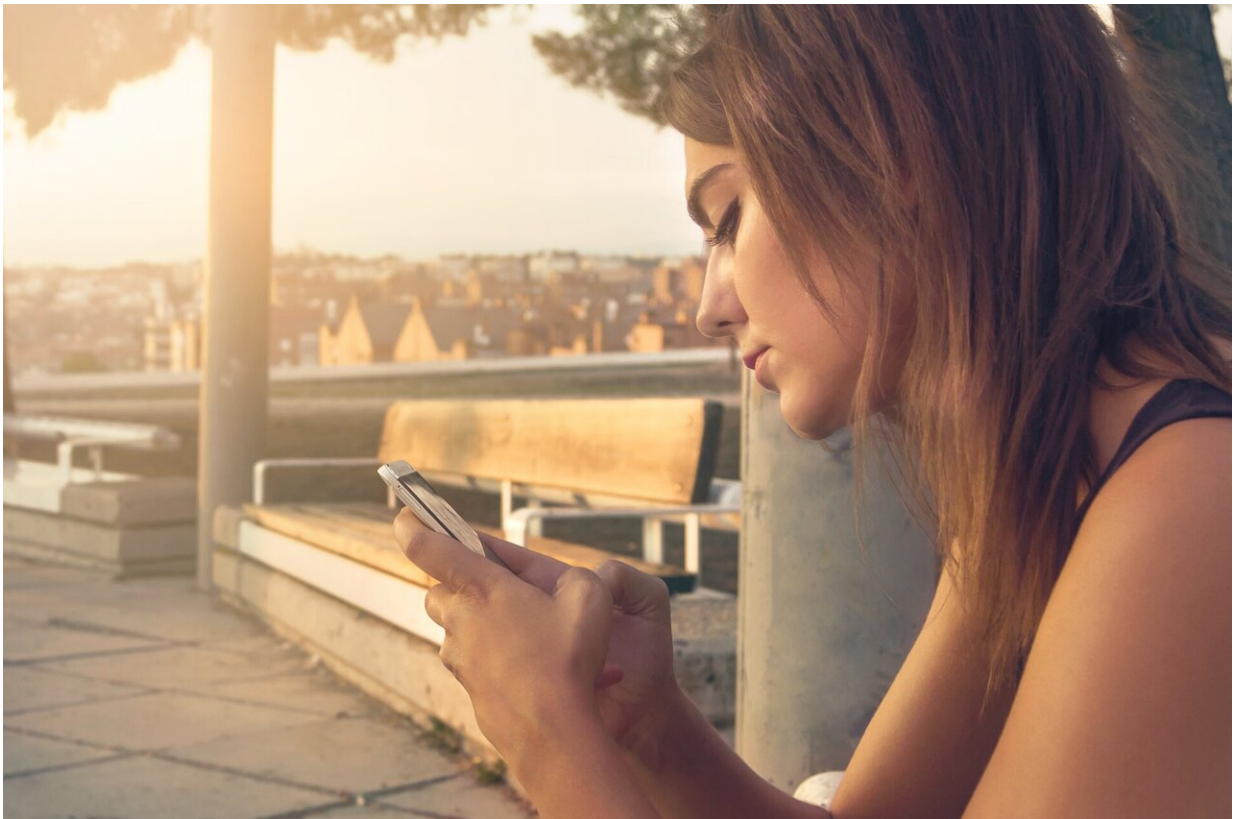


# Overwhelmed by group chat messages? You're not alone

November 10 2023, by Kate Mannell

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For many of us, group chats are part of the texture of our social lives. These groups, formed on apps like Messenger or Whatsapp, can be as large as a hundred people or as small as three.

We [use them for](#) organizing one-off tasks or events, managing recurring coordination between groups like [sports clubs](#) or work teams, and keeping in touch with [family](#) and friends.

In the best cases, group chats can provide important spaces for building and maintaining [relationships](#). They can be places of joy, [solidarity](#) and [refuge](#).

But they can also be burdensome, and create feelings of anxiety and worry. I researched group [chat](#) dynamics and these are the three biggest issues I encountered.

