
Don't Let Ghosting Ruin Your Relationships



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Ghosting is social rejection without any explanation - but not without care.

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The internet would have you believe that ghosting is a social sin of the highest order. Be it in a professional setting or personal context, unilaterally cutting off communication without warning or explanation has been painted as [insensitive](#), [disrespectful](#) and even [unethical](#).

Although ghosting is by no means a new phenomenon, the advent of online interactions has made it more visible, prevalent and perhaps easier – with the mere click of a button or the swipe of a finger, we can end a relationship without notice. In the dating world, [two-thirds](#) of young adults have reported ghosting others, while [three-quarters](#) have been ghosted. Ghosting is also on the rise in the [job market](#), with more than 90 percent of respondents to a [poll](#) revealing that they'd been ghosted during the application process.

In a new [paper](#) published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, [Yejin Park](#) from New York University and I (Nadav Klein) studied whether the decision to ghost is driven by selfish motives, or if there is more to the story. Are ghosters (those who ghost) really the menaces to society that some people make them out to be, or do they actually care about ghostees (those who are ghosted) more than the latter think?

What motivates ghosting

Ghosters are often viewed negatively because their actions can cause real psychological harm. Indeed, over the course of our research, we spoke to someone who had set up an entire company dedicated to helping people recuperate from being ghosted. Being ghosted is certainly not a pleasant experience, and ghostees can't be faulted for thinking that ghosters don't care for their well-being. However, we suggest that ghosters aren't purely motivated by selfish reasons.

Think about the last time you ghosted someone. You might have done so because you didn't have time, or you simply forgot. But it's also possible that you thought that telling the ghostee that you are ending the relationship – and explaining exactly why – may negatively affect the latter's well-being. By comparison, you may have viewed ghosting them as the lesser evil that would spare their feelings.

We first ran a series of pilot studies to distinguish ghosting from other rejection behaviours, such as exclusion and ignoring. We then conducted eight experiments to explore the relational and motivational implications of ghosting. These included asking participants to recall instances in which they were either ghosters or ghostees; partake in real-time ghosting experiences; and respond to hypothetical ghosting scenarios.

In line with our predictions, we found that participants who chose to ghost were not oblivious to the pain that rejection causes others. Rather, on top of self-oriented motives – including the desire to avoid having unpleasant or awkward conversations – the ghosters in our study were motivated by other-oriented reasons, such as not wanting to hurt the other person's feelings.

This was especially so when the reason for ghosting was likely to inflict pain and reflect badly on the person being rejected (i.e. the ghoster did not think they were socially compatible).

Our research also suggests that ghostees underestimate the level of care that ghosters have for their well-being. In other words, ghosters ghost in part to avoid causing pain to ghostees, but this reality is lost on ghostees. One reason for this is that the negative ordeal of being ghosted leads one to oversimplify the motives underlying the choice to ghost. It is hard to have a positive inference about a negative incident, and the most straightforward assumption when you've been ghosted is that the ghoster does not care about you.

Another interesting finding was that ghosters can misperceive the effect of ghosting on others, believing that cutting off contact entirely is better than saying something negative. But in reality, ghostees often prefer the closure that comes with a clear-cut rejection more than ghosters think. These insights highlight a mismatch in assumptions and perceptions between the two groups.

The effect on social networks

What are the consequences of ghosting on social networks? For starters, it may make ghostees less likely to reach out to the person who ghosted them for help in the future, as they've determined that the ghoster doesn't care about them. After all, if the person could not even make the minimal effort required to provide a response, they'd probably not engage in any future communication, let alone offer their assistance.

Our experiments tell a different story. In one of them, participants assigned to the ghoster condition were asked to imagine that after six months of no contact, the individual they ghosted got in touch with them to ask for advice in an area they were proficient in. We asked them whether they would help that person. Meanwhile, those assigned to the ghostee condition were asked whether they thought someone who ghosted them in the past would be willing to help them in the aforementioned scenario.

We found that ghosters were more likely to offer help than ghostees predicted. This suggests that ghostees who misperceive the willingness of ghosters to offer future help – and, as a result, choose not to get in touch at all – may be missing out on opportunities for valuable [help exchange](#) and negatively impacting their social networks. Of course, it can be extremely uncomfortable to reach out to someone who previously ghosted you, and there are likely others you’d prefer to turn to for help. However, the fact that someone ghosted you in the first place and probably feels guilty for doing so may actually make them more likely to lend a hand down the road.

How to deal with ghosting

Closing the gap between ghosters’ and ghostees’ perceptions of each other’s motives could help curb the negative effects of ghosting on the latter’s well-being and social networks. The next time someone ghosts you, try not to jump to cynical conclusions about their intentions. While it may seem counterintuitive, making a positive inference instead of letting yourself think the worst could actually be beneficial. If you’re right, you can retain that relationship. If you’re wrong, you don’t really lose all that much.

For the ghosters: The next time you feel compelled to ghost someone, even if it’s to save them from the sting of being rejected, remember that it’s not the best thing for their well-being. Taking a few minutes to craft and send a response can eliminate ambiguity, show the other party you care and, for lack of a better phrase, allow them to get on with their lives.

If you find yourself ghosting others frequently, it might point to an issue with how you manage your time or, if you’re in a leadership role, your delegation skills. Good leaders are able to parcel out tasks and responsibilities among their team effectively. This should make them less likely to ghost, as it frees up time for them to respond in a way that’s beneficial to the other party and reflects well on them and their organisation.

Ghosters may get a bad rap, but they are not bad people. Most – if not all – of us have made errors in judgement when thinking about how our actions affect others. With a little bit more empathy and understanding, ghosters

and ghostees can better understand each other's perspectives and motivations, which could go a long way towards preserving both professional and personal networks.

This article originally appeared on [Fortune.com](https://fortune.com).

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About the research

"[Ghosting: Social rejection without explanation, but not without care](#)" is published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*.