

You're Not Invited

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DISCLAIMER

The strategies and advice presented in this book are not a substitute for professional counselling or therapy. Seek guidance from qualified professionals for personalized support.

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DEDICATION

To anyone who's ever been left off the invite list— this
is for you. You *are* invited into this space with great
love and appreciation.



Big sis—thank you for inspiring me.

INTRODUCTION

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When you think of being ‘left out’, your mind probably flashes back to your school days. Those years when you desperately hoped not to get picked last in gym class. That awful lunch hour you spent eating a salami sandwich in a toilet cubicle next to the girl with diarrhea (still better than eating alone in the cafeteria). ‘Left out’ makes you think of outsiders in teen movies like Andy Walsh in *Pretty in Pink*. Janis Ian in *Mean Girls*. Maybe *you* were the mean girl in school, but now the tables have turned.

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This was the case for me, one Friday night when I was scrolling through Instagram and came across a picture that sent me into a mini spiral. There it was: a selfie of my closest friends raising their glasses to the camera, all of them smiling. They were at some fancy new cocktail bar.

My first thought: *Where was my invite?*

And then: *Was it something I said? Was it something I did, or didn't do?*

And then: *Bitches.*

My mind raced from one paranoid thought to the next as I desperately tried to work out why my so-called friends had left me out. I thought of confronting them. 'Hey! *Where was my invite?*' Then I thought of sending them a super nice message, so that they knew that I'd seen the pic. 'Oh, *that looks like such a fun time!*' I even thought of taking the most passive aggressive approach of all by simply liking the picture.

But in the end, I did nothing.

I just sat at the kitchen counter with my shoulders slumped over, confused, angry and mostly hurt. All of this drama over an Instagram pic. It was like I was

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sixteen all over again...

...Except I was thirty-years old. An adult with a job, a car, a husband and a mortgage. But not being invited still hurt like hell. I tried to shrug it off. *This is so silly. It's just a photo. Get a grip.* But all that shrugging didn't take away the growing discomfort. In fact, the ache grew deeper the next time I met up with my friends. I kept second guessing everything I said. Our catch-ups felt awkward, when before they had been easy-going and fun. Before I knew it, my sense of self-worth was in tatters— all over a picture. I felt pathetic. Confused. Why was I taking it so hard?

Maybe you've been through something similar. Whether it's the happy hour gang at work making a quick exit to the pub without you, the yummy mummies at your kid's school who won't extend an invite to their book club—being left out hurts. And it doesn't matter that you were never interested in their pretentious book club in the first place. It still makes you feel like a loser when you're not invited. You feel rejected, small, like you're giving off a bad smell. You think—*what is wrong with me?* You shake your head. *I should be past this childish*

insecure stage.

It's not just you

The truth is that we have *all* felt excluded at some point in our adulting years. Think about it. You're thrown into countless scenarios on a daily basis which involve mixing with different people. Maybe you've moved to a new town. A new job. Maybe your kids have started school, and the other mums at the school gate are less than welcoming. You're still single while your friends are all coupled up and going on double dates *sans* you. Or they're further along with babies, and that just isn't in the cards for you (been there).

It's only logical that as an adult, you'll at some point feel excluded. You just don't really hear about it, so it feels like it must only be happening to you. *There must be something wrong with me*, you think. So now on top of the hurt and confusion from the rejection, you also feel embarrassed for taking it so hard.

I'll say it again for those in the back: you're not alone. Far from it. This book is here to shine a light on the

darker side of adult friendships. The disappointments, the anger and the (too often unspoken) hurt we all go through as we navigate these complex relationships. We're going to look at it *all* so that you can come out the other side, feeling empowered and more connected to the people around you.

How to get the most from this book

There are tons of guides and self-help books out there about romantic relationships. Friendships—not so much. It's like we're expected to have these complex relationships all figured out by the time we've left school. But just like in a romantic relationship, you need to put in the work. Friendships change because we change.

More than ever, as adults, we're suffering from loneliness and isolation, even as we're more connected through our tech. Feeling lonely can wear us down. It can even be the precursor to a range of illnesses. So we've got to stop pretending that friendships are not a big deal. They matter, and it's high time we take a good look at how we're showing up for them.

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This book is not just about being left out, though we deep dive into what it means to be excluded, why it feels so rotten, and how you can come out the other side of a rejection, feeling good about yourself. This book is also here to help you build and maintain friendships with people who deserve your time. We'll explore how you can set healthy boundaries, and process hurt feelings when you drift apart from those who were once closest to you. We even look at how to handle being left out by your own family, which happens more than you'd think.

In the chapter 'In Good Company', you'll read personal stories from men and women who have been left off the invite list. We look at strategies on how you can process a range of social blows and move forward in a healthy way. There are exercises peppered throughout the book to help you gain awareness about your beliefs on friendship, and even on how you see yourself.