## 1. You're overwhelmed by the volume of messages

The volume of messages and notifications group chats generate can be overwhelming.

In [my own research](#), a participant recalled accidentally leaving her phone at home, and returning to find she'd missed 200 messages in a group chat about buying a birthday gift.

Another explained that their most active group chat kicked off at 8am and didn't quiet down until 1am.

A recent [survey](#) of people in the United States and United Kingdom suggests this is a common problem, with 40% of the respondents indicating they were overwhelmed with group chat messages and notifications. And then there's [notifications](#) from email, [social media](#), calendars, news apps, and so on.

People often manage this by muting group chats. But this can mean missing important information or plans to catch up, or having to dip in and out of the group chat to check for relevant conversations.

People can also find the chaos of group chat conversations overwhelming. In large groups, multiple conversations can be running at once, making it hard to keep track of what is being discussed or planned.

These problems can make group chats [ineffective](#) for the tasks they were set up to complete. Especially in large groups of acquaintances, planning can devolve into a mess of opinions, alternatives and side conversations.

One participant in my research described a group chat about a birthday gift getting sidetracked by two people having their own catch up.

Another recounted a disastrous group chat involving 20 people trying to organize a potluck dinner. Rather than reaching a consensus about who would bring what, the conversation devolved into a debate about whether potlucks were a bad idea, with one person insisting professional catering would better account for dietary requirements.

## **2. You don't want to be there—but can't leave**

Other, possibly more significant, challenges are the difficult or awkward social dynamics that can arise. The ease of creating groups and adding members means people can be included in groups they wouldn't have chosen to join.

In [one instance](#) of this, a woman was added to a group for organizing a shared gift for a colleague. She would have preferred not to contribute to the gift but found it too awkward to leave.

Challenging dynamics can also arise when relationships change after a group chat has been established.

One participant told me about a group chat started by four close friends when they began university. A year later, one person had grown distant

and become largely silent in the group chat, although the other three still used it to chat and organize catch ups. My participant found this dynamic incredibly awkward and had become cautious about starting group chats as a result.

Other participants described feeling trapped in group chats they would prefer to leave. The blunt "x has left the group" notification made them reluctant to formally quit but ignoring the group was also uncomfortable.

Many of these challenges stem from the rigid membership of group chats (you're either in or you're out) which doesn't always gel with the complexity of our relationships. These challenges may also be exacerbated by unclear or contested social etiquette around group messaging.

### **3. You feel excluded**

The most difficult issues arise when processes of social exclusion play out in group chats.

[Back channel groups](#) can emerge, where some [group members](#) create a new group to privately communicate about what's happening in the main chat.

In the most dramatic cases, participants described people getting kicked out of groups because of disagreements or because someone felt the group chat had become too large.

[Research](#) suggests that being removed from a group is rare and mostly occurs when a relationship has ended.

But guessing whether you've been excluded from a group chat can be cause for anxiety, especially because you might not just be missing out

on gossip and cat videos but also plans to catch up in person.

## So what can you do?

Our relationships with each other can be weird, awkward and messy—group chats reflect this social reality but with an added layer of technological complexity thrown in.

Generally, [research](#) suggests that the group chats people enjoy most are smaller groups with closer friends.

So, until app design improves and we collectively figure out etiquette for awkward group chat moments, your best bets are to:

- use group chats with a handful of people who know each other, or who you're confident will get along
- find another way of organizing that potluck. Use other forms of organization for more complex events or with larger groups (invitations, Facebook events or one-on-one texts)
- mute those crazy chats if you're struggling with distraction or aren't that interested. Muting is common and increasingly expected. If the chat is often used for organizing things you don't want to miss, let someone in the group know so they can keep you posted or make a routine of checking in
- if you're feeling weird about some group chat social dynamics, raise it with the person in the group you know best. We can make lots of assumptions about what other people's messaging behaviors mean but the lack of extra social cues mean our assumptions can be off. That person might not be avoiding you—they might just have the chat muted!

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