



Are you being brokefished?

Living costs are rising, but what happens when a 'skint' friend isn't as cash-strapped as they claim? From secret savings to subsidised splurges, *WH* explores the murky wealth gap dividing friendships

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Siobhan's story will make you wince. After her friend Mark* was made redundant – and could no longer afford to participate in their plans – she started to pick up his social tab. Over six months in her late thirties, the now 44-year-old bought him drinks, Sunday roasts and lunches near her office. On his birthday that year, Siobhan told him to fill a picnic basket with whatever he wanted from Waitrose, offering to foot the bill (what a woman). They were eating their sandwiches when Mark dropped into the conversation that his parents had given him £1,000. He was going to buy a MacBook. ‘By that point I’d spent about £900 subbing him,’ Siobhan tells *WH*. ‘So I told him it would really help my overdraft if he could use his birthday money to buy his own drinks in future. He replied, “I don’t know what that’s like, I’ve never been overdrawn.”’ Siobhan’s stomach fell. It transpired that Mark wasn’t strapped for cash at all; he never had been. He had a healthy savings account – one he wasn’t keen to dip into. Not long after that conversation, he bought a flat.

Siobhan had been brokefished – a money misrepresentation you’ll know from the friend who treats loans like legal tender and still owes on Splitwise from a trip you took pre-Covid. A new riff on catfishing – where a fake online identity is used to lure you into a relationship – brokefishing paints a misleading image of someone’s monetary situation to lure you into dishing out sympathy, financial aid or one more large glass of red. As October’s energy price-hike promises to rob even more money from the ‘fun’ pot, are you about to fall hook, line and sinker?

Mates rates

Vicky Reynal knows more about brokefishing than most. The psychotherapist and financial therapist (reynal-psychotherapist.co.uk) doesn’t approach money issues by telling clients to buy fewer avocados, but by unpicking cash’s complex emotional core, such as self-limiting beliefs (‘I can’t budget’) or salary shame. ‘Brokefishing has varying degrees of malicious intent,’ she

shares. At one end of the scale, are the super-budgeters. Triggered by cling-on-to-your-bank-card global threats such as inflation, they have a catastrophised view that can present as money dysmorphia. ‘They might constantly feel anxious about their finances, hoard money or ask friends for money – portraying themselves as not having enough (even if the reality is that they can afford more),’ she explains, with the caveat that

they’re unlikely to do it in a deceptive way and even less likely to spend it on something luxurious. At the other end you have the resentful brokefishers; feeling short-changed by life, they triumph in deceiving a friend to get what they see as their monetary just deserts. Mostly, brokefishers fall somewhere in the middle. ‘People who don’t have enough money for everything they want to do – but don’t want to compromise, either.’

*NAME HAS BEEN CHANGED



Caroline can relate. The 34-year-old project manager spent years funding a brokefishing friend who lived beyond her means. ‘I was always lending her money and having to ask for it back, which was annoying – mainly because she spent so much on Burberry and £300 shoes,’ she shares. Eventually, Caroline summoned the courage to call the behaviour out. ‘But she wouldn’t accept that her spending was irresponsible. She was deeply unrealistic, and still is – only now she’s married to a rich guy who keeps her in the lifestyle and I’m much poorer because I’m not.’

People have always lived beyond their means, of course. But, Reynal points out, the temptation becomes greater when you’re constantly served images of the lives of others. ‘Pre-social media, we only envied the cool girl when we saw her walk by. Today, the cool girl on social media is always available to be envied.’ Not only is she always there, her life is more enviable than the IRL cool girl’s ever was, thanks to Instagram’s ability to make life look like one long holiday. For the cash poor, brokefishing is a quick and easy route to keep up.

Okay, but ever heard of Klarna? ‘It’s easier to ask someone else to give up money than it is to give up something yourself,’ says Reynal. To save for a luxury

purchase, you might have to sacrifice your social life (are you listening, Mark?) but that’s difficult to do. ‘Rather than facing this and being honest with yourself and your friends, you present as not having enough money. Seen in this way, brokefishing is a defence against having to make a personal sacrifice.’

A loaded issue

But there’s an emotional debt to brokefishing, too. For every person being subbed, there’s another dipping into their own resources, which may be equally stretched. The trouble is, who really knows how full someone else’s kitty is? ‘It feels odd that I’ve taken a friend to a sexual health clinic but have no

idea how she bought a London flat,’ says Alex Holder, a pay-gap campaigner who wrote *Open Up: Why Talking About Money Will Change Your Life* to unmute the 50% of UK adults who believe that personal money matters are taboo. But without talking about finances, ‘all we have are assumptions’. And they split friendships, not bills.

Siobhan, who ‘miraculously’ (her words) stayed friends with Mark, now realises that while they knew each other well, they knew nothing of their clashing money styles. ‘He thought if I wanted to hang out enough to pay for him, he wasn’t going to stop me. To him, savings didn’t count and his birthday money was for a treat, not drinks. He wasn’t sorry because he saw the whole thing differently to me.’ For the victim of brokefishing, however, it can be incredibly upsetting. ‘[You feel] disappointment, sadness, shock and anger, but most painful is the sense of betrayal. You feel deceived and lied to,’ says Reynal.

