Dear Alice,

My "best friend" of almost 4 years now has always been competitive, but it's never been something we've discussed. Every time I'm wearing something trendy or saying something new, she will do the same thing. When we used to run in aerobics class, she would constantly try to beat my scores. I confronted her about that, but she never seems to learn? she still copies me and competes with everything from grades to guys. If I address the problems I've had in the past, I will look stupid because usually I would be the type to bring it up, but my life was too hectic at the time. Should I really "waste" time talking to her about her competitiveness? Or, is there a way to hint at it or persuade her to do something original?

Thanks,
Apparently Trendy

Answer

Dear Apparently Trendy,

A little competition between friends is common and healthy, as long as it's acknowledged, mutual, and energizing to the relationship. Friendly rivalry has the potential to inspire, encourage, and support friends to do more and be more.

Your friend's continued unwillingness to "do her own thing," however, even after confronting her about it, sounds frustrating, and threatening to your friendship. Perhaps your friend's constant competitiveness is her way of complementing your strengths in drive and ambition. Maybe she admires you so much that she wants to mimic your every move. Or, her ability to seek out her own aspirations may be affected by low self-esteem. Or, perhaps things are going on in her life that aren't apparently obvious; the constant competition may be her outlet for coping with personal issues. Your relationship might already be built on a foundation of competitiveness. If this is the case, it's possible that your friend feels compelled to be "the one" to up the ante just to keep up with you. Sometimes, what we despise or find annoying in others is what we dislike in ourselves. You may be experiencing or expressing a clash of similar personalities and traits.

Although it may be uncomfortable and seem unfair, maybe it's time to revisit a heart to heart with your friend. Taking the time to make sure you are saying exactly what you need to, and
expressing all that you need might be a good idea. Doing this is not a waste of time, since you still seem to be invested in your relationship. The purpose of saying what you need is not necessarily getting what you want, but maintaining/gaining self-respect, as well as a sincere commitment to be clear about your feelings to your friend. Furthermore, you can assure your friend that you are eager to listen, to help understand what makes each of you bring out the competitiveness in one another.

It sounds like your mission, or hope, is to have a conversation to understand your friend's, and perhaps your own, competitive nature. The goal of the conversation is to open the discussion for both of you to learn about the impact of each other's behavior on the other. As hard as it may seem, try coming from a caring place when expressing your concern and desire to remain friends? if that is your objective. Highlight her finer points to accentuate the positive and downplay the negative. In particular, concentrate on aspects that she may be stronger in than you. In other words, you are the "bigger" person for praising her accomplishments (even though they may feel similar to yours), to enable her to make more independent choices and decisions. When expressing your thoughts, delivering them in a concerned, yet appreciative manner, using "I" statements will convey that you've taken responsibility for your feelings. You might try saying something along the lines that you feel honored and/or flattered that she has taken such an interest in your interests, and it's time that she take notice of and focus on herself and her unique qualities. Perhaps you can help her identify her own specialness, because sometimes it's hard to see one's own qualities. Affirming your friendship and avoiding accusations might help keep the responder, your friend, from being on the defensive.

Based on your talk, you might decide to work through the problem together and maintain and cultivate your friendship, or you may choose to cut your losses and move on. It may help to write a list of all of the good things you gain from being friends with her, and another for the not-so-good things. If one list outweighs the other, it may be time to re-evaluate your friendship. Relationships take cooperation, communication, collaboration, commitment, nurturing, and time to mature. More than that, healthy relationships encourage people to be their best selves. And, while relationships need work to work, the payoffs can be rewarding.

Best of luck to you,

Alice!

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Published date:
Nov 14, 2003
Last reviewed on:
Apr 23, 2014