



# 8 bad habits that thwart GOOD FRIENDSHIPS

Friendship is important. You learned it in kindergarten and now there's evidence to suggest it's a key factor in leading a healthy life. Yet, many women find their social circle sparsely populated. Make sure you avoid these missteps that stave off your soul sisters. | *by* ANNE BOKMA

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## WOMEN ARE HARDWIRED FOR FRIENDSHIP.

We need others to laugh and lament with and we crave the energizing connections that allow us to share our inner lives, fill the emotional gaps in our marriages and feel less alone when life gets tough. Our very survival depends on deep friendships with other women: Study after study shows that women with a close circle of friends live longer, happier and healthier lives.

But we often don't have as many friends as we'd like – and we're not all that happy with the ones we have. Seventy-five percent of women are dissatisfied with their friendships, according to friendship expert Shasta Nelson, founder of the women's friendship matching site *GirlFriendCircles.com* and author of *Friendtimacy: How to Deepen Friendships for Lifelong Health and Happiness*.

Her view that a lack of friendship has created an "unacknowledged epidemic of loneliness in our world" is borne out by the numbers: Almost half of Canadians say they have three or four close friends, according to the General Social Survey on Social Identity and 25 percent describe themselves as lonely. That figure rises to 40 percent in the United States, where data from the General Social Survey reveals that 25 percent of Americans say they have no one to discuss personal troubles with, more than double the number in 1985. Overall, the number of people Americans have in their closest circle of friends has dropped from approximately three to two. Our Facebook friends are multiplying, but our "real life" friends are dwindling.

We're lonely "not because we don't know enough people but because we don't feel close enough to the ones we already know," says Nelson. "We are more networked than ever, yet we often feel like we have no net of friends beneath us."

What can you do to create more meaningful friendships? Start by considering what might be standing in the way of creating a stronger solidarity of sisterhood. Could you be making one of these eight mistakes?

# 1

## NOT PRIORITIZING PALS

Close friendships need to be nurtured and tended on a regular basis or they risk wilting from lack of attention. But when life gets hectic with work and family, we often let our friendships slide and lose out on the very connections that can help bring more joy and calm to our lives.

Not scheduling time with friends is the single biggest mistake that women make, says Nelson. She notes that when women go on a great date, they expect to make plans again soon after, yet they'll allow months to lapse after seeing a good friend. "We have expectations in romance that we don't extend to our friendships," she says. "We don't reap the benefits from our friendships until we have more meaningful relationships, and a huge part of that is logging the hours."

Pat Brown, a 68-year-old woman from Hamilton, ON, is part of a tight-knit circle of women who call themselves the "Ballard Babes" after the elementary school they attended together 60 years ago. Their long friendship is fuelled by frequent contact: They meet at a coffee house every Sunday morning ("It's our form of church"), have movie nights at one another's homes twice a month (they arrive in their PJs and often sleep over), take annual weekend trips together to the Stratford Festival and see one another through all the milestones of life.

"We've been to one another's wedding showers and baby showers and now we're pitching in to help one another take care of our aging parents," says Brown. The Ballard Babes have plans to celebrate their upcoming 70th birthdays together by taking a cruise and even talk about getting a house together in their old age. "There's always something to look forward to," says Brown. "We make it a priority to find time to enjoy each other."

# 2

## NOT CUTTING TIES

Sometimes we need to let go of friendships that no longer sustain us. You may share a sense of history but not much else with your high school chum from 20 years ago. If you usually feel drained instead of uplifted after spending time with a particular friend or if it seems like you're doing all the work and the friendship isn't mutual, these are sure signs you need to move on.

One Dutch study found that we shed half our close social network every seven years. Beth Turner,\* a recently retired 55-year-old human resources manager from Sherbrooke, QC, recently dropped out of a book club she'd been part of for more than a decade. The women had become friends when their children were young, but now that her kids were grown, Turner found that she didn't have much in common with them anymore.

"I've changed so much and become involved in things like cycling, golfing and skiing," she says. "They aren't active. They putter in their gardens, go to Florida in the winter and talk about their grandchildren a lot. I told them that my schedule is busy and I can't make the meetings. I think they understood that there was a big gap there."

# 3

## NOT NETWORKING ENOUGH

"Initiate the connections you're craving," says Nelson. "If you want more meaningful relationships, it's in your hands."

Suzanne Foreman, a 55-year-old massage therapist, followed that advice when she moved with her partner to Winnipeg – a city where she didn't know anyone – seven years ago. That soon changed when she got acquainted with her neighbours while shovelling snow in the winter and even clearing the walk for others on her street. Soon, small gifts like tins of cookies began appearing at her door and friendships were formed. She also volunteered for an AIDS prevention non-profit and met a woman she became close with.

"Doing something on a regular basis, like volunteering, gives you lots of opportunities to observe each other before you decide if you might have a friendship," says Foreman. "And if you're doing something you enjoy, you increase the chances of meeting others with similar interests." Whether it's joining a hiking group, taking a tap dancing class, attending a poetry reading or using an online social networking site, such as *girlfriendsocial.com* or *yesnewfriends.com*, there are plenty of ways to meet potential friends.