Part of the deception comes from the ambiguity of ‘skint’: ironically, a loaded word. With friends, it’s easy to think that if you have shared tastes in food and Peloton workouts, you’ll have a similar definition of

The temptation to live beyond your means has become greater thanks to social media

being broke. But this falls into Holder’s ‘assumptions’ zone. Kate, a 26-year-old physiotherapist, tells friends she’s

broke when her outgoings are paid but she has around £250 left. ‘I didn’t grow up in an affluent house, so I need that cushion, as well as having savings for emergencies such as the boiler going.’ For Louise, 23, a junior buyer, skint can mean ‘checking pockets, bags and down the sofa for change to buy bread’, while her ex-boyfriend saw skint as being down to his last £1,000 of spending money.

Digging deep

With the point at which someone asks for money coming in varying distances from the breadline – an issue that feels like trickery, but is often more of a comms issue – it’s



also hard not to judge what, or who, that person then spends money on. Particularly if it's on themselves. It might be Mark and his flat. But it could also be the friend who skips your hen do citing lack of funds before flying off to Dubai with her boyfriend. To manage these feelings, Reynal has the following advice. Ask yourself if that friend is really brokefishing (siphoning others' money to spend on themselves) or simply making a different choice about where to spend their money or time (which is allowed, even if it feels shitty). Then put the event in a wider context. Could the friend who skipped the hen party be using money as an excuse because she actually feels uncomfortable doing group activities? Or has she set financial priorities with her partner?

Kristina, a 34-year-old comms adviser in Vancouver who sees herself as the 'broke friend', says what may seem an extravagant purchase at the social group's expense could've taken years of behind-the-scenes saving. 'As a single person in one of the world's most expensive cities, money is always a struggle for me,' she tells *WH*. 'I've skipped so many dinners with friends so I can put away tiny amounts to pay for a holiday. Am I horrible for allowing a friend who earns three times what I do to buy dinner once in a while? I'm still broke, but taking a holiday that I've saved six years for doesn't make me a bad person.'

It's time to split

With the cost of living crisis set to bring about a collective tightening of purse strings, how can you stop the give-and-take-take-take of friendship borrowing from turning toxic? If you're guilty of tapping the bank of best friend, Reynal has a two-pronged approach to break the cycle. First, face practical facts. How often do you ask friends for money? What does it go on? What could you cut back on so that you've got enough money for important outgoings? Then consider the

Feeling a bit short-changed?



Pulling your financial weight in a friendship comes down to more than a lifetime of IOUs

emotions behind the asking. 'Be mindful of the inner dialogue that takes place before you ask a friend for money,' she says. For example, is there a part of you that wants it all? Do you envy your friends? Do you worry that if you don't join every event your friends will reject you? While these fears can push you to overspend, it's common to inflate these insecurities. There's also the risk that repeated borrowing – even if it's done to keep up socially – could damage the friendship itself.

It's easy to throw shade, but for every brokefisher, there's a complicit brokefisher – who Reynal calls 'the accomplice'. 'It would be hard to brokefish if you were met with a confident, bounded and assertive friend who said no,' she points out. 'A brokefisher often finds an accomplice in someone who feels guilty and seeks reparation for something, or who wants to act out a fantasy of rescuing a friend they care about.' The queen's face may also be papering over friendship cracks you're avoiding. 'Ask yourself why you keep doing something that leaves you feeling robbed or betrayed,' she adds. Is loaning money the price you're paying to keep a friendship alive? (In which case, is it truly worth it?) Are you trying to please others? Is it easier to flash the cash than face the potential conflict of saying no?

On that note, if saying no scares you more than checking your bank balance, Reynal suggests enquiring as to what's going on. Rather than a hard no to their request, which can come off as accusatory, a gentle conversation gives you the chance to understand the issue, and your friend an opportunity to resolve it. Of course, friendship means being willing to step in when means allow. But pulling your financial weight comes down to more than a lifetime of IOUs. As the saying goes: if it ain't broke, don't fix it. **WH**

Money talks: so how can you?



Host a money 'salon'

Financial writer Alex Holder's advice? Host 'a drunk rant with purpose'. Gather friends, wine and nibbles and focus all chat on money – like a book club for your bank accounts. Start with universal topics such as student loans, then segue into money dreams and worries. Saying things out loud offers clarity (so *that's* how you got a flat deposit!) and dissolves shame.



Swerve righteousness

It's easy to judge a flatmate for making an impulse buy when their rent's late. But this is like judging someone for their diet – not helpful. More useful is encouraging them to talk about their situation. Questions such as, 'Earlier you said that...' and 'Then what happened?' are more productive than giving advice (unless they ask for it).



Be a plan-setter

To rein in your social circle's spending, be the one to plan Friday night. This sets a positive tone, whereas a last-minute message saying you're now too skint to do cocktails mars the mood, says Holder. Your friends will probably be thrilled that someone's set a venue, and you get to control the spend.