

# Why Is Everyone "Ghosting"?

IT'S THE THOROUGHLY MODERN WAY TO EXIT SOMEONE'S LIFE, BUT IT CAN STILL HURT LIKE HECK. HERE'S HOW TO DEAL WITH A GHOST—AND HOW TO AVOID BECOMING ONE YOURSELF.

By Jennifer King Lindley



**GHOSTS (NO, WE'RE NOT** talking about those who've gone beyond the grave) move silently among us, but they make their presence known just the same. The unreturned texts. The promising interview that results in radio silence. A close friend who suddenly drops off the face of the earth. When confronted by sticky situations and awkward endings, more and more of us are simply going *poof*.

Ghosting—cutting off contact with no explanation, even after someone repeatedly attempts to connect—is fast becoming the new “No, thank you.” The term seems to have originated in the online dating world: One in four people have been ghosted by a partner, and almost as many confess to ghosting other people, according to a 2018 study in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*. But it has quickly spread to new realms. The study's respondents said they thought ghosting friends was more acceptable than ghosting romantic partners. It occurs frequently in the workplace too: An increasing number of applicants don't show up for interviews or go into hiding after getting job offers, says Catherine Mattice Zundel, founder of the consulting group Civility Partners.

(Some, inexplicably, don't appear for their first day.) "Microghosting" is also on the rise—those small, silent brush-offs we all smart from daily. Don't want to help with the annual potluck? Ignore your neighbor's voicemail and hope the problem drifts away.

True, there have always been disappearing acts. Back in the day, we'd stare fretfully at the unblinking eye of our one lone answering machine. "But it's now becoming a more normalized part of the landscape," says Leah LeFebvre, PhD, professor of communication studies at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, who studies the phenomenon. Why the recent invasion of crickets? We are being nibbled to death by a constant stream of IMs, texts, voicemails, and Stories, all with a needy person on the other end. Overwhelmed, we throw up our hands and retreat. In a world where you may have 600 Facebook friends and 1,000 LinkedIn connections, relationships can begin to feel disposable (swipe, swipe, swipe!).

"We have direct access to so many more people today and no overlapping social ties with most of them," says LeFebvre. "If we disappear on somebody, we may think it won't have any negative ramifications. There isn't the fear of a mutual friend saying, 'Hey, why did you do that to him?'" With a plethora of electronic curtains to hide behind, we're also getting rusty at an essential relationship skill—having difficult IRL conversations. It's easier to just not deal. "Our devices lull us into the sense that we can tightly manage all interpersonal communication and live without ever having to experience awkwardness," says

Alexandra Solomon, PhD, author of *Loving Bravely: 20 Lessons of Self-Discovery to Help You Get the Love You Want*.

Dissolving into the ether may seem like a way to spare people's feelings, which might be why even nonjerks seem to be doing it so much now. But in reality, silence is a blunt instrument, says Solomon: "The other person takes it as 'I don't matter. I'm invisible.'" When a heartfelt catch-up message to an old colleague goes unanswered, it stings. (*We were work spouses. Now I'm not worth a reply.*)

Multiply this pain by a million when someone close to you—a friend, family member, romantic partner—goes dark. (*He can't have been abducted by Martians; he just updated his Instagram!*) "It's like if you've had a cat who went out the back door one day and never came home," says Catherine Newman, *Real Simple's* resident etiquette expert. "You're always wondering, worrying, holding on to hope. It prevents you from grieving and getting over it."



Ghosting costs the ghoster as well. "Earlier studies on the silent treatment show people find it effortful and unpleasant to intentionally not speak to someone," says Gili Freedman, PhD, assistant professor of psychology at St. Mary's College of Maryland. Every "Where are you?" text is a reminder of your cowardly dodge. In folklore, some ghosts return to their earthly stomping grounds because they're plagued by unfinished business; you'll be haunted too. "Unfinished tasks are distracting and upsetting and act as a pebble in our shoe," says Solomon. As a life strategy, ghosting is short-sighted. You avoid the immediate discomfort of a difficult conversation, yes, but "you are burning bridges," says Zundel. The person you stood up for a networking coffee date may be the hiring manager for a job you want in five years. And do you really want to have to hide in the bathroom when you see the Hinge date you went dark on at a party?

For the sake of everyone's feelings and a more respectful world, it's time to bring back the direct approach. "Doing the right thing doesn't always feel good in the moment," says Newman. "But there are very few cases where going silent is the right thing to do. Falling off the planet is the opposite of empathy, courtesy, and graciousness." So return that message. Brace yourself for the clarifying goodbye. "Afterward you'll see yourself as brave, kind, and assertive," says Solomon. "It's Golden Rule stuff." Here are expert tips on ghostbusting of all kinds.

