

Why Workplace Frenemies are Our Most Stressful Colleagues

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Among immediate colleagues, it's easy to spot two groups of people: genuine friends, who make each workday a little brighter; and sworn enemies – the people who will deliberately make your life hard for no reason. But what about all those people in the middle?

These colleagues may offer a sympathetic ear to your woes, but then go and gossip about them behind your back. Or they'll defend you from criticism, but then take sole credit for a joint project, erasing your contributions without a backward glance. They help and they hurt in equal measure; they are frenemies, or “ambivalent relationships”.

In the past, workplace psychologists had tended to take a black and white view of our relationships with our colleagues, while ignoring the many grey areas of our social networks. Yet the latest research shows that our frenemies are equally, if not more, important than the people at either extreme of the spectrum – with unique consequences for our health, wellbeing and our behaviour in the workplace. And by understanding their complexities, we can all learn to navigate office politics more wisely – as well as potentially reduce the stress they cause.

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