Rachel Bertsche embarked on a yearlong mission to go on 52 weekly friend dates after moving to Chicago when her husband got a new job. In her 2011 book, *MWF Seeking BFF: My Yearlong Search for a New Best Friend*, the 34-year-old details how she searched for new friends by signing up for cooking and improv classes, used the website *RentAFriend.com* (paying a woman \$60 to visit a museum and have lunch with her) and even left a note for a waitress she hit it off with.

"I wrote that I was new in town and that she seemed cool and asked if she would like to grab a drink sometime," says Bertsche, who still keeps in touch with at least 10 of the women she met during the experiment. "I heard from her the next day. I thought I was crazy and alone, but people were much more open to the idea of meeting and making new friends than I expected."

# 4

## NOT ATTENDING TO ALLIANCES

Sometimes we neglect our female friendships and give our all to romantic relationships, as writer Dorothy Parker famously quipped about putting all of her "eggs in one bastard." Expanding and tending to our friendship circles can actually take a lot of pressure off our marriages since we're less likely to expect our partner to fulfill all our needs. According to a study in *Developmental Psychology*, results showed that having solid friendships had a more powerful effect on well-being and stress levels than being married.

"Having great friends can make your relationship with your husband more fulfilling," agrees Brown of the Ballard Babes, who has been married for almost 50 years. "As one of the women in our group says, 'We are each other's safety net and soulmates.'" Their strong bonds have seen the group of seven women through three divorces and the deaths of two husbands. "We've saved a lot on therapy by having each other as friends," she laughs.

# 5

## NOT SPREADING THE LOVE

Sometimes people cling to the notion that they must have a one-and-only bestie. This can be just as limiting as expecting your partner to fulfill all your emotional needs. The research of Dr. Robin Dunbar, an evolutionary psychologist at Oxford University who studies friendship, has shown we need three to five close friends for optimal well-being.

When Bertsche set out to write her book, she thought she was looking for the kind of best friend she had in grade school – the one she hung out with every day after school and traded friendship bracelets with. "That's a lot of pressure to put on one person," she says. "I realized that different friends could have different roles – there was the one I did yoga with, the one I could talk to about work dramas and the friend I could call on a Friday night to drink wine and watch *Scandal*," she says. "I went into this wanting one best friend and I came out of it with a bouquet of best friends. There really is strength in numbers."

# 6

## NOT BALANCING THE BOND

The three key ingredients for deep friendship bonds are positivity, vulnerability and consistency, according to Nelson. The more shared history and safety we feel with someone, the more likely we are to open up and share our hopes, dreams, insecurities and secrets.

Of these three, positivity takes precedence. That doesn't mean you can't complain to a friend, but Nelson's guideline is that there should be five positive interactions for every one negative interaction to maintain a happy pairing.

"Nobody wants more whiny, complaining people in their life," she says. Ingrid Martin\*, a 56-year-old PR adviser from Toronto, says she has lost three friends over the years because these ingredients were missing. One close friend moved to another country (lack of consistency), a workout friend began drinking heavily because she was having challenges in her marriage yet wouldn't discuss with her (lack of vulnerability), and a mom friend from the neighbourhood became unrelentingly bitter after her divorce (lack of positivity).

"I had to really re-evaluate that last friendship because it just wasn't working," she says. "On paper, we could have been the best of friends because we have the same interests, but her intense neediness and the drama sucked the life out of me."

# 7

## NOT THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX

It's never too late to meet a friend for life. When 54-year-old IT professional Yveta Nemeč broke her leg last year after moving into a new condo in Hamilton, ON, her neighbour Claire checked in on her daily, made dinners and even got her groceries. "She treated me like a sister," says Nemeč, who adds that they've become so close, they're now planning a trip to Mexico together.

Seven years ago, 51-year-old Denise Gordon, a small-business owner in Dundas, ON, befriended four new friends through a community singing group called Sweet Refrain. Now, they celebrate one another's birthdays, rent a summer cottage together and share a potluck New Year's Eve dinner every year. Even their spouses have become friends. "These friendships came about because of a love of singing," says Gordon. "It was a very happy surprise. When you reach out to other women, the rewards can be wonderful."



## THERE'S AN APP FOR THAT!

Finding new friends is now as easy as simply swiping right

A mobile app that was launched earlier this year is helping women widen their friendship circles by adopting the same computer algorithms used by online dating sites like Tinder. Hey! VINA, launched by two girlfriends who work in San Francisco's IT industry, suggests friends based on personality and lifestyle quizzes, proximity and mutual Facebook friends. More than 100,000 women signed up for the app in the first six months. Curious about the app's name? It's based on a networking group that one of the founders started called "Ladies Who Vino." Vina is also a Scottish girl name meaning "beloved" or "friend."

# 8

## NOT APPRECIATING THE BENEFITS

A 2010 review of 148 studies showed that having close friends increases our likelihood of survival by 50 percent. Friendship has a profound impact on our psychological well-being, protects our health as much as quitting smoking does, chases away depression and literally adds years to our lives. There's even evidence that having lots of friends can reduce our chances of catching a cold.

When it comes to finding – and keeping – great girlfriends, actress Amy Poehler, who counts fellow comic Tina Fey among her BFFs, said it best: "Find a group of people who challenge and inspire you and spend a lot of time with them and it will change your life." *mt*

*\*names have been changed*