## IF YOU'RE THINKING OF GHOSTING SOMEONE...

**Know what to say to friends and romantic partners.** Not every close relationship is supposed to last forever. But abruptly going into eternal hiding can hurt the other person for years. (Aren't you still pained by your best friend from junior high who iced you out without a word?)

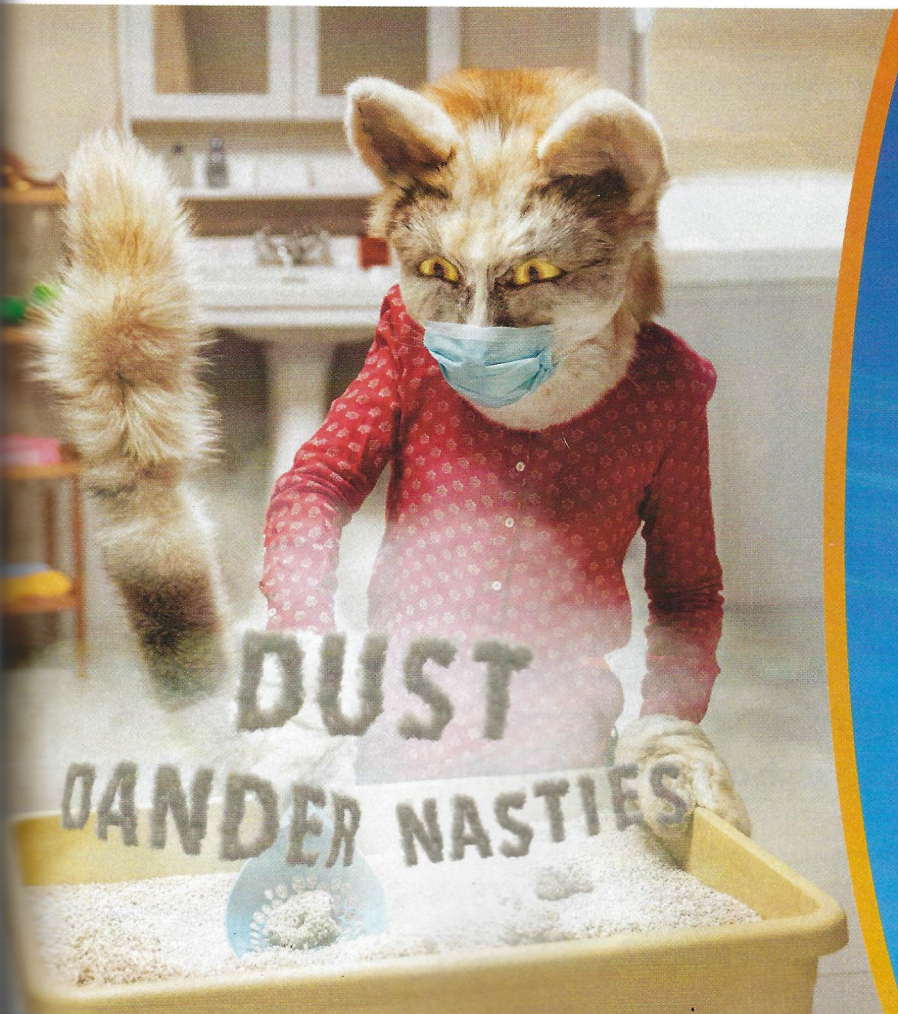
What often tempts us to ghost is having no idea what to say. "We are socialized in this culture to shy away from goodbyes. They are awkward and uncomfortable, and we would

rather just not have them. But doing so can be healing for both of you," says Elisabeth LaMotte, a psychotherapist in Washington, D.C.

While every situation is different, there are some basic ground rules. A face-to-face goodbye is best. (If you absolutely can't deal with that, a letter, email, or even text is better than nothing at all, says LaMotte.) Start with the positive: To set a tone of empathy and kindness, share a quality you have enjoyed about the person. During your talk, keep your comments "I" focused—now is not the time to recite a litany of complaints about the other person. You are beyond wanting to repair things (and trust: They will have their own list). Instead, describe the situation in terms of what you are

thinking, feeling, and wanting. Be kind but clear. "Own it. I have lots of good memories with you. I wish you all good things. But I am not able to put any more energy into this friendship," says Solomon. "You are responsible for speaking your own truth with compassion, but you are not responsible for the other person's reaction."

