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# The last great ROMANCE

In a world where people no longer love and honour their life partners "until death do us part", friends have become our life witnesses, our truest confidantes and the ones we turn to in times of stress or grief. Is the humble friendship the last relationship standing?

WORDS / MARIE ROWLAND

**T**he ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus claimed there were three fundamental tenets for a happy life: freedom, an examined life and friendship. Thousands of years on, his insights seem to resonate more than ever. In a society where one in three people divorce, or couples go through a revolving door of relationships even before they get to "I do", the humble friendship has remained steadfast.

Friendships are the new long-term relationships that outlast romance and marriage. But what is the intrinsic magic that allows you to find and form friendships that can last a lifetime? And does the absence of sex remove all the issues from the relationship equation? Not necessarily. Friendships can be as dynamic as romantic relationships and fraught with many of the same ailments, such as jealousy and competitiveness, but there is a different type of resilience built into their social structures.

In a nod to the rise to prominence of pals, even Hollywood has focused on friendships, with myriad versions of buddy/buddette movies hitting the cinemas. On the small screen, friendship franchise television shows such as *Friends*, *Sex And The City* and, more recently, *Girls* have thrived, with many more scenarios including friendships in the workplace also proving ripe for dramatisation, such as in the perennial *Murphy Brown*. These shows have provided great solace for





viewers who may have disconnected from family or whose romantic lives have flat-lined. We've yearned for share houses or weekends away with the girls as a respite from otherwise dull or uninspiring lives. These shows provide comfort as they reiterate the importance of friendship in our daily lives.

In unstable times, we need this form of relationship to reflect our own lives back to us. They help us to make sense of the world and, when the world doesn't make sense, friends help us through.

### WHY FRIENDSHIPS MATTER

Friends come together from all walks of life, but oftentimes there are circumstances that create these bonds: shared cultural heritage, school networks, work and sport or recreation, geographic proximity and common experiences such as children. For the most part, you don't actually choose your friends based on a predetermined set of values or conditions — you are usually thrown together and then empathic connections develop.

Despite contrived beginnings, in the course of establishing a friendship a range of dynamics occur that are perfectly organic. This is where genuine bonds are formed as you are drawn to some and not to others. A shared sense of humour or values, empathic bonds or simply that feeling of intrinsic connection with the other creates the basis of a heartfelt relationship. There are no words for this feeling of deep empathy — it's just there.

We often use the term "chemistry" when speaking of romantic relationships, but friendships originate in the same way. Why do you connect with this person and not the other, despite shared circumstances? This is the inexplicable chemistry that exists within these bonds and, like lovers, friends have to work hard to maintain the right pH balance.

### THE FRIENDSHIP FORMULA

As with many things in life that you value, such as your health or home, you have to nurture and tend to your friendships. They cannot be ignored, nor can it be assumed that they will remain robust based on historical goodwill. Like any relationship, they are prone to misunderstanding, neglect or being taken for granted.

Friendships are susceptible to falling into patterns that favour one of the

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participants over the other. One such paradigm is the giver/taker scenario. This "setup" is usually established right from the outset, unbeknown to either party, as the connection seems so strong and so easy at first. This remains so until the perennial listener is in crisis and switches roles, needing to talk or requiring help or advice. The "taker" (who may not even acknowledge that this is the role they've stepped into) is not used to giving and therefore fails in providing the nurturing or understanding role. This can cause a rupture in the friendship.

It's important that you are mindful of the roles you assume. Having a deep bond is not enough — you have to take care of and check in with each other. Active listening and watching for behavioural cues means resentment and withdrawal are averted.

### FRIENDSHIP FATIGUE

What about those friendships where the two parties' values no longer align? Perhaps, as each person has or has not evolved, even though you may still have a great regard for each other, there is simply no common ground any more. Or it may be that the way you view life is so diametrically opposed that it makes it hard to accept each other without judgement or anxiety. What do you do in this case?

Friendships need equal footing. Friendship is the one relationship that can be truly democratic — you can vote to stay or you can leave if the policies in the relationship no longer match your sense of integrity. While sad, friendships can end with respect and love.

### FRIENDSHIP FALLOUT

Sometimes it's OK to simply acknowledge that a friendship has run its course and now is the time to gently withdraw from a relationship that no longer offers sustenance, humour or

sanctuary. This is not an easy task and, like a death, both parties, no matter how injured or hurt, will still grieve. Moreover, as with the breakup of a marriage, there are casualties: shared friends, borrowed books and having to change gyms! So how do you know when it is over and that you need to break a bond that's no longer sustaining or healthy?

Emma and Rebecca were besties through university and navigated the dating world and work together, even sharing an apartment before respectively getting married. Emma, who was the wild child, settled into marriage and kids and metamorphosed into the perfect PTA mum. Rebecca, on the other hand, divorced soon after her second child was born and darted between her job and pickups. While Emma understood the difficulties in her friend's life, she could not help judging her and moreover felt that Rebecca didn't quite fit in her world any more. But it was Rebecca who finally put an end to the friendship as she felt their values no longer aligned and that she needed different things from a best friend. It was hard for both parties, but their respective experiences meant their outlooks on life had diverged and neither could find meaningful common ground.

