapy room. Although most people with mental health problems are lovely, a small minority

## YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND ME

can be manipulative. Often this is because they haven't had the attachment relationship that they need in order to grow up with an ability to feel and hold in mind someone else's point of view. People like this often suck you in by being an on/off friend, or just by being exciting or risky when life is feeling a bit dull. You can get a bit addicted to them.

Of course, good and non-toxic friends will have crises and you want to be there for your proper friends. The difference with a damaging friendship is that they have to be in constant crisis to get the affection and attention they need. If their need for attention or affection is a bottomless pit and cannot be filled, you need to protect yourself.

Boundaries between yourself and others are important in general but particularly in these toxic 'friendships' that can suck you dry. Make excuses if necessary: it might be that you say that your mum makes you turn off your phone at night or that you have to visit your cousins at the weekend. It might be an idea to set your parents up in your friends' minds as very strict. Then they will be the perfect excuse to get out of things you don't want to do: 'You know what my dad is like' (eye-roll). You may wish to slowly move away from them and extricate yourself from that friendship group, even if that means a period of not having friends for a while.

It is normal to have some secrets between friends, and some privacy from adults is important and reflective of your growing independence, but don't get sucked in to keeping worrying secrets. It is OK to break confidentiality on the big stuff, like self-harm. As I say, you are not responsible for other people's mental health. Being a good friend doesn't mean *always* being there for someone – that's impossible – it means *usually* being there for

## FRIENDS

them. Nor does friendship mean never calling someone out on things or saying, 'That's not OK.'

It is important to try to be there for your friends but it is also important to set realistic expectations for yourself, and that involves boundaries. These have become infinitely more complex with mobile communication, as it used to be impossible to be in constant touch with each other. The availability of mobiles have set up an expectation that no one can keep: we can't be empathic all the time. I'm a therapist and I couldn't do that. Before we can have the mental space to think about other people, we need to have a bit of mental space to think about ourselves. It is important to allow yourself this space as well as letting your friends have space, and not getting offended or taking it personally if they are not around for a bit.

Just one more important point about boundaries – the word has sadly become weaponised. It can be used to create a false premise: 'my feelings should always be listened to and respected'. As a psychologist, I spend my life listening to and respecting feelings but that does not mean that should *always* happen. As we will see in the next chapter, however strong a feeling is, they are sometimes based on a false premise and not on reality. They should not be used as an excuse for bad behaviour or to control the behaviour of others. Remember that having our feelings listened to is an honour, not a right. Our feelings should not be used as a reason to forget our responsibilities or to be a dick. Most of all, they should never be used to trump other people's feelings. It is sensible to have boundaries and it is fine to communicate your boundaries ('I don't do that', 'I'm not allowed', 'I don't like it', 'I don't want to') but it is toxic to weaponise boundaries to hurt or make a point at someone else.

### **So now I've told you friendship is gonna be this way**

So, friendship isn't always how you want it to be. Friendship can sometimes feel full of ups and downs. I hope that this chapter has helped you to both understand some of the pitfalls and feel less alone when you encounter them. I also hope that I have given you confidence in the future of your friendships. If you are struggling now, think of it as friendship training. It will get better: few grown-up women fail to make good and lasting friendships. Like with fitness training, sometimes you need to hurt a bit before getting to the end result. Having on/off friends, being left out, being a bit lonely and encountering toxic friendships is all good practice for meeting and making your kidney-sharing friends in the future.