

Vanished INTO THIN AIR

In today's digital age, we're more connected than ever but with insidious social trends like ghosting becoming more commonplace, we've never been so disconnected either

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Communication has rapidly evolved over the last two decades and thanks to the internet, social media and smartphones, it has never been easier to form and maintain connections with others. An unfortunate by-product though of living in today's hyper-connected world is the effect it has had on how we choose to cease contact with others and end relationships. Technology has given us new and effortless ways to prune our contact list and stop unwarranted interactions; the most notable of these being 'ghosting'.

Ghosting is a colloquial term that refers to the practice of one person ending all forms of communication with another, without prior warning or justification. Messages are left on 'read', calls are ignored, and social media ties may be severed. They (the ghoster) suddenly disappear, leaving

the other person (the ghostee) haunted by unanswered questions as to what they did wrong to cause such a brutal and abrupt end to the relationship. In a recent study by the University of Georgia, it was discovered that two thirds of participants had been both perpetrators and victims of ghosting on several occasions. Another report by the Thriving Center of Psychology found that 84% of Millennial and Gen Z participants had been ghosted by someone, yet 65% of them had also engaged in ghosting behaviour themselves.

The word 'ghosting' first entered the cultural zeitgeist during the early 2000s, but it didn't become a popular expression until the mid-2010s, with the surge in online dating seeing it being added to the Collins English Dictionary in 2015. Although we usually associate ghosting with dating and romantic liaisons, it has become an increasingly used word within

other social spheres, such as platonic and professional relationships. In today's competitive job market, it is now the norm for job seekers to be met with radio silence by prospective employers after sending out an application or attending an interview. This can work both ways too - an employee might quit without giving notice or the new hire is suddenly nowhere to be seen on their first day of work. In the realm of family and friends, being ghosted might manifest in being unexpectedly deleted and blocked on social media, having a friend persistently bail out on plans at the last minute or having a loved one be a no-show at a party they RSVPed to.

Why do people ghost others?

It would be a mistake though to believe that ghosting is an entirely new phenomenon - the act of suddenly cutting contact with others has existed well before the dawn of the digital age. Ghosting can be likened to the modern-day version of someone 'popping to the shops and never coming back'. The difference, however, is that with technology monopolising so many of our social interactions with others nowadays, it has never been easier for

“MESSAGES ARE LEFT ON 'READ', CALLS ARE IGNORED, AND SOCIAL MEDIA TIES MAY BE SEVERED”

us to disappear, thanks to the anonymity that our online presence grants us.

Before the internet, many of our relationships were formed in person and within inter-connected circles, typically through friends or at work. It would have been much harder to completely sever contact with someone without the awkwardness of bumping into them or facing negative social implications within the community. In our current climate though, with so many of our relationships being initiated online with strangers and with fewer connections in common, there are fewer consequences, if any at all, to deal with if we decide to disconnect from someone in a less-than-ethical way.

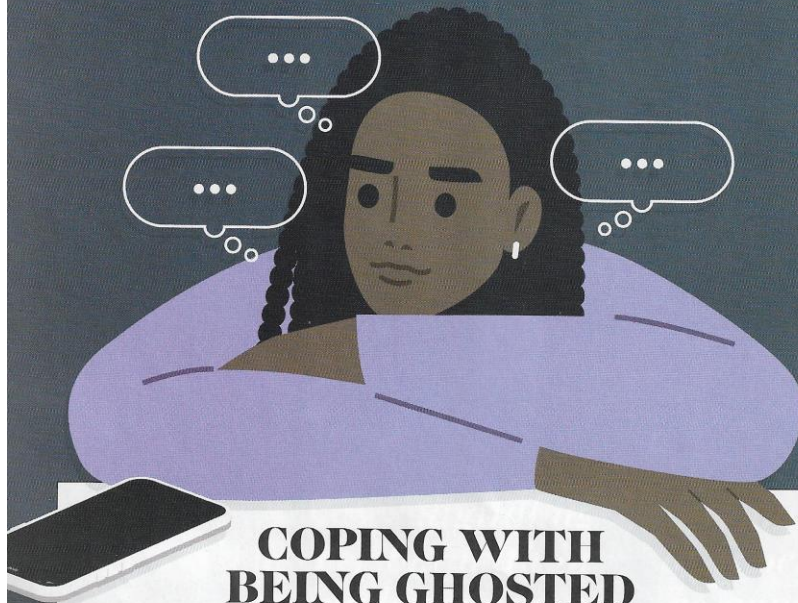
Ghosting can be seen as an effortless solution for avoiding the emotional messiness of having to explain to somebody why you no longer want to continue engaging with them. It is an ideal way out for those who find it difficult to have uncomfortable conversations due to the fear of the other person's reaction or of being seen as the 'bad guy'. Deliberately avoiding confrontation can be a form of self-protection to safeguard the ghoster from anxiety or stress, especially if they have had negative experiences dealing with conflict in the past or lack effective communication skills. The ghoster may see cutting all contact as a less harsh approach