Avoid trying to soften the blow with insincere hedging. ("Who knows? Maybe I will feel differently someday.") It just extends the agony. "Sorry" may not help either, suggests Freedman's research. Her 2017 study in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology* found that rejections that included apologies were perceived as more hurtful than



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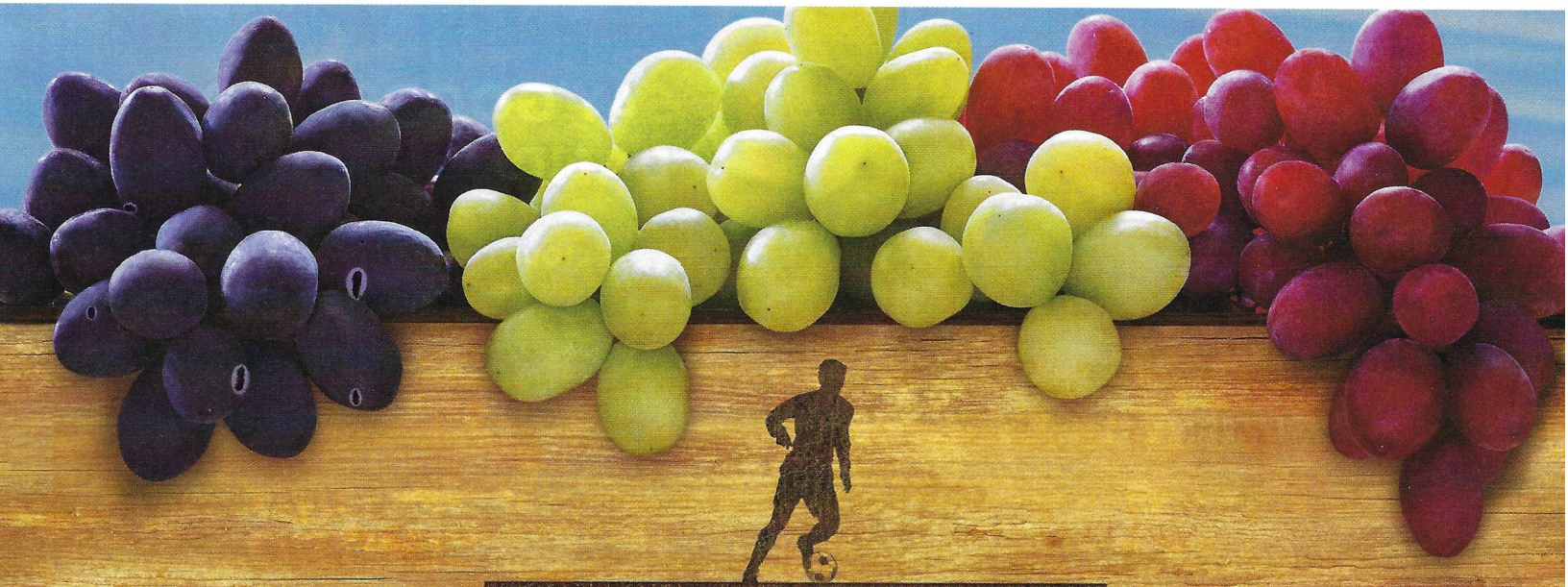
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those that didn't. "The other person feels obliged to say 'I forgive you' when they don't actually feel it," she explains.

Yes, the other person may feel bad and mad. But your clear message will help them heal faster. "We misjudge others' resilience when we tell ourselves they can't handle our rejections," says Solomon. In fact, a real goodbye can help prepare you both for future relationships. "We can learn about our effect on others and reflect on what we might do differently next time," says Michelle Drouin, PhD, a relationship and technology expert in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Ghosting, in contrast, just leaves people shaking their heads in confusion.

**Choose a kinder fade-out when appropriate.** It's a brave new world out there. Case in point: What do you owe someone on a dating app you occasionally chatted with about windsurfing for a week? "We all have limited emotional energy. Having a big conversation suggests an investment in a relationship when you don't have one," says Solomon. Be clear but brief. Overkill: "I am not texting you back, because I am breaking up with you!" Kind and polite: "It was nice chatting with you. Have fun out there!" Better than just going silent, it costs you nothing and saves the other person from endlessly wondering if you were kidnapped midtext or trying to pick back up later to discuss sushi. Plus, practicing being clear with people online can help prevent silence from becoming your go-to in real life.

In some cases, a slow fade is the kindest out, says Newman. Once upon a time, you and a mom-group acquaintance bonded over your babies. You have since drifted miles apart—a chasm that suits you fine. If she persists in sending you occasional invites, a wan "Life's crazy, so I have to pass" (repeat as needed) is usually enough to send the message. With these kinds of superficial connections, no one is served by being blunt. "Even if it were the truth, I don't think I would ever brutalize someone by saying, 'You are boring and I don't want to spend time



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with you ever again,” says Newman. Always a good rule of thumb: Think about how you would like to be treated if the tables were turned.

