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## With friends like these...

**If a best pal gives you more angst than an amour, something's wrong**

By JO PIAZZA

It's Friday night and you're ready to hit the town with a friend. You've had a long week and this should be a good time, but unfortunately all you can think is: "Ughhhhh, does it have to be with her?"

Dread and nausea are *not* normal side effects of friendship - sounds like you have a toxic friend, the kind of companion who makes the night drag on and on and leaves you more exhausted than a 10-hour work day.

You're not alone. Friendships, like relationships, can turn sour. Writer Mike Albo satirizes one such toxic friend in magazine pieces and in his new novel, "The Underminer: The Best Friend Who Casually Destroys Your Life."

Through 15 years of the "friend's" successes and his character's failures, Albo, who wrote the book with New York Times writer Virginia Heffernan, shows how his toxic friend - a conglomerate of many real-life destructive companions including, he admits, himself - slowly dismantles his life.

Albo's underminer says things like: *"Yay about that little play you wrote and performed! I didn't see it, but Jack saw it. So yay! Great! It's really great that you are doing that. You did it, you took a step. You know I really admire you. It's just so great that you are just going to stick it out and see how long it takes."* It's the kind of thing that makes you cringe.

"I think living in such a crazy city that has such a focus on careers and success and where you're headed finally drives everyone crazy. In another time and place, we might be beating each other over the head with clubs, but we've become so overtherapied and polite that we attack each other verbally," Albo says.

And the book will ring true for every New Yorker who clings to a bad friendship, even when that friend is systematically turning them into an insecure mess.



Adulthood can be a lot like high school; both are full of toxic friends.



At least most grown-ups know better than to stay pals with 'Mean Girls.'

CAPS

## One-upping by one-downing

But, unlike a bad romance, there is no easy out with the toxic friend. You can't exactly dump a friend. Or can you?

Rebecca, an aspiring actress in New York City, dealt with her needy friend for more than a year before she finally called it quits. She had fun with Kate - most of the time. But Kate was one of those people who had to turn everything around so that the attention was squarely in her court.

If Rebecca complained about feeling fat, Kate would burst into tears and talk about how she had been nearly bulimic the previous summer. If Rebecca mentioned how she got into a fight with her mom, Kate would remind her that her own mother was a raging alcoholic.

Finally, Rebecca decided that she had to purge Kate from her life. "It was tough," she recalls of the breakup. "I stopped calling. I stopped responding to her text messages. I just cut off contact, and after a while, she got the point."

Albo also admits to using the fade when he feels trapped in a toxic friendship.

"I'm not a very confrontational person," he admits. "I use the 'drift away like a cloud' technique when I need to instigate a breakup."

## Telling them to get lost-ish

For some toxic friends, the hint of the fade is never enough. Sometimes you actually have to flat-out ditch.

Ariel, a 28-year-old public-relations executive found herself stuck with a jealous and demanding friend whom she finally had to sit down and "dump." "It became more stressful than my relationship with my boyfriend. She would get mad when I spent time with another friend. She would get mean and bitter," Ariel says. "If this were a boyfriend, I would have booted him forever ago."

So Ariel invited her out to dinner and broke up with her. "I started crying and telling her it just was not healthy for us anymore. She accepted it after a while, realizing that she was no longer happy either."

Four years later, the two speak on special occasions - the same way one might keep an ex-boyfriend at arm's length.

The breakup didn't go as well for Kim. When her old college roommate became possessive and annoying ("checking in" 25 times a day was the least of her offenses), Kim tried the fade and stopped responding altogether, but it didn't stick. The roommate kept calling obsessively until Kim finally moved from Los Angeles to New York. Across the country, her toxic friend finally took the hint.

\* \* \*

## Toxic relief

Breaking up is hard to do - even when you're just friends. Relationship expert Dr. Gilda Carle ([drgilda.com](http://drgilda.com)) has these tips:

- **Prepare yourself:** "Understand first that it's never going to be pain-free," says Carle. "The person who does the breaking up feels more guilty than the person being broken up with."
- **Avoid the slow fade:** Gradually disappearing from the person's life is less than courageous - and can come back to haunt you. "It's not going to build your emotional muscle," says Carle. "When somebody does not confront people and issues in their life, they are only faced with similar

issues at another time."

- **It's not about them:** Keep it "totally about you, and the person doesn't have an opportunity of doing too much damage after that," says Carle. "If you [only use 'me'] language, who's going to argue with your feelings?"
- **No third parties:** "Avoid triangulation," says Carle. "The other person may bring third parties in, because he or she is probably not a fair fighter, but you don't want to do that - that's a sure-fire way to get that person really upset."
- **Deal with the aftermath:** "This person is going to be very hurt and may even try to finagle their way into other people's ears," says Carle. "Keep in mind that you may end up with some negative press around you, but that all comes with the territory."

**Julian Kesner**

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