than direct rejection, and use this as a justification for their behaviour.

Ghosting culture can also be interpreted as resulting from the unlimited choices »

“GHOSTING IS AN IDEAL WAY OUT FOR THOSE WHO DON'T LIKE UNCOMFORTABLE CONVERSATIONS”





COPING WITH BEING GHOSTED

SET A TIME LIMIT

If your repeated attempts to contact someone are being ignored, message them to say that you're giving them X number of days to reply or you'll assume that the relationship is over.

ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR FEELINGS

Allow yourself to feel hurt, angry or sad. Consider if any old wounds are being triggered by this current situation and what personal work needs to be done to heal them.

AVOID SELF-BLAME

Focus on their behaviour and not yours. Ghosting is more of a reflection of the perpetrator and their issues so don't internalise their actions as a measure of your worth.

SEEK CLOSURE ELSEWHERE

You will probably never gain closure from your ghoster as to why they chose to end the relationship, so find other ways to achieve it. This could involve journalling or talking to a trusted friend.

LEARN FROM THE EXPERIENCE

Use this situation as an opportunity for personal growth. Contemplate how you can set clearer boundaries and foster healthier communication within your relationships.

“IT HAS BECOME TOO EASY TO VIEW OTHERS AS COMMODITIES, READY TO TRADE IN AT THE CLICK OF A BUTTON”

that we now have at our fingertips when it comes to finding a new partner, job or social circle to join. With the huge array of possibilities out there for us to pick from, it has become far too easy to view others as commodities, ready to trade in at the click of a button for something bigger and better. Decision fatigue plays a factor too, especially when we are trying to balance numerous options and interactions all in one go. Ghosting provides a practical strategy for weeding out less desirable candidates and saving our energy and time from having to explain why they 'didn't make the cut', especially when there is no emotional investment there.

Who are more likely to ghost others?

Researchers have discovered that certain personality traits may play a role in making someone more likely to exhibit ghosting behaviour. One of these attributes is holding strong beliefs about the premise of destiny, as well as having a fatalist view of relationships. Those who believe that their dream partner or object of desire is out there waiting for them are more likely to engage in ghosting behaviour, especially when their current prospects are less than ideal. Those with a fixed mindset, who see life as already pre-determined, will be quicker to ditch a situation because they believe certain things are meant to be and don't see any potential for change. Those with a growth mindset, on the other hand, are less likely to ghost as they realise that relationships need a lot of time, work and effort to develop and don't come in a pre-prepared parcel ready for immediate consumption.

Another factor that plays a role is attachment style, which relates to how we learnt as children to interact and behave with others and is heavily influenced by our early bonds with caregivers. Studies

have shown that those with an avoidant attachment style, characterised by a strong desire for independence and a preference for avoiding intimacy, are much more likely to ghost others. This may stem from commitment issues or as a way of protecting themselves from feeling vulnerable or getting possibly hurt. Ghosting might be used as a deliberate act of self-sabotage if an avoidant finds themselves growing too close to another person. It can also be used as a way of keeping connections casual if there is a risk that the other person may require more effort and commitment than the ghoster is willing to give.

Researchers have also discovered that those who display high levels of 'Dark Triad' traits are more likely to be ghosters. The Dark Triad is a term referring to a group of three negative personality types – narcissism (characterised by grandiosity and egotism), Machiavellianism (a tendency to exploit others for self-interest) and psychopathy (a propensity for emotional coldness and anti-social behaviour). They all share a common feature, which is a lack of empathy. In relation to ghosting, those with low empathy either do not fully grasp the impact their behaviour may have on another person, or they simply do not care.

