

# Forever friends?

Surrounding yourself with good friends can help you live a long, healthy life. So how do you nurture the relationships you value – and let the others go? asks *Bridget Freer*



## *The past year has been tough.*

My marriage broke up, I had a severe work crisis and my dad died. It would have been a lot tougher, though, without my friends. Seeing them, talking to them, just knowing they were there for me was a lifesaver. Without them I would have got through, but not nearly so well.

A few months after my dad died, one of my best friends came to stay. I'd been looking forward to it hugely, but from the moment she arrived I knew things weren't right. She seemed really distant, and we kept straying into silly niggly rows – about what we should have to eat, whether wallpaper was ever admissible, who was first to like Amy Winehouse: anything and everything. I repeatedly got the feeling I'd done something to make her angry, but had no idea what it might have been.

The whole thing came to a head over breakfast on the second day, when I said, 'What's wrong? I feel as if I'm walking on eggshells,' and she shot back, 'That's exactly how I feel!' When she left later that day, things still felt off between us.

Thankfully, over the following weeks and with the help of lots of late-night Skype chats and a fair bit of red wine

## **'When my marriage broke up, just knowing my friends were there for me was a lifesaver'**

and laughter, we sorted it out. It turned out she felt I'd been distant and unapproachable. I was able to admit I probably had been, but that I'd felt somewhat under-supported by her. We both realised it was all a bit of a storm in a teacup, and that we loved each other, and valued our friendship enormously.

Things are now back to normal, but during that period, when I thought it might be curtains for a 23-year-strong friendship, I felt bereft. The feeling of sadness and impending grief and loss were so strong that they were right up there with the end of my marriage and the loss of my father.

According to Psychotherapist Rachel Shattock Dawson (therapyon.thames.co.uk), this shouldn't have come as a surprise. 'Friendships are so important. Some of the very first questions a therapist asks a client are: "What's your support network like? What kind of friends do you have, and how close are they?"'

It's not just a question of having a network for socialising, support and solace, though. Friendship is far more important than that, says Rachel. 'Research has shown that friendship can help keep you healthy, and that people could recover from cancer and heart disease more efficiently with support from friends. Study after ▶

## **'My childhood friend dropped me'**

**MARIA, 36, is a GP who lives in Brighton**

'Rosie and I met at junior school and soon became inseparable. I was always at her house and used to daydream that her mum and dad would adopt me if anything happened to mine. We went to the same secondary school and experienced all the ups and downs of puberty and boyfriends together – we told each other everything. If we had a sleepover, we'd be up all night talking.

'Then I went to university in Scotland and Rosie stayed in Croydon, where we grew up, and we drifted apart. Five years ago my husband got a job in Brighton, where Rosie was living. I tracked her down and told her, and she was really pleased – she even threw a dinner party so we could meet some of her friends. We fell back into our friendship and would meet up at least once a week.

'Then, after about six months, she never seemed to be around any more. Whenever I tried to arrange a time to meet she'd just say, "I'm really busy" and get off the phone quickly. It's been three years now and I still don't know why she cut me out of her life. If I bump into her she's very civil and I try to be cheery, but I feel the full force of the rejection all over again. The first time it happened I just managed to get in my car before bursting into tears.'

study shows that our friends help us live longer.'

And it seems this is particularly true for women. Research carried out at the University of California, Los Angeles, found that women respond to stress in a different way to men. Instead of the fight or flight response, they get a cascade of oxytocin, the 'bonding' chemical. This means that, when the going gets tough, women are programmed to tend to their children and gather other women around them. When they engage in this tending and befriending behaviour, more oxytocin is released, which helps to further reduce stress.

Sometimes, though, friendships can actually increase your stress levels. For instance, when a friend suddenly dumps you for no apparent reason, or if you've started to feel as though one of your friends is draining your lifeblood rather than boosting your chance of survival.

The writer Virginia Woolf revealed that she had a unique yardstick she used to measure the value of a friendship when she said, 'I have lost friends, some by death, others through sheer inability to cross the street.' It's not a bad way of looking at it – if one of your friendships is worth salvaging, you have to care enough to cross the street.

The first step to saving a friendship is working out what has caused the rift between you, says Dr Angela Carter, lecturer at The Institute of Work Psychology at the University of Sheffield. 'You have to assess your own needs first. What do you want



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from your friendships? How much of that are you getting? What can you do to get more of the things you need? To achieve this you must have self-awareness: what do you habitually do that prevents you from being the type of friend you'd like to be, or having the kinds of friends you want and need? A little bit of reflection is always useful.

'It could be a pattern set in your early childhood that's affecting your behaviour towards your friends now – jealousy, perhaps, if one of your siblings knocked you out of your parents' focus when you were a baby, or over-defensiveness if you were bullied at school,' she explains. The sooner you

recognise this, the sooner you can begin to reverse it.

Rachel says that it is "lifestage friends" – the ones you met while at university or as a new mum – that are often the first you lose contact with. 'As we gain a stronger sense of self, what used to matter to us no longer does and we do outgrow certain friendships,' she says. 'Once you're aware of that, without being cruel or feeling ridden with guilt, you can begin to let go of the relationships that you find are no longer nourishing you.'

But how do you go about giving somebody up when they've been your friend for many years? 'It's a complicated dance,' says Rachel. 'We start learning the steps when we're quite young, and they don't change all that much. But whereas in the playground you might have just run off and made a new set of mates with a simple, "You're not my friend any more", as an adult you have to quietly remove yourself from the friendship and not be available any more until the message has got through.'

As for keeping hold of the friends you would happily cross the street for, Phillip Hodson, Fellow of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, says there is a very simple rule you need to follow: 'You have to do things for them. The underlying nature of the relationship you have with each other is a deal. There's very little unconditional love on the planet and you don't have it with your friends, so you have to give as much as you receive.' ♦

## **'We dumped each other, but it all worked out in the end'**

**DOLORES, 42, is a teacher who lives in London**

*'I met Cath 17 years ago at work. We're very different, but I think she was drawn to me because I'm loud, and I liked the fact that there was more to her than met the eye. She comes across as very straight, but underneath it there's a wicked sense of humour. She's not as outspoken as I am, but she laughs at the same things and we became close quite quickly.*

*'We spent almost all our spare time together until about two years on, when the arguments started. Cath would say that I didn't give her enough time or attention. She'd complain that I didn't phone her enough and that she always had to make the first move. It's true that I didn't phone her much because my life's busier than hers, and when I did ring I couldn't get her off*

*the phone for ages! In the end I just thought, "Oh, I can't be bothered", and stopped calling at all. She took a stand and we went for a whole year without speaking to each other.*

*'For a long time I was relieved, then suddenly I missed her. I was five months pregnant – a really important event in my life – and I hadn't told her. I realised how much she meant to me and*

*decided to email her. She replied straight away and we had a long talk about everything. She said she'd got fed up with being the one to get in touch all the time. I defended myself by saying I'd made the first move this time and that she's really important to me. So we got over it. I can't imagine not having her in my life now, she's my best friend. I just love her.'*