

How to ace the 40s *friendship* shift

The demands of a career and family life mean it's easy to let friendships slip away. But with research showing the importance of friends to health and happiness, it's time to reprioritise nurturing those bonds

WORDS CHRISTINA QUAINÉ

When my husband was diagnosed with terminal cancer, Maila was the first person I called,' says Monica Danese Perrin, 40, who has been best friends with Maila Reeves, 41, for over 20 years. When they met at a party, each immediately sensed a kindred spirit, thanks to matching big personalities and a love of bad singing. They've supported each other through life's major milestones ever since: marriage, pregnancy, raising children, career highs and lows, and most recently, Monica's husband's terminal cancer diagnosis.

'Jamie and I have been together 23 years,' she says. 'Contemplating a future without him is unthinkable. Maila understood there are no words at a time like this; she just held me and let me cry before sitting me down and helping me unpick the diagnosis so we can ensure Jamie has the best quality of life in the time he has left. She didn't come out with tired clichés and platitudes – that's not her style and she knows I have no time for that. To be able to go to pieces with her, at a time when my husband needs me to stay strong for him, is a kindness I can never repay.'

Likewise, Monica has supported Maila through the heartbreak of divorce. 'My confidence was completely shattered and I'd spend days turning over and over what went wrong,' says Maila. 'I felt foolish, but Monica helped me see that we all make mistakes and she was constantly there to pick me up and remind me that I'm a good person.'

Friends who know you inside out, who will be there for you when life is doing its worst, benefit your health in so many ways – and those gains start in childhood. A study at Concordia University, Canada, found that having a friend around buffers negative experiences. Researchers concluded that when school children were alone during a negative event, such as getting into trouble with a teacher, the stress hormone cortisol rocketed and self-worth dipped. However, if a friend was present, the impact on cortisol and self-worth was reduced.

Friendships also have implications for our longevity. Research published in the *Journal Of Epidemiology & Community Health* looked at the data of over 1500 people aged 70+, and found that those with the strongest social networks were 22 per cent more likely to live longer over the next decade than those with the fewest friends.

Meeting up with a friend for a flat white isn't just a welcome break – it's good for your heart, too. A study published in the *Annals Of Behavioral Medicine* found that participants with fewer social connections had lower heart-rate variability (HRV) – the difference in time between heartbeats. Low HRV has been linked to greater risk of cardiac diseases. The upshot? Our health could be immeasurably poorer without friends.

'Good friendships have enormous potential to boost everything from our mood to our physical health,'

says psychologist Suzy Reading (suzyreading.co.uk). 'That sense of connection to, and belonging with, others is a basic human need and essential to our wellbeing. Without it, we leave ourselves open to greater risk of depression and stress.'

DO YOUR FRIENDS FIT?

However, as any woman juggling career, relationship and family will know, it can be easy to leave meeting up with mates on the back burner. 'Circumstances change as we move through the decades and this can challenge friendships,' says Reading. The intense bonds of our teens and early 20s are challenged by navigating marriage, motherhood and mortgages in our 30s. By our 40s, we're lucky if we remember to send a snatched text to the buddy we once spent hours on the phone to, dissecting every last detail of a date or latest TV phenomenon to catch our fancy. The key to maintaining those bonds with your tribe? Don't feel that you have to live up to a Hollywood version of the perfect friendship – after all, who really has time for all those leisurely brunches enjoyed by

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Carrie & Co in *Sex And The City*? 'It doesn't take much to stay connected,' says Reading. 'If you're busy, send a text to say you're thinking of them, or send a photo saying, "This is what I did this morning, I'd love to have shared it with you." It's about finding creative ways to keep the connection.'

What also impacts on friendship is when our life moves at a different speed to those of our friends. 'I see this all the time with my clients,' says psychotherapist Hilda Burke (hildaburke.co.uk). 'The lifestyle choices we make in our 30s – whether we settle into a long-term relationship, having children or not – tend to come home to roost in our 40s.' With the most recent Office for National Statistics figures showing that childlessness is on the rise – one fifth of women are childless by the age of 45, compared with one in nine women born in 1940 – and numerous studies confirming declining rates of marriage, we are now very likely to have single and/or childless friends. Or, indeed, we may be that friend ourselves.

So how best can you stay connected when one of you spends Friday nights poring over Farrow & Ball colour charts, while the other is all about the cocktail menu on a night out with single mates? 'It's important that you both realign your expectations,' says Burke. 'Acknowledge that your friendship isn't going to be the same as it was 10 or 20 years ago, ►



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and give each other space to grow and be who you want to be.' If you're the coupled-up friend, it's tempting to think you can get all your emotional support from your partner, but experts agree that friends offer something unique. 'They are often better placed than your partner to give advice,' says Reading. 'Your partner's judgement can be skewed because your decisions directly affect him. Friends, on the other hand, can offer a more balanced view.'

In fact, once you hit your 40s, seeing a girlfriend can become like going on a date. Just as you feel excited during those heady first days of a romance, friends can be the ones you dress up for and go on 'dates' with. It's something PR consultant Sigrid Daniel, 44, from East Sussex, relates to. Now married with two children, Sigrid has known her best friends, Louise and Kate, since nursery. 'We went on to primary and secondary schools together and we lived in London throughout our 20s, before moving back to East Sussex. Seeing Kate and Louise for lunch or a drink is, without doubt, the highlight of my month,' says Sigrid. 'There's no small talk,



we get straight down to the important stuff about what's going on in each other's lives. Our meet-ups are a chance to just be "me", outside of being a mother, a wife, a colleague. For me, there is really nothing more special than having a good old natter with someone I picked daisies and made mud pies with as a toddler.'

QUALITY TRUMPS QUANTITY

Another bonus of friendship in your 40s is realising you don't have to be buddies with everyone. In fact, it's far better to focus on fewer friends than to spread yourself too thinly and studies show we become pickier about who's in our social circle as we get older. Stanford University psychologists looked at interviews conducted over 34 years with men and women at various ages, and found that by our 30s, we let go of less meaningful relationships in favour of a select group. As writer Sali Hughes recently put it: 'When life becomes more complicated and laden with responsibility, a process of natural selection begins. Time becomes too precious to spend on those who just don't matter.'

So how do you work out who is worth your efforts? 'The best way to gauge a friendship is by asking yourself how you feel after seeing that friend: do you feel brilliant? Or do you feel drained?' says Burke. 'Of course, friends will go through tough times when it's difficult to be with them, but if your heart sinks every time you're together, alarm bells should be ringing. In reality, it's impossible to keep every friendship going that you've accumulated over the years. You need to check whether your friends still fit.'

Reading believes there are five types of friend every woman needs in her life. 'You need an advocate who will be your cheerleader, plus a devil's advocate who challenges you and stops you running on autopilot. You need a listener, someone to whom you can lay bare your hopes, dreams and fears, without being judged. A work friend who will understand your career triumphs and niggles, as well as the lifelong buddy to whom you don't need to explain anything, they just "get" you,' she says. 'You might get a few of those functions in one friend, or have different friends for each of them. Also think about whose team you're on and what purpose you serve, because friendship isn't only about what you're taking, it's about what you're offering, too.'

Ultimately, friendship is about kindness, love, laughter and support. It's a 'How are you?' text when life is rough. It's remembering their birthday without the help of Facebook. It's being in a bar, looking across the table at the friend who has known you since Take That posters were on your bedroom wall, and knowing you're going to have a great night. **b**