Why being ghosted hurts

Ghosting might be becoming more and more frequent these days, but that doesn't mean it has become any easier to deal with. The lack of closure that comes from being ghosted leaves the receiver in a perpetual state of confusion. The cues that are usually present in the breakdown of a relationship, such as a heated argument or a reduction in communication over time, may be absent in this case. The ghostee might then endlessly ruminate and re-examine every last interaction, to pinpoint a cause for the termination of the relationship. This usually leads to negative conclusions and self-blame, as a way of gaining certainty from the situation, but this only further erodes self-esteem and fosters feelings of inadequacy and devaluation.

Ghosting is painful because it is a form of social rejection, and humans are wired to be social beings. In a world where we are so accessible to others, knowing that we are being deliberately ignored by someone can be distressing. If we are repeatedly subjected to this type of behaviour, it can have a negative influence on our ability to form future relationships. We might be hesitant to initiate new connections or become hypervigilant for any signs of potential rejection, which further perpetuates feelings of loneliness and isolation.

HOW TO DISCONNECT ETHICALLY

If you decide that you want to end all communication with someone, you can choose the 'Caspering' approach as a friendlier alternative to ghosting. Named after the fictional cartoon character, Caspering is where you send a short, direct yet amicable explanation as to why you have chosen to end the relationship while expressing gratitude for any positive interactions you may have both had and wishing them well for the future. Using the sandwich method, where you deliver bad news, such as 'I'm not looking for a relationship right now', between two slices of positive feedback, helps to take the sting out of disconnecting, for both the messenger and the recipient. There is still a chance that you may get a negative response, but you have at least provided them with some form of closure, and how they choose to react is not your responsibility.

Being ghosted can be particularly painful for those with abandonment or attachment issues as it can reinforce beliefs about them being unlovable and unworthy. Being ghosted can reactivate old psychological wounds caused by previous instances of abandonment, betrayal or trauma, along with also having to contend with the grief from the loss of the current relationship. Moreover, studies have shown that those with an anxious attachment style, which is fuelled by a fear of abandonment and a need for constant validation and reassurance, are the most likely to fall victim to ghosting. This can be due to their heightened anxiety and clinginess being emotionally draining to the other person and subsequently driving them away, which only further feeds their fears of abandonment.

'It's not you, it's them'

Although it may not seem like it, it's not only the recipient who suffers from the consequences of ghosting. As a short-term solution, ghosting may provide immediate relief to the ghoster from having to deal with conflict, but it does not bode well for their future ability to navigate relationships. If ghosting and avoidance become a common occurrence in their social interactions with others, they risk missing out on healthy long-term relationships that require effective communication skills, problem-solving and trust in order to thrive.

In fact, ghosting usually says much more about the person doing it rather than the one experiencing it. Relying on passive-aggressive tactics like ghosting

is a clear sign that the individual lacks emotional intelligence or does not have the capacity to behave like a mature adult. If this becomes a regular pattern in their life, it may have detrimental effects on the perpetrator's own mental health. A German study in 2023 found that people who ghosted friends were much more likely to be depressed later on, partly because preserving relationships is vital to our emotional wellbeing.

Is it ever okay to ghost someone?

There are certain circumstances, however, where it might be acceptable, even necessary, to completely cut contact with someone. In cases of abuse, or in situations where you might feel unsafe or threatened, ghosting can be a precautionary method to avoid further interaction and potential harm. In some instances, it might be justifiable to sever all ties with someone who repeatedly violates your boundaries, despite previous warnings, or with someone who exhibits toxic behaviour that is having a negative impact on your mental health.

Disconnection is an unavoidable aspect of life but how we choose to end relationships is fully within our control. Instead of further perpetuating societal trends of disposable interactions and flaky behaviour, it is our responsibility as both individuals and as a collective to do better. It may seem cliché but adopting old-fashioned principles, such as treating others the way we would like to be treated, will prevent us from becoming a society haunted by ghoulish behaviour. ■

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