

How Did Epstein Snare So Many Otherwise Savvy People?

Why would luminaries risk their reputations by interacting with Jeffrey Epstein? Sex aside, it's clear to me what many of the others were truly after.

By [Holly Peterson](#)

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Those who knew Jeffrey Epstein (seen here in an undated photo) say his powers of seduction could be intoxicating. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

In the dribbling and desultory release of [Jeffrey Epstein's](#) emails over the past few months, one question has risen above the filthy froth: why did brilliant economists, doctors, and chieftains of industry seek Epstein's counsel and kowtow to him? *Shouldn't they have known better?*

Part of the answer is simple: his infamous black book of contacts. Among a certain set—particularly the one I grew up around in Manhattan—we salivated over whose name might be tarnished next. But as it played out, the little book served as a road map of who *mattered*.

“When a new list came out, I had a dinner partner who first said he'd hoped he wasn't in the black book,” remembers Euan Rellie, the co-founder of investment firm BDA Partners. “Then he checked his phone right there under the table, and said, ‘Oh, thank God, I *am*.’”

Sure, Epstein was a serial child sex offender who orchestrated a vast, multi-state network to groom and exploit minors. But most of his hangers-on were not in it for sex. And though some of the names listed have since been implicated in his crimes, or at least knew about his conviction, many others were dumbfounded to be mentioned at all because they'd never met Epstein.

To understand those convening at Epstein's dinner table, know this law of power: Rich people don't get richer from tax windfalls. As any social scientist will tell you, studies show that most rich people get richer because they hang out together.

And going to one dinner at Epstein's was just so damn efficient. By bantering with the “right” people, even if invited by an unsavory host, the hedge-fund bro or TV director might just grab the brass ring on the merry-go-round—a connection to an Ivy League trustee for your high-schooler, a green light for a TV series—something that would be difficult to achieve on their own. Most of the men I know would cut off a limb to play 18 holes at Augusta National.

“There was something about the world behind the closed doors of Epstein's townhouse, or in the privacy of the island, where they all believed they were receiving information that could give them an edge, and that is what it was all about. It was like a private club,” says investigative reporter Vicky Ward, who had interactions with Epstein in person. “He dangled people in front of people he knew they'd want to connect with. This is a case of sheer transactionality.”

From my own vantage inside this world, I've seen the good and the bad. When heavyweights exchange ideas, much good can come in the form of entrepreneurship and innovation. The American system of philanthropy is partly responsible for museums, hospitals, schools and relief for the country's underprivileged. Even after donating \$100 million from the sale of a Roy Lichtenstein masterpiece, the

philanthropist Aggie Gund never felt she'd done enough. Shortly before her death last year, she told me, "As you age, you get concerned that you did it right...there are so many other problems I would like to be able to attack."

On the darker side, I've seen gluttonous greed and an utterly neurotic need to fit in and be seen. The act of striving for more, like some frenzied truffle hound, is usually an attempt to override fear. Insecurity among the self-made is often nuclear-powered from deep within a fragile psyche.



Epstein's infamous black book was a mishmash of people curated by Gislaine Maxwell (left)—many of whom *she* believed he should meet. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

Most of these strivers weren't entitled scions playing with Daddy's money. Like Epstein, whose father was a New York City parks groundskeeper, they had stratospheric trajectories from, say, a working-class background to running a multinational corporation.

With Epstein, their societal ambitions were so urgent they failed to be discerning. In their sweaty striving to be hosted and toasted at the right dinners, book parties, panels, benefits or openings—the Paleo protein of New York Upper Crust evening smorgasbord—many lost their bearings. Call it a fancy form of FOMO.

I've been privy to someone's absurd envy over a rival's bigger jet and heard people running huge enterprises speak of wanting to start another one at 70. There's safety in that insatiability, which is why most self-made people in Manhattan never retire.

Regardless of where they fall on the income spectrum, many people can relate to wanting to be included, or badly needing help from someone and bending their standards or ethics to get it.

Peter Attia, the longevity guru and bestselling author who recently resigned from [CBS](#) when his sophomoric banter with Epstein came to light, copped to his blind attraction to power. In an apology posted on X, Attia said when he went to Epstein's home between 2014 and 2019, "at that point in my career, I had little exposure to prominent people, and that level of access was novel to me."

At these visits he encountered leading scientists, business leaders and heads of state. "In retrospect, the presence and credibility of such venerable people in different orbits led me to make assumptions about him that clouded my judgment in ways it shouldn't have."

Attia has a point: it was well known that Epstein's guest list could include figures like Palantir's Peter Thiel, Treasury Secretary Larry Summers or former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, who helped whitewash Epstein's image by being the draw at one of his dinners. Their presence conferred credibility.

The way I see it, many Epstein hangers-on believed they were doing nothing wrong. Success made them feel untouchable. You know the thinking: If so-and-so power broker is also in the room, why should I worry? None of these folks ever thought they'd be called to account. They looked at each other and thought, *we're too big to fail*.

As for Epstein's former associates and friends, both the men and women I've spoken to who knew him say his powers of seduction could be intoxicating. They also told me he could turn on a dime and become reclusive or even disdainful of dinner guests.



A view of financier's Jeffrey Epstein's Upper East Side Townhouse in 2019. NANCY KASZERMAN/ZUMA PRESS

You may ask, couldn't these titans gather with anyone, anytime they wanted? Here's another law of social power: New Yorkers don't entertain at home often. There's no easy backyard after work to gather around. In such a socially competitive and professionally rapacious city, having a dinner party is intimidating, too much work, and very few people, even with boatloads of cash, end up hosting one. It's not a take-out affair when you're inviting CEOs, acclaimed economists or bestselling authors over.

Fast forward to today when an appearance in the Justice Department's file dump can potentially ruin your life. In some respects, this is insanity. The names of many New Yorkers who never met Epstein appear in the DOJ files—and many listed in his black book never knew him either. Huh? Sure, some he knew, but that book was Ghislaine Maxwell's curation, a mishmash of people, many of whom *she* believed he should meet.

My name appears in the book, but I was never introduced to Epstein. I did once spy him across the room at a cocktail party for Prince Andrew in the early 2000s. All the men were wearing suits. Epstein, in a schlumpy gray sweatshirt and sweatpants, radiated energy as he alone stood at the staircase, surveying the room. (Apparently the track suit was what Vicky Ward calls "his schtick, he liked to wear them when everyone was dressed up. It was a not so subtle f- you.")

A friend who was at the party with me recalls that, as underdressed as he was, Epstein pulled everyone's focus to him—even the most powerful people in the room.

Those who spent time with Epstein were drawn in for different reasons. "For the men seeking sex, I have a feeling they couldn't get girls when they were younger by the traditional methods of, say, flowers, charm, and in my case, a lot of pleading," says Graydon Carter, former editor of *Vanity Fair*. "You know, all of a sudden some 19-year-old with a Russian accent is showing interest in them, and they think they're Brad Pitt."

"Or perhaps people engaged with Epstein out of pure curiosity," he continued. "To figure out where his power and money came from—they felt trying to answer that didn't implicate them in his crimes." Those are questions we still haven't figured out nearly seven years after his death.

What was Epstein seeking in the end? Apart from gratifying a criminal sexual deviancy, my theory is that he wanted to be seen as someone his contemporaries considered worthy of his own black book.

But in the end that proved to be a hollow dream. After all, professionally speaking, compared to the people he lured into his lair, Epstein never accomplished anything.