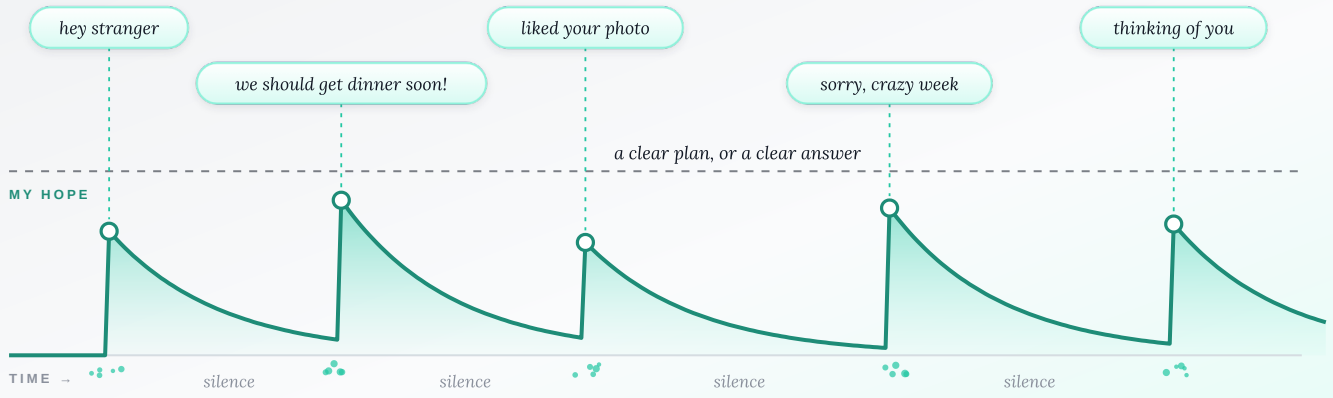
Breadcrumbing

RELATIONSHIPS · DATING · UNCERTAINTY

When someone gives you just enough attention to keep you hoping

Breadcrumbing describes a pattern of occasional, inconsistent contact, such as a message, a like or a vague promise, that keeps someone interested without moving towards a clear plan or commitment. This form looks at mixed signals, why they can be so hard to let go of, and how to look after yourself in the uncertainty.



Each message lifts your hope a little, then it fades in the silence, and the clarity never quite arrives.

01 What it can look like

- Messages that arrive just as you start to move on
- Vague plans that never get a date
- Likes and reactions instead of conversation
- Warm, then distant, with no explanation
- Contact late at night, or only when it suits them
- Apologies for being busy, but nothing changes

02 Why it can be hard to let go

Hope on an unpredictable schedule

Rewards that arrive at unpredictable times tend to keep us checking more than regular ones (Ferster & Skinner, 1957). A message after silence can feel especially powerful.

Uncertainty keeps the mind busy

Not knowing where you stand can lead to replaying conversations, checking your phone and searching for meaning in small signs.

It can touch older hurts

Being chosen some of the time, but not reliably, can stir up earlier experiences of feeling uncertain or not enough.

The good moments felt real

The warmth may have been genuine in the moment, which can make it harder to see the overall pattern.

03 Holding it in perspective

IT ISN'T ALWAYS INTENTIONAL

Mixed signals have many causes

People can be overwhelmed, unsure what they want, or poor at communicating. Not all inconsistency is a deliberate pattern.

YOUR EXPERIENCE STILL MATTERS

Focus on the effect on you

Whatever the reason, it's fair to ask whether this connection meets your needs, and how the uncertainty is affecting you.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SUGGESTS

Research on breadcrumbing is still new. In one preliminary study, adults who reported recent experiences of breadcrumbing also reported lower life satisfaction and more loneliness and helplessness (Navarro et al., 2020). The findings are correlational, so they show an association rather than cause and effect.

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04 Noticing the pattern

Keep a short record for a week or two. Patterns are often easier to see on paper than in the moment.

DATE	WHAT THEY SAID OR DID	HOW I FELT	WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

05 What I want, and what I'm getting

What I'm hoping for

from this connection

What I'm actually getting

based on what happens, not what's promised

How clear does this connection feel? *0 = very unclear · 10 = very clear*

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

06 Checking in with myself

- ☐ I check my phone more than I'd like
- ☐ I explain away the gaps
- ☐ I feel lifted after contact, then low afterwards
- ☐ I put my plans on hold in case they get in touch
- ☐ I feel anxious while waiting to hear back
- ☐ I've started asking for less than I want

07 Options I have

Ask for clarity

Say what you're looking for, and notice how they respond.

I've enjoyed getting to know you. I'm looking for something more consistent. Is that something you want too?

Set a boundary

Decide what you will and won't keep waiting for.

If a plan doesn't have a day and time, I'll assume it isn't happening.

Step back

Create some space so you're not waiting by the phone.

Muting the chat, turning off notifications, or planning other things.

Lean on others

Spend time with people who are reliably there for you.

A friend I could call, or plans that don't depend on them.

08 What I want in a connection

Things that matter to me

consistency, honesty, follow-through…

One step I'll take this week

small and kind to myself

A note of care. Ongoing uncertainty in a relationship can be distressing. If it is affecting your mood, sleep or wellbeing, it may help to talk it through with someone you trust or a health professional.

SOURCES

Ferster, C. B., & Skinner, B. F. (1957). *Schedules of reinforcement.* Appleton-Century-Crofts.

Navarro, R., Larrañaga, E., Yubero, S., & Víllora, B. (2020). Psychological correlates of ghosting and breadcrumbing experiences: A preliminary study among adults. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 17*(3), 1116.

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