

My new best friends

In her 20s, Helen Croydon had a busy social life but, when crisis struck, there was no one to support her. Now, she is learning how to forge deep friendships as an adult >>>



>>> **M**oving to London for my first taste of the working world at the age of 23 felt like university freshers' week all over again. Within days, I found myself at a house party at which I barely knew anyone but, within an hour, I'd bonded with a gregarious trio of women over vodka jellies. By midnight, we'd exchanged phone numbers, shrieking, 'We must have a night out together soon!'

When I started my job as a tax consultant alongside other young graduates, we had drinks every other night. A month after moving in with new flatmates, we'd arranged a skiing holiday. I never wanted for company because I made friends wherever I went. When we hit our 30s, I found that the many drinking buddies in my address book became tougher to pin down. As they acquired more responsible jobs, spouses, children, gardens and dogs, the impromptu get-togethers off the back of a text, or drinking cider in a gastro pub all Sunday, dwindled. Instead, it would be a quick catch-up over dinner, planned six weeks in advance.

I, too, was busy: building a career, networking, dating, keeping fit and so on, so once-a-month liaisons with a wide range of people suited me and made me feel popular. So why, after a painful break-up two years ago, aged 37, did I have no one to call? I felt that I could talk about all manner of intimate affairs with girlfriends over cocktails, but somehow it seemed needy and weird to call out of the blue. How had I, Little Miss Popular, come to this?

Friends versus contacts

It pains me to admit that I have been a 'scattergun friend'. I have gone for quantity over quality and prioritised fun over support. Yet, it seems I am not the only one. Shasta Nelson, author

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of *Frientimacy* (Seal Press, £10.99) and creator of 'friendship inspiring' website GirlFriendCircles, says, 'The need for deeper friendships is the most common type of loneliness. This explanation of the feeling is nothing like the stigma we have of recluses with no social skills. Social media has highlighted this: we keep in touch with more people online and feel "connected", so we don't see this craving as loneliness.'

I have three people I count as solid friends. They are the ones I am totally comfortable with, who tease me about my foibles and with whom I could

suggest a meeting at any time, even if a year has passed since we last spoke. These are the friends I can talk to about 'issues', not just give the lowdown of what I've been up to in the interim. One is a former flatmate; one a university housemate; and one I travelled with. I met them all before the age of 25. These are the friends who could have been there for me during my difficult time – but they were no longer in close proximity. Two had moved abroad and the third had family commitments. I saw more of my 'new' friends, but there was none of the depth.

So, is it possible to cement strong bonds as adults? Yes it is, says Irene Levine, psychologist and author of *Best Friends Forever* (Overlook Press, £13.12), but you have to put in the work. 'It's far easier to make friends at school or university because we do things together all the time,' she says. 'Intimacy comes from consistency and shared experiences. As adults, get-togethers are different. It isn't a relaxed "hanging out" during which you either talk or don't



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but make up for it with the other two. It can be a beautiful gift making friends as adults – we know how to respect each other. One study shows that we replace our close friends every seven years. That isn’t to say the friendships end, but the people with whom we are most consistent and vulnerable changes.’

I feel envious when I hear women talking about doing yoga together, or cooking at each other’s homes – I don’t have that sort of regular informality with anyone. On the other hand, my sister has an impenetrable bond with both school and university friends and they still go on holidays together in their 40s. The difference? My sister

prioritised her friends over her own interests. She made time to chat on the phone even if she was busy. She would let her commitments take a back seat for the evening to go to her friends’ birthday parties. I, however, have been more functional with my time. Why go shopping with a friend when it’s so much quicker to go alone?

A question of time

Over the past year, I’ve made more of an effort to nurture friends, old and new: less time networking, more getting to know someone. I arrange fewer ‘catch-ups’ over dinner or drinks and instigate more shared activities. I’ve helped friends move home, gone for long walks, arranged bike rides – pastimes I would have thought an unproductive use of my day a few years ago.

Anytime we invest in our friends, even if it’s a banal chat, is a building block to intimate relationships – a cornerstone of our wellbeing. It’s the thing we did automatically when we were young and carefree – and it took a short sharp taste of loneliness to realise that.

GirlFriendCircles.com

talk. You arrange to meet for a meal, which puts a beginning and an ending to the interaction. You can’t maintain a friendship on conversation alone.’

If only I’d realised in my 20s how valuable it was to have the time to bond. We take it for granted how easily we make friends when we are free to live, study or travel with others. The reason my enduring friendships have survived the once-a-month maintenance is because of the groundwork we did then.

Interaction action

I had many isolated evenings after that break-up two years ago to reflect on my friendship habits. Instead of spanning many different social circles, I wish I’d nurtured a few promising connections.

Nelson agrees that we need to change how we interact with others as we get older. ‘There are three requirements for friendship – consistency, positivity and vulnerability. When we’re young, we have tons of consistency but can’t articulate vulnerability and positivity so well. As adults, we lose consistency

How to make special friends as a grown-up

Author Shasta Nelson and psychologist and author Irene Levine get to the nitty-gritty of bonding as an adult

- **Aim for more consistency with fewer people.** Research shows that we are most happy when we have four or five close friends. Studies suggest that those of us with more than 10 key friends are less likely to be happy.
- **Shorten the interval between get-togethers**

with friends. If you see someone once a month, you are merely updating each other. If you have a phone call in-between, you truly know what’s going on in each other’s lives.

- **Organise shared experiences** such as going on a course or a weekend away together. You can’t

maintain an intimate friendship with verbal discourse alone.

- **Slowly reveal more about yourself and your life as you build trust with your friend.** A friendship is like a dance. You can show more vulnerability as you get to know each other and become closer over time.