When a friend talks WAAAAAAAY too much

Your face is smiling but you're thinking, 'SHUT UP!' Sali Hughes has been there...

I've known one of my closest friends, Jess, for over 20 years. She's loyal, generous, kind and funny. We hang about in each other's kitchens, talking 19 to the dozen over a bottle or three... Although when I say 'talking', I should explain that I am largely mute; Jess takes care of the 'conversation', filling every second of air space with talk about herself: what she's just bought in Whistles, what her boyfriend's colleague said at the work's party, what her neighbour had the audacity to do last week... and on. And on. I mainly pour wine, nod and occasionally try to change the subject before I inadvertently remind her of something else she'd like to share about herself.

Rampant rabbit

Conversation hijackers. We all know one – somebody who needs to dominate every conversation, contribute the key points, experiences and anecdotes, and, ideally, the laughs as well. Tiresome, isn't it? They're like people living in a *Big Brother* audition 24/7, only they're preaching to an audience of existing friends. With Jess, I've even turned it into a game: how far can I count before we revert to *her* life? (It's an achievement to reach double figures.)

Listening to a pal quack on endlessly about themselves can be annoying, and sometimes feels like a sackable offence. But is that really fair? Psychotherapist Lucy Beresford claims our conversation-hijacking friends could actually be trying to empathise with our problems. "Actually, one can't assume that a very talkative person is self-absorbed," she says. "Often they're trying to make a connection with you by giving an example about themselves. They're trying to tell you, in their own way, 'I'm with you – I did that, I understand.' She even says that a friend who seems self-obsessed in conversation may actually feel inferior.

'They're like people living in a *Big Brother* audition 24/7'

"Some people talk about themselves because they're insecure; they're often trying to prove to *themselves* that they're clever, interesting or funny."

We've all been there, right? And I can't help but wonder if we are *all* conversation hijackers at times, just with different people. With Jess, I've learnt to be quiet. But when I hang with Kate, I tend to be the noisy one; when I meet Sarah and Julia, we're all so chatty we might as well hand round a talking pass, like at primary school. Lucy agrees: "People can be very changeable, depending on who they're with. Some are listeners in friendships; talkers in romance."

Feel-bad friendship?

None of this is to downplay the problem of a friend who considers her traumas intrinsically greater than yours, her stories funnier, her achievements more worthy of celebration. Realising you're spending what should be fun times with someone who makes you feel inferior is a call for action. And at that point, the relentless monologue might not be the only thing that needs to end. "Over time, it can undermine your confidence," says Lucy. "If you've tried saying, for example, 'Thanks for sharing that with me, but can we go back to my problems, because I'm really struggling here?' without any result, then you should be spending less time with that person."

But in the meantime, we could perhaps all use a little tolerance and acknowledge our chatterbox friends' good points. And Jess *is* lovely. She doesn't think she's better or more interesting than me. I know I can call her in the middle of the night if I'm chained to a phone box in a hen costume, or have woken up to find a fox in my room (yes, really – let's not go there), and once she's finished telling me about that time she, er, fell off a lifeguard in Thailand, she'll always be right beside me, helping me out of a jam. I don't want to consider whatever it is she has to tolerate in *me*, but all that chatter is probably a fair swap. ◆

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