My friend relentlessly competes with me, and I want it to stop

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. That said, what you've described about this friendship doesn't seem to be fostering those elements in your life. If that's the case and you wish to salvage and grow in this friendship, taking time to talk through what's been happening with your pal (rather than hinting or persuading) isn't likely to be a waste of your time. Clear and honest communication in any relationship is key and doing so will allow you to get a sense of why this might be happening and inform how best to move forward with your friend in the future.

There could be many reasons why your friend is running with this uncomfortable competitive streak. What's more, it seems as if imitation feels far from the sincerest form of flattery in this relationship. Since your friend doesn't seem to have taken the hint from your previous attempt at confronting these circumstances, subtle communication may not be the most effective tool for addressing your concerns. As such, it may be wise to revisit a heart to heart with your pal. Before you do though, it's a good idea to put some time and thought into how you'd like to discuss this with her by reflecting on exactly what you've experienced, how it's affecting both you and your relationship with her, and what you need to feel like you've been
heard and respected moving forward. The purpose of preparing for what you’d like to share in this conversation isn’t necessarily to get what you want, but rather to signify a sincere commitment to be clear about your feelings with your friend (and hopefully that your buddy will do the same).

As you continue to think through how to broach the issue with your friend, here are some other tips to consider:

- 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.
- Be honest, but sensitive when describing what you’ve observed in her behavior. Try to provide some recent examples of situations where she copied you or was competitive with you that were bothersome.
- Avoid attacks on her overall character (e.g., “You always compete with me, no matter what we do.” or “Every time I buy new clothes, you have to get the same exact ones.”) and accusations that might also help keep the responder, your friend, from being on the defensive.
- Then, from your perspective, share how those situations or behaviors made you feel. Using “I” statements will convey that you’ve taken responsibility for your feelings.
- When expressing your thoughts, try delivering them in a concerned, yet appreciative manner. You might try saying something along the lines that you feel honored or flattered that she is so enthusiastic about your interests and that you feel it’s time that she take notice of and focus on herself and her unique qualities.
- Highlight her finer points to accentuate the positive. In particular, concentrate on aspects that she may be stronger in than you. Perhaps you can also help her identify what makes her special because sometimes it’s hard for a person to see their own qualities.
- Ask her to share her perspective on what you’ve shared? does she agree with you? Does she see the issue differently and how? Try to really listen to what she has to say.
- Describe how you would like your relationship to look in the future and invite her to share her thoughts, too.

Based on your conversation, you may 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 positive aspects of being friends with her, and another for the not-so-good ones. If one list outweighs the other, that may be your cue to re-evaluate your friendship. If you’re still feeling unsure about how to talk to your friend or what to do, it may be worthwhile to reach out to a trusted friend (perhaps one that is in a different friend group), family member, or even a mental health professional to talk through your approach and reflect further on your feelings. However you decide to handle this situation, keep in mind that relationships take cooperation, communication, collaboration, commitment, nurturing, and time to mature. More than that, healthy relationships encourage those involved to be their best selves. And, while friendships need work to work, the payoffs can definitely be rewarding.

Best of luck to you,

Alice!

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