It's easy to judge this above scenario, depending on which side of the fence you fall. But, sometimes, when friendships falter and there is that initial recrimination and hurt, we can resort to all sorts of negative behaviours. Re-evaluating what matters to you, and accepting that life means we all evolve differently and are shaped by our individual experiences, means you have to take responsibility for your life choices. This may result in taking different paths.

Interestingly, many counsellors and psychologists say they don't see many clients dealing with the issue of friendship breakdown, yet this can be just as dramatic as a marriage breakdown or even the loss of someone. There may not be legal documents to sign or a need to move house but the hurt can cut just as deeply. There is grief, regret and residual sadness that remains.

### FACE-TO-FACE FRIENDSHIPS

Press the keyboard, click "Add Friend" and suddenly I'm your friend. The advent of social media has turned the notion of friendship upside down. Now



we have more access, greater digital face time and the ability to connect at the touch of a key. However, many psychologists and social anthropologists say this in no way replaces a real-time, real-life friendship — one in which the interaction occurs in a physical space.

Part of the problem with an online friendship is that it has not occurred organically. Real chemistry and energetic connection have not been established. Research shows it's a medium laden with pitfalls where friendships are made and lost with a mere mouse click. While it may seem like an easier way to "meet" people and form friendships, many of the rites of passage are skipped over, so these relationships don't have the same resilience or empathy.

The US National Bureau of Economic Research compared the happiness effects of online friends versus real-life friends based on an extensive Canadian survey involving 5000 randomly selected people. It found there was a distinct positive correlation between the wellbeing of someone and the number of real-life friends. This was irrespective of socioeconomic and personality variables. Conversely, online friendships — no matter the number acquired — had no positive bearing on the subjective wellbeing of candidates. Finally, and perhaps most telling, real-life friends were found to be pivotal in creating a sense of happiness for those who were single, divorced, separated or widowed. Those who were partnered, on the other hand, derived meaningful connection at home and therefore did not rely as heavily on friends, either online or otherwise.

In cases where old friends have spent real time together and have shared experiences, Facebook is a terrific top-up medium for the relationship. For newer friendships, however, the bond is merely superficial. It is, in effect, friendship on display. So it's important to be wary of how you manifest and nurture relationships. For those people you meet online, try to create real-life meetings or forums to strengthen the bonds of friendship.

This is not to say that online portals are not helpful. Support groups and blogs can be a great way to share a common problem. For people who are incapacitated, this is sometimes the only way for them to avert loneliness and find understanding on hand, literally. If this support can be taken into the real world, things like the power of



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touch, mirrored behaviour and a smile can replace words and show that the physical presence of a relationship trumps all online communication.

**FRIENDSHIPS FOR HEART'S SAKE**

Research conducted by the University of California (Los Angeles) in the US showed that friendships are not only of intrinsic importance to us but also inform our sense of wellbeing and affect who we are and how we view the world. Friendships impact on our stress levels in a positive way and allow us to create perspective when under pressure, it found. In fact, the stress hormone cortisol is stabilised when friendship is part of daily interaction. The study also concluded that the "happy" hormone, dopamine, is released when we befriend others.

Friendship is demonstrably good for our health. Studies have shown that people who have no friends increase their risk of death over a six-month period. Further, such people are more prone to bouts of sadness or depression. Conversely, those with many friends and with meaningful ties reduce their risk of death by 60 per cent.

Harvard Medical School in the US conducted a famous long-running

study on nurses' health, which concluded that female friends are less likely to develop physical ailments or conditions as they age. A joyful life was found to be directionally proportional to longevity. The flip side to this was that those women without close friends were shown to face health outcomes just as detrimental as smoking or being overweight.

There could not be a more compelling argument in favour of tending and nurturing friendships. Even in terms of pure self-interest, friendship is good for your health as it has a healing and restorative effect and may indeed guarantee a longer life.

**THE POWER OF FRIENDSHIP**

We now live in a time when a friendship can be the most enduring and meaningful relationship you ever have. Research shows that we seek validation even more than we need happiness to create a meaningful life, so it's down to our friends to witness the good, bad and ugly of our lives. Rather than busy yourself with distractions, therefore, it might be wise to take some time to prioritise friendship, to forgive former friends and to hold on to those who matter in your life.

If it's true that we are the sum total of our relationships, then let's make sure we acquire meaningful friendships. They count. Friendship is a gift, not a given. 🌟

*Marie Rowland is a writer and psychotherapist in private practice in Manly on the northern beaches of Sydney, Australia. You can find out more about Marie's work at [talking-matters.com](http://talking-matters.com).*