

WE know your little secret: You get jealous of your friends from time to time, right? But don't worry -- you've got nothing to be ashamed of. According to experts, little flashes of envy can actually be a good thing. "In small doses, competition can motivate you to achieve more," says Jan Yager, Ph.D., author of *When Friendship Hurts: How to Deal With Friends Who Betray, Abandon or Wound You*. For example, seeing that a friend has dropped 10 pounds may inspire you to ditch your candy habit and hit the gym more frequently.

However, problems do arise when rivalry goes too far. Constantly comparing career successes, wardrobes, bank accounts or your love lives can wear down your self-esteem -- and your friendship. "Competition becomes unhealthy when it makes you feel bad about yourself," says Susan Perry, Ph.D., a psychologist who specialises in self-esteem and relationship issues. If you leave a date with a friend feeling deflated and frustrated with yourself instead of relaxed and happy, then things may be getting out of hand. "One of the main ingredients in a positive friendship is that both people feel that they can be themselves and don't have to impress each other," says Dr. Yager.

So how does a little envy turn into a big green monster? "It's easy to become jealous of people if they're in the same realm as us or have the same goals we have," says Dr. Perry. That could explain why you have no problem shrugging off Jennifer Lopez's gargantuan engagement ring, but feel oddly irked when your best pal shows off her rock. Also, people tend to harbour an irrational belief that there's only so much good stuff to go around. Perry says it's common to fear that if your friend finds a nice home or a great guy before you do, you'll never get those things for yourself. But the root of the problem is not your friend's amazing luck, but your own flagging sense of self-esteem. "People who try to beat others all the time are attempting to bolster their self-image," says psychologist Tina Tessina, Ph.D.

The good news: If your relationship is falling victim to a "me vs. you" mentality -- whether you yourself or your pal are guilty of ramping up the competition -- there are steps you can take to call off the contest and revive the friendship. Here's how:

If you are the jealous party:

Think before you speak. Be conscious of your jealous feelings and catch yourself before you say something that might hurt your friend, says Dr. Tessina. If you feel the need to get your feelings out into the open, then prepare what you'd like to say -- and how you plan on responding if she

Friend Envy

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doesn't take it well. On a good note, she may take the opportunity to tell you about some of the things in your life that she's envious of, which may make you feel that you're on equal footing.

Acknowledge your issues. If you feel that you're competing on a regular basis, you need to take a look inside. "If you feel bad about yourself every time a friend achieves something, you may have some self-esteem issues," says Perry. If that's the case, consider seeing a counsellor who can help you work through your feelings.

Don't beat yourself up. Above all, keep in mind that competition is normal and doesn't mean you aren't a good friend. You might even find ways to make the competition work in favour of your friendship by channelling your -- or her -- competitive nature into a shared goal, such as training for a marathon. That way, you both end up with accomplishments you're proud of -- and you have some fun to boot. Isn't that what friends are for?

If your friend is jealous:

Talk to her. Gently approach your friend using "I" statements as in: "I love hanging out with you, but I don't like

when we compete. I'd like us to have a more supportive friendship, wouldn't you?" Your pal may be unaware of her competitive tendencies. Agree on a signal. Old habits die hard, so decide together on a word or phrase to use to alert your friend when she slips into hyper-competitive mode. Sometimes jokingly saying "OK, you win" is enough to remind her that your friendship is not a race. Create some distance. If your friend refuses to back down, start keeping details about your life to yourself, suggests Tessina. The less she knows, the less she'll be able to compare. Plus, she may sense that something is amiss and look at her own behaviour for the cause of the distance between you -- giving you an opening to discuss your concerns.

Avoid her triggers. If your friend is competitive in just one realm -- say, whose two-year-old is smarter -- then steer clear of kid-related conversations. If house envy is the problem, meet at a restaurant instead of each other's homes, suggests Yager.

Know when to let go. "If the problem is excessive, you have to consider whether this is someone you can be friends with," says Yager. Dana, 23, a merchandise co-ordinator, had to cut one super-competitive friend loose. "I couldn't change the fact that she was jealous about everything from the guys I dated to my clothes," she says. "Our so-called friendship wasn't worth the abuse I took, so I moved on with no regrets."

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