We'll go through practical tools you can use as soon as today to start rebuilding your self-confidence after it's taken a knock. And once you're ready to get back out there, chapter five is full of tips on how to build and

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maintain new friendships in your adulting years. The next time you've been left off the invite list, you'll be able to handle the rejection with confidence, grace and a deep inner love for yourself.

Because there's only one person whose invite matters. And to them, you're the be all and end all. The absolute life of the party. Of course, I'm talking about you.

CHAPTER 1

WHY BEING LEFT OUT SUCKS

Chantelle's friends from work were going on a trip to Barcelona together. She found out over lunch when one of them let it slip. 'I could see that they felt awkward about it, which made me feel even more awkward,' Chantelle recalls. To show them that she was totally relaxed and breezy about their trip, she smiled casually and asked her friends what sights they were planning to visit.

But in truth, she wasn't okay.

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Chantelle thought that they each stood on an even keel in their friendship—but apparently not. She went home later that evening and couldn't shake off this sad, heavy feeling. She went through the motions of cooking dinner, and all the while, she felt agitated and physically on edge. The pain settled in her throat like a stone, even as she sat next to her partner on the sofa. She wasn't really watching what was on the television screen. Her mind was too busy spouting negative thoughts. *There's something wrong with you. You're boring, that's why they left you out.*

Her partner asked why she was so quiet. Rather than share what had happened, she told him that she was just tired. 'I didn't want to tell Roger because I felt... embarrassed. I didn't want him to see that I was excluded. It might sound silly, but I worried he'd see me in a different light. Like I wasn't good enough...because I guess that was how I felt about myself.'

Back at work, Chantelle was constantly second guessing herself around her friends. She was reserved in conversations when usually the chat flowed as they laughed, letting off steam together. 'I felt myself

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constantly worried about whether I was saying the wrong thing, so I kind of just stopped talking.' She found it easier to avoid the lunchroom altogether and ate at her desk. 'It's like I was a teenager again, hoping no one would notice how embarrassing I was.'

You're hardwired to hate being excluded

If you've been in a situation like Chantelle, you'll know about the bitter cocktail of emotions that comes with feeling excluded. Pain, confusion, fear, worry, anger—to name a few. Anxiety can feel like it is literally crawling through your veins as a dozen questions flood your mind. *What did I say? What did I do? What didn't I do?*

Then comes the frustration and shame. Your logical brain might try to rein you in. *You're being OTT. Stop acting like a baby. Get it together.* And yet, the feelings persist.

What's actually going on?

The pain you feel after being excluded is hard-wired into your biology. In the old hunting and gathering days, your survival depended on being part of a clan. If you were

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turned out, it wouldn't be long before a predator sunk its teeth into your neck. Or, you might freeze from the cold or just die of starvation. The consequences of being excluded and rejected used to literally mean death. That's why it feels so painful when you face a rejection.

The panic and fear were supposed to alert you to the impending danger and encourage you to change your course of action. For instance, you might share your portion of the day's hunt with the clan member who has a bone to pick with you. That action might be what saves you from getting booted out and left to fend for yourself.

But of course, times have changed. You're not in danger of being chased by a saber-tooth and you're probably able to source food for yourself (hello, Taco Bell drive-through). And yet, your brain is still wired the way it was millions of years ago. So give yourself a break the next time you've been left off the invite list and you find an avalanche of negative emotions rolling through you. Just remember: it's normal to feel crappy. Your brain is doing exactly what it's expected to do.

Is it me, or is it them?

When you've been left off the invite list, your brain wants to work out why the snub happened. *Is it me? Is it them?* you ask yourself, desperate to find the root cause.

The 'It's Me' lens is the most painful of the two. When you blame yourself for being excluded, you think there is something wrong with you. You might feel anxious, regretful and fearful when you believe, 'It's Me'. Your heart races as your brain floods with negative self-talk: *I'm such a loser. I'm so embarrassing!* You try to think of ways to make your snubbers like you, but you second guess yourself, so instead of taking action, you just wallow. And if you do decide to take action, your energy comes off as desperate. The strong emotions and physical sensations that come with 'It's Me' train of thinking, can easily be traced back to our hunting and gathering days when we worried about being booted out of the tribe. You had to adjust your behavior fast. Those negative feelings are primal—no wonder you're so bent out of shape!

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'It's Them' feels slightly less uncomfortable. When you look at the world through the 'It's Them' lens, your snubbers are the ones who are wrong. They're selfish jerks. Here, the pre-dominant emotions you feel are

It's Me:

Was it something I said or did, or didn't do? What's wrong with me? I'm such a loser. Maybe if I try harder then they'll like me.

