



“My Friend Always Expects Me to Baby-Sit.”

DEBBY, 34: I am currently unemployed, and feel like my friend is taking advantage of me by regularly requesting my help with looking after her children. Just because I have free time doesn't mean I'm obliged to fill it by taking care of her responsibilities. How can I say no without seeming selfish or insensitive?

ASSISTANCE AND SUPPORT ARE the reasons why friendships are so valuable when someone is in need. “While her reliance on you is a heartwarming testament to how much your friend trusts you, help should never be expected or demanded,” says Ingrid Roberts, a coach and women’s mentor based in Pietermaritzburg. “Ideally, when you come to her aid, it should be with pleasure and not a sense of duty.” To lovingly shift her dependence away from you, you’ll need courage and care.

ALIGN YOUR THOUGHTS AND BEHAVIOUR

It’s possible that your friend doesn’t know how you truly feel because you’re sending mixed messages. “For a decision to be conveyed clearly, what you think, say and do need to match,” says Roberts. “If you’re feeling reluctant to baby-sit regularly, communicate this to your friend, and then take clear actions reflecting this decision.” This will mean sticking to your choice even if you feel guilty

afterwards, or your friend is hurt that you can’t come to her rescue. Reneging on your initial decision might give the impression that you will concede if begged, which is then exactly what will happen in future.

HAVE AN OFFER

You can say no, but still acknowledge your friend’s need for help. “To set a paradigm of respect for your schedule and personal needs, suggest that she book childminding dates for the next month. This will indicate your love and willingness to support.” You could volunteer to set up a roster of friends and relatives who are prepared to step in. By stating the terms on which you’re able to help her, you’ll take power back and not come across as hard-hearted.

CELEBRATE COMMON GROUND

There’s a reason why the two of you first became friends, and it’s crucial to keep up those common interests. “Though you may be in different life stages, it’s possible to still relate to one another.” Whether it’s movie dates or shopping excursions, ensure you make time to connect and catch up. Without the foundation of regular fun interaction, your friendship could be stretched out of existence. **O**