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How To Make a Graceful Exit



By Charlotte Latvala

Smart ways to handle life's

We've all felt trapped--at a never-ending dinner party; on a phone call with a long-winded friend; in the staff meeting from hell. But with a little finesse, you can wiggle out of almost any situation--and take control of your time--without hurting anyone's feelings or committing career suicide. Read on for tactful ways to:

Leave a dull dinner party.

You don't want to diss the hostess, but dessert is nowhere to be seen, you aren't clicking with the other guests, and your *Pride and Prejudice* DVD is calling your name. Loudly. Pull the hostess aside, advises New York-based etiquette consultant Melissa Leonard. "Thank her and say you had a great time, but you need to go," she says. If she asks why, keep your explanation simple: "Even 'I'm not feeling great' can backfire if she sees you at the gym the next morning," says Leonard. Instead, give a vague excuse, such as, "I'm so sorry, but I'm exhausted--I need to go home and get some sleep."

Cut a phone conversation short.

Your head is spinning as your motormouthed friend goes on and on about problems with her boss or babysitter. Yes, you care-- but you have a life to get back to. Wanting to wrap up the call doesn't make you a bad friend, says Cheryl Richardson, author of *Stand Up for Your Life*. "Staying on the phone out of guilt doesn't put you in a frame of mind to offer truly helpful advice anyway," she notes. A better idea: Wait for a pause in the conversation, and say that--whoa!--you just glanced at your watch and realized you need to pick up your kids (or call your husband, or get back to your desk). To break away with compassion, say, "Clearly, this is really important to you. But right now I can't focus the way I'd like to for you. Can we schedule another time to talk?" Once she's had some solo time to mull over her problem, chances are she'll be ready to have a conversation about it-- instead of a monologue.

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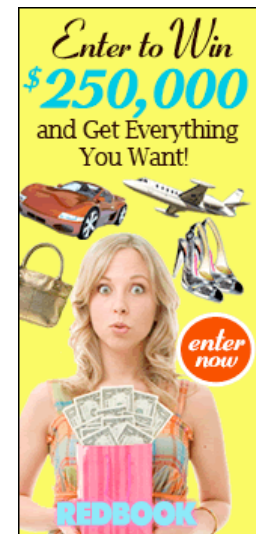
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Slip out of a group work meeting.

No need to stand up and announce where you're going (especially if it's to the doctor--"For days, nosy nellys will ask, 'Are you okay?'" says Leonard). Instead, tell your boss beforehand--the earlier, the better--that you have "an appointment." Adds Leonard: "At the very least, say you need to leave at 4 p.m., or whenever, as you enter the conference room." If you forget to give advance notice, or the meeting has run crazy long, just exit quietly and leave a brief explanatory, apologetic note with the boss's assistant. Follow up with your boss when you return (even if it's the next day) to see what you missed. You'll earn brownie points for your conscientiousness, and your vanishing act will be ancient history.

Walk out of a too-pricey or unappealing restaurant.

As you scan the menu, you realize that a meal here would set you back a day's pay, and it's just not worth it. Don't panic; you've got a right to leave--you didn't sign a contract with the tournedos de boeuf when you sat down at the table. True, the waiter was solicitous, and he already brought the ice water with lemon that you had requested. But no matter how embarrassed you might feel, don't sneak out--it's just rude. "You need to excuse yourself and leave with dignity," says Leonard. Simply say, "I'm sorry, but we have to go," and thank him. Fibbing usually results in more embarrassment--especially if the waiter offers to put in your appetizer order while you step out to "find the nearest cash machine." If he was particularly accommodating--or if you already nibbled on the bread and butter--leave a \$2 or \$3 tip. And don't forget to use the most helpful tool of all in exiting any awkward situation: a gracious smile.

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