What to do about flaky friends? [1]

Dear Alice,

I have a few “friends” that are real flakes. I’ve known them for years and years, but they blow me off so easily. I’ve tried a lot of different tactics, but nothing seems to stop the problem. For example: This guy that I have known since I was born and I recently started college at the same place. We live three blocks away from each other. I have spent a good amount of time at his house and he has come to mine (just friends), so I know he is comfortable spending time with me. He has a tendency to text me with a basic “hey I’ll be coming over tonight” or “You want to come by for dinner” and then without warning, he will no show. What’s going on with this? I don’t know what to do.

Answer

Dear Reader,

Navigating changes in friendships can be tricky especially when the changes feel like they are pushing you apart, versus bringing you closer. It’s not always easy to understand motives for other people’s behaviors, either especially if those behaviors feel hurtful or disrespectful. It sounds like you have been thinking a lot about the dynamics in your flaky friendships. Considering different reasons for why a person acts flakey may allow you to adjust expectations and actions moving forward and ultimately help you feel like you’re not always waiting for a no show.

There can be a lot of reasons behind flaky behavior. Often times, individual perception of personality traits (like flakiness) are very subjective perhaps you view your friend as unreliable but they don’t see themselves the same way. It may be helpful to keep an open mind when learning about various internal and external factors that affect a person’s behavior, as well as the differing definitions that can exist for subjective traits. There may be reasons at play that you are unaware of causing your friend(s) to be frequently late or not follow through on plans.
It sounds like you may have already tried some different ways of confronting friends about flaky behavior. It may be helpful to consider whether the value of this friend in your life outweighs the stress or disappointment as a result of their behavior. Sometimes, as hard as it can be to cut ties with someone you have known for a long time, eliminating the unpleasant friendship dynamic can alleviate unpleasant feelings and make room for more positive relationships.

If you do want to continue to work on the friendship, here are some suggestions to consider for both conversations you can have and ways to adjust your own behavior and expectations.

- **Communicate openly and directly.** If you haven’t already, open the lines of communication about the behavior that is hurtful or feels disrespectful. Try to think about the specific actions that bother you and how they make you feel before you talk with them. One way to begin this kind of talk is by saying “I want to talk about something that feels hard/upsetting/hurtful/etc. for me.” A clear way to tell your friend how you feel specifically might be to say, “I feel undervalued when you do not show after telling me that you will be somewhere.”

- **Base your expectations on what you know.** If your friend is consistently late or often doesn’t follow through on plans, try expecting those behaviors the next time the two of you discuss hanging out. If they text you saying they are on their way, assume they will likely be late or may no show, and continue what you are doing until they show up.

- **Let go of what you can’t control, and focus on what you can.** Try adopting a nonchalant attitude to what the friend says and try to not be surprised if they continue their pattern of flaking out at the last minute. This may take some time, but if you can, try letting go of trying to change your friend’s behavior. Sometimes, the only behavior within your control is doing your best to let the other person know how you feel and not engaging in repetitive scenarios that feel hurtful or negative.

- **Spend time with friends that follow through.** Consider investing in those who do keep their word. You may naturally fall out of touch with those who can’t follow through on invitations and plans.

- **Ask yourself if you still want to continue with the friendship.** If your friend’s behavior continues, you may decide that ending the friendship is the best option for you. It is okay to say to someone “I consistently feel hurt by how you treat me/show up late/don’t follow through, and I don’t feel this friendship is healthy for me anymore.” Breaking up with friends is not easy, but it could be a good option if it helps make room in your life for those whose meet up habits are more in line with yours.

Many relationships, friendship and otherwise, shift as people get older and other areas of their life also change. It sounds like some of your current friendships are highlighting qualities that are high up on your list of traits in a healthy friendship for you. While often emotionally challenging in the moment, cultivating skills to be able to sift through unpleasant dynamics may allow energy and space in your life to focus on what makes you feel valued.

Hope this helps!

Alice!

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