

The Effect of Ghosting on Mental Health and Well-Being

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Abstract

The world of dating is fraught with danger, catfishing, gaslighting, and breadcrumbing, among the hazards to be negotiated by those looking for romance. Of particular interest in this paper is ghosting, where a partner, without warning or explanation, ceases all contact and essentially disappears from the scene. Ghosting is often perpetrated by those without a conscience with the goal of avoiding all contact. The effect on the victim can be devastating and severely detrimental to their mental health and overall well-being. This paper explores the reasons for ghosting and its effects, and outlines several high-profile case studies. It also offers suggestions on how a victim or offender of ghosting should cope with this situation.

Keywords: ghosting, online dating, mental health, emotion, well-being

1. Introduction

The term “ghosting” implies that the person who disappears becomes like a ghost: present one moment and then vanishes without a trace. It usually occurs in the context of dating and refers to abruptly cutting off communication with someone without explanation or closure. The concept most often refers to romantic relationships but can also describe disappearances from friendships and the workplace. Although ghosting can be obvious, it can also occur gradually, as the other person progressively minimizes contact over time until they disappear altogether. Although more commonly mentioned in the dating context, ghosting can refer to any situation in which contact unexpectedly ceases, including friendships and family relationships [1].

According to Bree Jenkins, a renowned licensed marriage and family therapist and dating coach based in Los Angeles, California, the term “ghosting” has been prevalent well before the digital age and online dating [2]. She says, “I think references to ‘going for a loaf of bread and never coming back’ are examples of ghosting. Ghosting used to be leaving a person and moving away or not leaving them with your contact information; its earlier origins are even the simple act of leaving a party or social gathering without notice or goodbyes.”

In a romantic setting, ghosting can happen after a first date, a few dates, or even during an established relationship. To avoid having a conversation about their feelings or intentions, one person stops responding to calls, texts, or messages and blocks the other on social media. If a person has made repeated efforts to contact someone who won't respond, it is a strong indicator that they have been ghosted [3]. The injured party is left wondering what went wrong, leaving them hurt, confused, and often in a depressed mental state.

Much of the research on ghosting has been qualitative [4–7], while other studies focus on motivation, morality, and social perception [8]. Findings suggest that people who have been ghosted feel their fundamental needs have been threatened, including control, self-esteem, and belongingness [9].

The following sections provide guidelines for recognising ghosting, dealing with it, and demonstrating it through case studies.

2. Scenarios

Ghosting may occur in several circumstances. Telltale signs include a partner who often bails out of plans to get together, struggles to make commitments, and is reluctant to share personal information. They withdraw from social media and rarely respond to your texts or calls. An important signal that ghosting

may be on the way is that their conversations lack depth and, in fact, they seem uninterested in anything you bring up, especially if it involves the future together. They may also be reluctant to introduce you to their friends or family. These are all indications that the relationship is coming to an end [3].

In one example, ghosting involves seduction, where the aim of a male is simply to get a particular female to sleep with them, although they are looking for nothing further. This can involve a lengthy lead-up that includes dinner, movies, and other outings. Once the woman agrees to have sex and it's completed, the conquest has been made, and the mystery is now solved. The man becomes a ghost, having got what he wanted, while the female is devastated, made to feel cheap and used, which can lead to depression. Of course, the same applies, although less frequently, to a woman who seduces a man, or, in fact, any combination of sexes.

Another situation arises when one party is after money and intends to fleece their unsuspecting victim, who may be found on dating sites, at a pub, or in another establishment. Suppose, for example, an attractive woman meets an older, not-so-good-looking man who she discovers through conversation is quite wealthy. He also lets it be known that he is widowed, divorced, or never married and is, in fact, quite lonely.

The woman's aim is to get him to part with some of his cash, either as a supposed loan or for medical expenses involving her or a close relative. This can be substantial, but the carrot for the man is her undying gratitude with a hint of a life for them together. Once the payment is made, she becomes a ghost, and he never sees or hears from her again. Unless, however, she feels that he's still on the hook and continues this pattern until he runs out of money. Then she will surely ghost him.

The same goes for an attractive man who comes across a lonely, single woman, possibly widowed or divorced, and uses every trick he knows to relieve her of her assets before ghosting her. This can happen when the ghost knows the victim has nothing of value left to give. The ruthlessness is the same no matter who is the ghoster or the victim.

People respond to being ghosted in different ways. For many, it feels like a profound betrayal because there's no closure. It negatively affects the victim's well-being, but spares the ghoster the charade of explaining why a relationship has ended after they have simply lost interest or found someone better. In other words, the ghoster finds it too much trouble to explain their feelings to someone for whom they now sense indifference.

3. Reasons

Among the many possible reasons for ghosting, some stand out. A major one is avoiding confrontation and the unpleasantness of hurting someone's feelings face-

to-face. For example, a person may have decided that a relationship has run its course but is aware that their partner is still in love with them. It's obvious that there are going to be some quite unpleasant scenes when the breakup is announced, usually accompanied by a flood of tears, recriminations, and explanations.