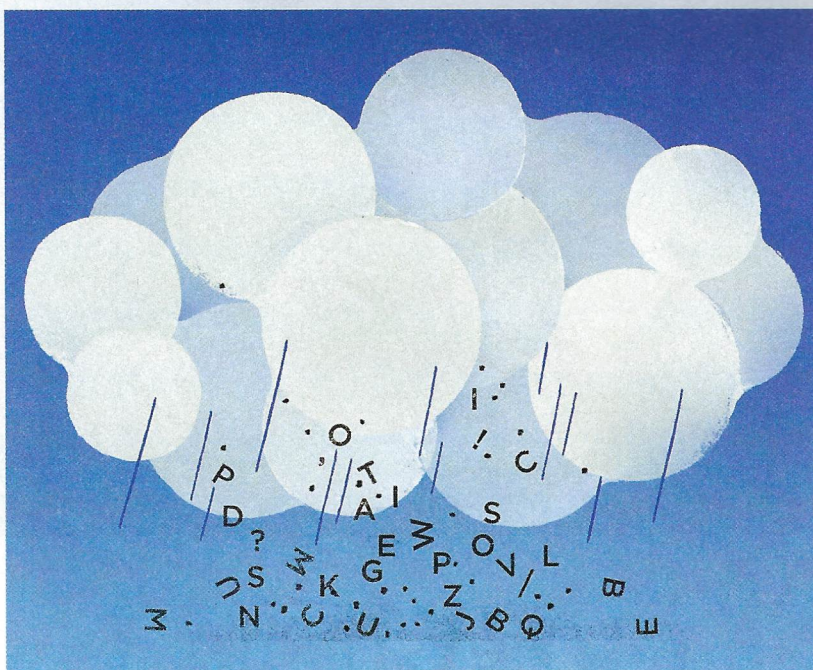
**Manage awkward requests gracefully.**

More and more, radio silence is the answer to life's trickier asks. Say a friend of a friend “reaches out” to ask for a professional favor you don't have time for. You feel bad you can't oblige and are tempted to avoid them entirely and pretend you never got the email. A nicer strategy than microghosting: Deploy the classic “no sandwich,” suggests attorney Sheila Heen, who teaches negotiation at Harvard Law School and coauthored *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*. Layer a clear refusal between two positive statements. “I'm flattered our friend Joe thinks I'm an expert on this! I am just totally overwhelmed, and I don't have the bandwidth to help. But it sounds like a cool project!” They will feel like they've received your respect, if not your assistance. “Above all, everyone wants to feel seen,” says Heen. (As for simply not showing up for a job interview or the first day of work? Um, please don't do that.)

**IF YOU'VE BEEN GHOSTED...**

**Rest assured that rejection almost always stings.**

“The ambiguity of being ghosted can create anxiety,” says LeFebvre. Too often we fill in the blank by blaming ourselves. “You start ruminating: ‘What did I do? There must be something wrong with me,’” says Erika Martinez, PsyD, a licensed psychologist in Miami, Florida. Trying to solve the mystery can result in unhealthy behaviors—sending a barrage of texts, creeping on the other person's social media—that can get dark fast, she says. If it's at all manageable, do your best to let it lie and find a way to move on.



**If necessary, take (a little)**

**action.** Being shut out without a word can make you feel like you have no control, says Freedman. One antidote is to take action. When met with an echoing void, it's fine to message the person briefly, says Drouin. “Call them out on their disappearance in a dignified way. ‘I am not sure why we are not communicating, but if you want to get in contact again, I am open to it.’ That's a mature thing to do.” Adds Solomon, “One of my graduate students asked someone she dated for an ‘exit interview.’ He owned his ghosting of her, which helped her see it as *his* issue.” Likewise, you can politely ask for feedback if you don't hear a peep after a promising job interview, says Zundel.

**Think of silence as its own message.**

Regarding much-yearned-for closure: “Realize a nonanswer is an answer. Don't take that as ambiguous. Take that as ‘I don't want to speak to you,’” says Drouin. And take heart in the fact that the disappearance says more about the ghoster than about you, our experts agree. A hiring manager who never gives you an answer has just told you something important about what it would have been like to work with them. “I tell clients that this person is showing you how they handle conflict and interpersonal relationships,” says Martinez. “They may be struggling with issues that have nothing to do with you.”

Muster up whatever empathy and compassion you can for the person who ghosted you, advises Martinez. It will likely help you feel better faster. Above all, surround yourself with supportive people—the kind who, through thick or thin, won't just disappear.