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Friendship Advice: When Your Best Friend Brings a Crowd

'Focusers' prefer time alone; 'diffusers' like to socialize in groups

Some people prefer the intimate exchange that comes with time alone with a friend. Others like to socialize most in groups. *PHOTO: CORBIS*

By

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Jan. 11, 2016 2:03 p.m. ET

I was looking forward to catching up with a good friend over dinner recently. Then she texted that afternoon and said that one of her co-workers would be joining us.

This really irritated me. I tried to picture the three of us having a meaningful conversation about our lives, and failed. So I told my friend I wasn't feeling well and stayed home.

Most people fall into one of two socializing styles. Some prefer to see friends and loved ones in a one-on-one situation. They love deep connections and are comfortable with emotional intimacy. I'll call them "focusers."

Others prefer to socialize in groups—"the more the merrier" would be their motto. They enjoy being surrounded by loved ones, joking, teasing, telling stories and bringing other people together. In this way

they deflect personal intimacy. I'll call them "diffusers."

PHOTO: THOMAS PITILLI FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Vote: How do you prefer to spend time with a friend?

A One-on-one

B In a group

You know if you're a focuser or a diffuser, although, like any personality trait, there is a gray area. Just think back to school days. Were you part of a clique—and aspire to be the life of it? Or did you have one true best friend?

Psychologists say these social styles are related to, but not the same as, being extroverted or introverted. Those personality traits are innate and determine how we become energized—by being with others or by being alone.

Whether you are a focuser or a diffuser depends on how comfortable you are with emotional intimacy and is determined mostly by something psychologists call our attachment system. Scientists believe the attachment system is an evolutionary process that humans developed to survive—we would have perished without sticking together. Much of our lifelong attachment style is determined by how we learned to relate to our parents as young children.

There are three attachment-style types: secure, anxious and avoidant, according to Hal Shorey, a psychologist and associate professor for the Institute for Graduate Clinical Psychology at Widener University, in Chester, Pa. Secure people, roughly 55% of the population, typically are warm, loving and comfortable with intimacy. They were raised, most likely, by a consistently caring and responsive mother or parental figure. The other 45% has a sometimes problematic attachment style, meaning they are anxious, avoidant or a combination, Dr. Shorey says.

Anxious people are often focusers. They had parents who were inconsistently nurturing and typically seek intimacy to calm and

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reassure themselves. Avoidant, or "dismissive," people often had parents who didn't tolerate neediness or insecurities. They try to minimize closeness and are mainly diffusers.

Therapists say they often see patients, especially women, who have conflicts with friends who have different social styles. Focusers typically feel rejected by a friend who rarely wants to see them alone. Diffusers often think a focuser friend is rude or antisocial for not wanting to make their outings a group event. And as people get older and have less time to socialize, it becomes even more important that each social event is satisfying, so they are less likely to compromise.

This issue can be hard to address. A focuser may feel vulnerable telling a friend she was looking forward to one-on-one time and was hurt her friend didn't seem to feel the same. A diffuser may feel vulnerable saying she was hurt when her friend didn't show up at a dinner party that was important to her. "People feel rejected, like they don't matter or aren't a priority," says Stacy Kaiser, a licensed psychotherapist in Los Angeles.

Kelley Kitley is a focuser. As a mother of four, she has limited time to see her friends, and when she does, she wants to catch up one-on-one.

Ms. Kitley is a licensed clinical social worker in Chicago, yet she also struggles with the focuser-versus-diffuser issue in her own relationships. A few years ago, she decided she no longer wanted to attend the monthly dinners her best friend organized for 10 mutual friends from high school; she found the small talk emotionally unsatisfying. But when she called her friend and explained this, her friend hung up on her.

The two women didn't talk for several weeks. Ms. Kitley says. Then her friend called and apologized for overreacting, and Ms. Kitley apologized for being too blunt.

What can you do if you have a different socializing style than a friend or loved one?

You can start by knowing your style—and your friend's. And remember that each of you is just trying to get your emotional needs met. This will help you to manage expectations.

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Be prepared to compromise. "Friends may need to give in to each other's styles at times for the sake of the friendship," says Irene S. Levine, a clinical professor of psychiatry at New York University School of Medicine and author of "Best Friends Forever: Surviving a Breakup with Your Best Friend."

If you do find yourself annoyed or insulted by a friend's behavior, stop yourself from ruminating by identifying your automatic negative thought. ("I feel rejected because my friend doesn't want to spend time alone with me.") Ms. Kitley, the psychotherapist, instructs her clients to write this thought down in one sentence.

Then she has them think of five or six positive thoughts about the situation and to write these down. This is called cognitive restructuring.

Consider checking in with a third party, to get an objective opinion. Are you overreacting?

And respond to your friend honestly and kindly. If you really don't want to go, stand your ground. Resentment at being pushed into something won't help your friendship in the long run. "And your comfort needs to come first," says Ms. Kaiser. "Just be nice about it."

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My friend knows me well enough to suspect I didn't cancel on her because I felt ill. She called me the next day and asked what happened. I told her I had really been looking forward to seeing her because I missed her, and that I also wanted to get her advice on something private. And I gently reminded her that I don't care for her co-worker.

Then my friend surprised me. She said she'd stayed home herself after I had canceled. "I really wanted to see you, too. I only invited my friend because she likes you and asked if she could come along when she heard we had plans." She also explained that she thinks her co-worker and I have a lot in common and might hit it off as friends if I gave it another shot.

How did we end it? We took a two-day road trip, where we talked nonstop about all sorts of things, including her coming milestone birthday party. She plans to invite dozens of her closest friends for a weekend-long gathering. I can't wait to help her celebrate.

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