This can be exacerbated if the ghoster has found, in their eyes at least, a better partner and knows there will be immense pressure to reveal exactly who it is. There will also be the inevitable demand for reasons why things have come to an end, and so it's much easier to simply disappear than to become involved in an uncomfortable and awkward conversation. This reflects emotional insecurity on the ghoster's part, as they are extremely reluctant to discuss their feelings.

On occasions, one partner simply becomes bored with the relationship. There's no drama, but something, perhaps an indefinable spark, is missing, and it's time to move on. For the ghoster, no satisfactory reason can be provided, and so they feel it is better to just walk away. In their view, this is a passive, non-threatening way to signal that it's over.

Other reasons people ghost include a real or imagined fear of the other person's reaction to rejection. Also, with online dating in particular, there are so many choices that it is tempting to think that the grass might be greener elsewhere. A prospective partner may seem nice enough, but if a person is juggling several prospects at once, not all of them will make the cut and will be let go without explanation.

Several prominent reasons, or a combination of them, can lead a person to decide to be a ghost. These include avoiding an awkward situation, minimising confrontation, fear of missing out on better options, and dread of a bad reaction [8].

4. Indicators

With the advent of the digital world and online dating, combined with a plethora of social media outlets, it's never been easier to be a ghoster. Blocking someone from calling, texting, emailing, or any other form of digital communication requires little skill or effort. The rise of online dating and social media has made ghosting more prevalent, as it's easier to vanish behind a screen than to break up face-to-face.

Ghosting can also occur when the rules of a relationship aren't made clear to both parties. Questions such as exclusivity, sleeping with other people, and even being a friend with benefits are all matters that need to be made clear up front. One person's view on casually dating other people may not be the same as their partner's, and if it all becomes too much with the inevitable conflict, one of them becomes a ghost.

It can even take a while for someone to realise they have been ghosted, but there are telltale signs. These

include one party consistently cancelling plans to get together, struggling to make commitments, and no longer sharing personal information. These can indicate that a breakup is imminent and that ghosting is a real possibility.

Other indicators that you are about to be ghosted include a new reluctance to meet your friends or family and a sudden disappearance from social media as they deactivate or delete their accounts. Conversations with them become mundane, and they seem disinterested in any topic you raise for discussion. But perhaps the most obvious sign is when they become slow to respond to your texts or calls, until they stop answering them at all. If you have repeatedly tried to make contact and they won't respond, there's a good chance that you've been ghosted.

When a person simply vanishes into thin air, it can have a significant impact on the mental health and well-being of the one being ghosted, leaving feelings of rejection and causing them to question their self-worth. There will be bewilderment at what they did wrong, although the real answer may be 'nothing'. In a friendship, trust erodes, and deep feelings of betrayal set in. There is a lack of respect, kindness, and honesty that are the lifeblood of any healthy relationship. In desperation for closure, the person being ghosted reaches out to re-initiate contact, only to be met with continuing silence.

According to Dr Margaret Seide, a board-certified psychiatrist based in New York City [10], "with internet dating comes what may seem like infinite choices as opposed to walking into a bar and having limited options. There are now so many choices; online daters are quick to have the 'OK, next' or the 'Yeah, but what else?' mindset. Sometimes the person is nice enough but is juggling a few other people, and that person just didn't make the cut." For some, ghosting is an easy (in the short term) but immature way to end a relationship. It's a passive-aggressive act that borders on emotional abuse and is often based on fear of the other person's reaction when they're told that it's over. When all hints have failed, the ghoster may be well aware that being blunt and direct will cause a scene involving tears and great upset. This is all too much to bear, so a somewhat cowardly approach is taken: total avoidance of such a scenario.

With the advent of technology, it's never been easier to ghost somebody. This is borne out by a recent study that found 25 per cent of men and women reported being ghosted in a romantic relationship, and 22 per cent admitted to having ghosted someone else. It's easy to forget that there are real people on the other end and that electronic devices are used as a shield to leave someone high and dry. In a survey of over 14,000 people, 11 per cent of respondents said they had ghosted someone, 68 per cent had been ghosted themselves, and 18 per cent had done both [3].

Ghosting can also occur in the workplace when an employee simply doesn't show up for duty with no explanation, with all attempts by management to contact them being futile. This can even occur during or after the first day on the job, when the employee realizes that the position itself or their work colleagues fall far short of the ghoster's expectations. Instead of making a scene, it's considered easier not to return, even if it means forgoing a day's pay. This action sends a clear message that the worker couldn't be bothered to explain themselves or consider the consequences to the business of what they did.

If you love someone who ghosts you without warning, there's every chance that you'll start to panic, as you'll have the sinking feeling that something terrible has happened to them. Why aren't they answering their phone or returning your texts and emails? Your immediate thought is that they're unable to do so: perhaps they've been in an accident and can't contact you. You may go to their house and find that they're not home, then start contacting their friends to see if they have seen them.