It's Them:

They're mean. Selfish. Awful people! I never like them anyway. I'll make them pay.

anger and bitterness. You might even try to work out ways to make your friends feel guilty so that you have the moral high-ground. This is also known as being a martyr. The emotions are heavy and unpleasant, but they're a lot less painful than when you look at the situation through the 'It's Me' lens because at least you're not doubting your self-worth. But 'It's Them' still feels terrible because at the end of the day, you believe you have no control over the situation. You are a victim. Being a victim never feels good. Chantelle swung

between 'It's Me' and 'It's Them' thinking. 'My feelings were giving me whiplash,' she remembers.

Why we suppress negative feelings

Whether we blame ourselves or our excluders, we usually try to push down our uncomfortable feelings when we've been left out. This was the case for Chantelle who didn't tell her partner that her friends hadn't included her on their Barcelona trip. She pushed down her emotions because she didn't want to potentially face another rejection. 'I know this sounds ridiculous, but I thought that if my partner found out what a loser I was, then maybe he'd think less of me, too.' What Chantelle felt is actually quite common. We don't want other people to witness our rejection. Think of your school days. Sitting in gym class as the last person who was picked on a team while everyone watched. The public exposure of your rejection was embarrassing and you probably just wanted to crawl into a hole and die.

But hiding from our feelings is not a good strategy. As the saying goes—what we resist, persists. If time

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passes and you still feel bitter or upset about being left off the invite list, then you must believe on some level that you're not a worthwhile person. Maybe you think, 'I'm not good enough.' And chances are that, 'I'm not good enough,' is not isolated to this one social blow, either. It can creep into different areas of your life—your work, your other relationships—which is why it's worth exploring your emotions instead of pushing them down.

Exercise: Let it all out on paper

It's not always easy to know what's going on in our heads. Following a social blow, some people describe their discomfort as 'background unhappiness'. But knowing what you're actually thinking and feeling when you've faced rejection can be hugely beneficial. Rather than letting your negative thoughts and feelings run rampant and ruin your day and potentially your sleep, give them the space they so desperately crave. Here's the irony: you actually get rid of negative thoughts and feelings by giving them the spotlight.

If you're still not convinced, here are some benefits of journaling:

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- The most terrifying monster is the one we can't see. By journaling, you're taking those hazy feelings and making them concrete right there on the page. So shine a bright light on that pain, baby!
- By taking the time to journal, you're showing up for yourself. Even when your friends don't show up, *you* are there for yourself. Returning to the page is an act of self-love. You're being honest and open with the most important person in your life.
- Writing your thoughts and feelings means you can more easily question whether they are true. *Am I really a loser? What do I do well? What makes me a good friend?* Put every negative thought on trial.

Let's get writing so that you gain a sense of control, instead of feeling like a victim. As a first step, get yourself a journal. Pick a design that makes you feel inspired to return to the page day after day. Next, designate your journal as a safe space that's only meant for your eyes (unless you feel comfortable sharing it with someone else, of course). Write as though no one is watching. No editing—just raw, unfiltered emotions and thoughts.

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Prompts can help us get started. Here are some questions you can ask yourself to get the ball rolling, when you've been left off the invite list:

- ❖ What exactly happened?
- ❖ How did I feel at the time?
- ❖ How do I feel about the incident now?
- ❖ What are the thoughts going through my head?
- ❖ Is it me, or is it them, or is it something else?

Why writing it out helps

I feel like shit. I feel like an absolute loser. Nobody likes me. And I'm so blind. I thought they were my good friends, but I guess not. This hurts so bad. I should stop being such a baby. I'm 34! They're horrible. Who do they think they are?

That's what Chantelle's diary looked like. If you're thinking, 'Ouch that's harsh,' you wouldn't be wrong. But chances are that you have been just as hard on yourself and others when you've suffered a social blow. Only, you didn't realize it because you didn't put pen to paper. So, jot it all down. However ugly, leave it there on

the page. It's the first step to healing.

But really—is it me, or them?

It's only natural that you want to get to the bottom of why they left you out. If you did something that hurt and offended a friend, you probably want to know about it, so that you can apologize and go about things differently in the future. As we've already seen, it's hard-wired in every one of us to want to fix a problem after a rejection because our survival used to depend on being able to adjust our behavior.

An apology is not...	An apology is...
I'm sorry you feel that way...	I'm sorry I've hurt you.
Maybe you've misunderstood...	Can you help me better understand? I can see I've caused you pain and I want to do better.
I'm sorry, but...	I'm sorry.
This was not my intention...	I will be more mindful in the future.

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Often though, nothing really ‘went wrong’ when we weren’t invited. Relationships are not black and white—there are different moving parts involved. Examples can help us learn how to navigate tricky social situations. They can also show us that we’re not alone. In the next chapter, I’ll take you through specific scenarios where thirteen brave souls have offered up their stories of social rejection. For now, the main thing to remember is that everything is relational. There are two (or sometimes a few) sides involved, and every person in that relationship plays a part. In a general sense, you and the other side are responsible for the way things stand between you. This is a good thing because it means that you have control and agency, even though you might feel like a victim.

