

Do we have to accept invitations when we don't want them?



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Psychologist Laurie Betito, shown at her book launch and signing in Montreal on Sept. 16, 2014, suggests taking the honest route when letting people down if you don't want to continue spending time with them.

One morning years ago, on a standing-room-only 66 bus heading downtown during rush hour, a chatty colleague I knew vaguely from one of the local wire services invited me out to dinner.

He had a loud voice and the invitation was issued at such volume across the aisle in the crowded bus that I was convinced everyone on board had heard it. In my very early 20s, I had not yet marshalled the resources to respond with the required aplomb to the uncomfortable social situations that life sometimes lobs at us. So I said yes – even though I had no interest in having dinner with him.

He was friendly enough. But in accepting that first invitation, I set into motion a pattern that would last for some years: Every so often, he'd call to invite me to dinner or coffee or a movie. And I would take his calls and accept his invitations, even though they were not welcome: Saying yes meant choosing the path of least resistance.

We do it in romantic relationships, but also others kinds of relationships: There are people we call friends who do not always have our best interests at heart, who have agendas and their own issues. It's true also in other ventures, like study or career plans. It's always simpler to follow the path you believe you see set out in front of you than to try to deviate from it.

There was never anything romantic between me and the guy from the bus – and, when he moved to another city, the calls stopped. But for a long time, I continued to believe it was incumbent on me to accept invitations even if I didn't particularly want to, even if I found the people proffering them to be inconsiderate or self-absorbed, even if they didn't make me feel good about myself.

But turning down an invitation is awkward. It risks hurting the feelings of the person issuing it. And so, crazily, it is often easier to go out with someone whose company we don't especially enjoy than to say no. More than anything about those evenings with the fellow from the bus, I remember the relief felt as I turned the key of the door to my apartment once they were over.

In youth, you feel time stretching out before you on a canvas so expansive that it that feels infinite. It's not, of course – and eventually you come to understand that. It's a sombre realization, but it's also emancipating.

You realize that you do not have all the time in the world and you understand that, if you are going to spend the time you do have trying to

please others, it's likely you will never get around to doing what you yourself want to do.



To tell yourself that it's all right - a good idea, even - to refuse the invitations of those with whom you do not wish to spend time or invest energy or affection is hugely liberating.

In hindsight, I realize that I did myself no favours by accepting invitations I did not want. I did not honour the people extending them, but worse, I did not honour myself. I wasted a lot of time.

Along the way, there were those who rejected me — romantically and otherwise. And it hurt. I was not always sanguine about the rejections, but in my heart, I envied the people for having the guts to just walk away from something they didn't want.

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The other night I was listening to psychologist Laurie Betito's CJAD 800 radio show, *Passion*, as I drove home from work. One of the subjects she raised was how to let people down when you don't want to continue spending time with them. She suggested saying something like, “‘You know. I really didn't feel that we clicked, so I'm going to pass.’ Go the honest route,” she suggested.

Don't be cruel, she went on to say: Don't say anything hurtful or insulting. No need to go into details about specifically what bothers you about the person you're rejecting. Betito reached out to her callers to ask what they thought – and one responded that the best way to handle the situation is to

just do it: Go ahead and say that it's not working. "Rip it off like a Band-Aid." Make it clear that you wish the other person happiness, the caller said —but that it won't be with you.

I listened – and confess that I was envious at how together the caller sounded. Just as it never feels good to be rejected, it doesn't feel good to be the one doing the rejecting. But her advice was sage, it was realistic, and it sounded like a plan — a plan that could have saved me all kinds of time. All kinds of time.

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