When the facts of the matter are known, there is a sense of bewilderment and possibly anger as it dawns on you that the ghoster has a complete disregard for your feelings. They had no qualms about leaving you in limbo, wondering what went wrong, and causing you to question your own self-worth. Part of this is a feeling that you are the one at fault.

5. Case Studies

In one research study [5], a participant described being ghosted after several weeks of dating, as follows: "We had been texting daily, going on dates, and making plans for the future. Then, without warning, my partner stopped replying to messages entirely. I sent multiple follow-ups over several days but received no response. My partner, the ghost, continued posting on social media, clearly active, but never acknowledged me again."

In another instance [6], a member of a research group described how, after a few months of dating, their partner abruptly stopped responding to calls and texts. The participant tried to contact them several times, worried something had happened, but eventually they learned through mutual friends that the person was fine. Their partner had simply decided to end the relationship by disappearing.

In a separate study [7], a person revealed that they had been in regular contact with someone they met online. Communication was frequent and affectionate until one day, when they stopped receiving replies, despite knowing that the ghoster had read their messages. The person described feeling confused and hurt, feeling that they had done something wrong.

Among many other examples, Vogue highlighted three high-profile cases of ghosting [11]. In the first of these, a 26-year-old woman named Rianna lived with

her then boyfriend of two years in Esher, a suburban town 20 kilometres from London. Although his mother was keen for them to buy a house, Rianna didn't feel ready for such a commitment. Her judgement proved to be sound when, in December 2021, her boyfriend told her he was heading out to buy Christmas gifts and would be back the next day. But he never returned, leaving her with a dog he had recently purchased for her.

Her first instinct was that he must have met foul play, but when she tried to contact him on social media, she found he had blocked her. Rianna soon discovered he was alive and well and was simply avoiding her. What made this case of ghosting even more puzzling was that all his clothes, personal belongings, family photos, passport, and certificates were still in the house.

In a second case, a 42-year-old woman, Tafori, was ghosted by her boyfriend of two years, who simply stopped contacting her. As he had many of her belongings, she went to his place and knocked on the door, but he refused to open it. She could see him looking at her through a courtyard window. He didn't let her in, even though it was raining heavily, and she stood there soaking for a full five minutes before driving home. To this day, Tafori still has no explanation for his actions.

In another instance, Eva, 33, was ghosted by her boyfriend after a year of dating. When they first met, she described it as "pure sparks" and felt like they had known each other for years. However, after a while, she noticed his communication with her becoming increasingly infrequent, as though he was phasing her out. Then, predictably, he stopped completely. As with the other cases, there was no explanation, but it left Eva with severe trust issues and left her struggling with how to behave in other relationships, fearing she'd find herself in the same position.

These case studies share the same theme: a relationship that, on the surface, seems to be progressing well and suddenly collapses when one partner, for whatever reason, decides to withdraw. This is not always done gracefully or with any reason given, leaving the injured party with devastating mental scars, wondering what they did wrong.

6. Discussion

Despite all the negative connotations surrounding ghosting, there are several circumstances in which it may be considered appropriate. This occurs when you discover the person you are dating is married, in a committed relationship, conducting illegal activities, exhibiting unsavoury behaviour, or subjecting you to a great deal of toxicity, including domestic violence. In these circumstances, you do not owe the other party an explanation for abruptly bringing things to a halt.

Ghosting in these instances can be a matter of self-preservation, especially if you feel threatened in any

way. Any feelings of guilt should be put aside, as this is the best thing for you to do to keep you safe and give you peace of mind. Removing yourself from a potentially volatile situation is the right thing to do.

If a person has firmly made up their mind that they never want to see a partner again, ghosting is one way to end it, though it's cruel and cowardly. There are other alternatives, apart from the simple 'it's not you, it's me' cliché. Instead, a polite note may help ease the pain that you're about to inflict. An example might be "I think you're a really great person and I've enjoyed our time together. But you'll probably know that it's not working out for us, and I want to be honest about that. I wish you all the very best for the future. Please take very good care of yourself."

Whatever is written, it should be short and to the point, but with a very clear message that, as far as you're concerned, the relationship is over and you want to move on without a drawn-out conversation. This is a much better way to end things than not giving any explanation and becoming a ghost.

On the other hand, if a person feels sure that they have been ghosted, one option is to politely get the last word by writing their own message. It could be something along the lines of "I haven't heard from you for some time, and so I'm not sure what's going on. Whatever it is, I don't want to continue in this way, and so I don't want to waste my valuable time pursuing our relationship. Best of luck in whatever you do." They probably won't get an answer but will feel a whole lot better about themselves.

If someone is ghosted after reaching out several times without a response, the best course of action is not to pursue the matter. Instead, they should accept the situation and stop trying to reach out, as this will only lead to more rejection. It is time to move on and concentrate on caring for yourself, remembering that their behaviour reflects their character, not yours.

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Conflicts of Interest

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