

## Honest Communication in the Age of Ghosting

*It can be awkward to deliver a rejection, but job applicants and potential dates deserve the courtesy of certainty*



Illustration: Fabio Consoli

By Jenny Taitz

Hate wondering and waiting? We all do. That's why it's important to let people in your personal and professional life know when to expect to hear from you, and also to say what you mean, clearly and kindly, even when it isn't what they want to hear. As a clinical psychologist, I've seen that many people find the prospect of disappointing someone so cringeworthy that they prefer to skip a potentially awkward exchange and just disappear—a practice popularly known as “ghosting.”

A 2021 survey of 500 job seekers and 500 employers by the employment website Indeed found that 77% of candidates had experienced ghosting from prospective employers, while 28% of candidates acknowledged doing the ghosting themselves. When it comes to personal relationships, a survey of more than 500 people published in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* in 2018 found that 25% of respondents had been ghosted by someone they were dating, and 38% by a friend.

Though my clients often find it uncomfortable to deliver bad news, I encourage them to offer others the courtesy of certainty. Studies show that being left hanging or obsessing over mixed messages—when someone gives you reason to hope, then pulls away, known as “breadcrumbing”—decreases life satisfaction and fuels loneliness more profoundly than disappearing completely. Your job as a compassionate human being is to “Give people predictability,” explains Dr. Robert Sutton, who teaches organizational behavior at Stanford Graduate School of Business and is the author of “The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn't.”

When someone we know morphs from attentive to aloof without explanation, it's disconcerting and maddening. In a famous experiment in the 1970s, psychologist Edward Tronick of the University of Massachusetts Boston studied what happens when

mothers warmly engage with their babies and then suddenly withdraw. The children became palpably distraught, illustrating how human beings innately crave validation. Whatever your age, it's normal to want responsiveness.

That's why learning to say no with kindness is something we all need to practice. Though you don't need to formally break up with someone after one meeting or reply to every message you receive on LinkedIn, "If someone you've engaged with contacts you, you have to respond," says Dr. Guy Winch, a clinical psychologist and co-host of the podcast "Dear Therapists." While at times you can't help having to disappoint someone, reaching out promptly and offering compassion eases the sting.

It can be hard to find the right words when you fear that they will make someone feel worse. "Many people do the ghosting because they don't know what to say," Dr. Winch says. It can help to draft empathetic responses beforehand, and you can tweak them later depending on the circumstances. When my clients ask me for some sort of template, I suggest including an empathetic acknowledgment, a direct update and a warm parting. One rejection I received shortly after I applied for a position was so effective that I kept it to use as an example: "Thank you for your efforts yesterday. I think you did a great job. We all did. The fact that the group is planning to move to the next step with another therapist should in no way imply otherwise. I wish we could choose two therapists!"

While it's good to be direct, you don't need to delve into details. Deciding whether someone is a good fit is subjective and you don't want someone to walk away feeling like there is something wrong with them. Especially in the workplace, you could open yourself up to legal risks by saying too much, warns Dr. Sutton.

Much of how someone absorbs your message comes from your tone. When possible, I suggest reaching out by phone or sending a voice memo so that your warmth comes through. Once you're in a conversation, "Rather than choosing the perfect words, be present to how the person is responding," suggests Kim Scott, author of "Radical Candor: Be a Kick-Ass Boss Without Losing Your Humanity."

It's natural to feel awkward when you approach a conversation that may disappoint someone, especially if you're a naturally compassionate person. "Getting rejected is most painful, doing the rejecting is second to that," says Dr. Winch.

But trying to avoid feeling negative emotions can actually make you feel worse. Rather than delegate the task of delivering bad news to someone else, like the human resources department, you can think of doing it yourself as a chance to exercise your empathy muscles. "Part of your job is the ability to do dirty work," Dr. Sutton says. Besides, it's a small world and your reputation reverberates: "Ghosting creates lots of personal harm that others will remember."

Proactively communicating a rejection can also save you time, since dealing with repeated follow-up inquiries is draining. "It takes no more effort to say something quickly and clearly versus not replying," says Ms. Scott. Just as you took the time to meet with someone, do them the courtesy of investing a few minutes to close the communication loop. If you're actively dating or hiring and find yourself procrastinating on rejections, set a short daily window where you'll tend to this task, even for 10 minutes. "A little goes a long way," says Greg McKeown, a leadership consultant and the author of "Effortless: Make It Easier to Do What Matters Most."

If you're honest and warm, it's possible to maintain your self-respect and likability while delivering frustrating information. When Dr. Gil Winch, a psychologist and organizational consultant (and twin brother of Guy), had to furlough the majority of his employees because of the pandemic, he tried to make the experience less stressful by sending five-minute weekly video updates, conveying that he cared about the team, even if he wasn't exactly sure what would happen next.

The people we interact with aren't just email addresses or avatars on dating apps. All of us are vulnerable, and we all want to feel safe and seen. In these uncertain times, saying no to ghosting is one way to act like we're all part of an interconnected community.

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