

Express friendship

After a few disappointments with mates, Alice Purkiss felt guarded – then she went trekking in the Himalayas with a group of strangers



Blinking back tears overlooking the Himalayan landscape, as hail danced on the mountaintop, I tried to figure out who to hug first. Charlotte, who walked beside me and whose stories had me in stitches; Hope, whose morning chat made my week of 5.30am starts far less painful; Lydia, who had inspired me with the way she tackled her anxiety head-on; or Hattie, with whom I had an overwhelming amount of common ground? Maybe Caitlin, who I truly admired? Or Polly? Or Beth? Or Frankie, who had led us?

There were 25 of us on that mountain – and I wanted to scoop up each person and hold them as tightly as I could. I wanted to share that precise moment with them – when, after three days of trekking through the Indian Himalayas, we reached the summit of our highest peak. It was the equivalent of climbing Ben Nevis twice.

We had been through so much together. We had cried, laughed and talked frankly about life, death, bowel movements and everything in between. Yet I had known these flawed and magnificent women for less than a week. I didn't even know what most of them did for a living because it didn't seem important. But, after being thrown together for those hours and days, it felt as if I had known them my entire life.

Relationships come in all shapes and sizes. There are the friends you've had since you were a child; the allegiances forged under the watchful eye of a judgmental boss. Some of my strongest relationships have been created in online communities and via Instagram-based camaraderie. But, last year, I learned that there is another type of friendship, one that I had never considered – express friendship. And I was seduced by its heady power.

Where's my woman cave?

I had signed up to trek through the Himalayas to raise money for the breast cancer awareness charity CoppaFeel! on a whim. I had been involved with the charity as a trustee and ambassador since my breast cancer diagnosis in 2015 at the age of 26, but putting myself out there in such a bold way isn't my usual style. I could be described as an extroverted introvert, so throwing myself into a group of 100 trekkers made me highly anxious. I like meeting new people, but I prefer doing it on my own terms, in my own way, with safe corners in which to hide. I am quick to warm to people, but never to throw myself into close friendships.

Since my cancer diagnosis, I had experienced scenarios where people talked about >>>

the ‘sisterhood’ of cancer survivors and ‘friends for life’ that are made during and beyond cancer treatment, but I was sceptical of those relationships. So, when women who had trekked with CoppaFeel! told me to expect life-changing moments and wonderful friendships, I had reservations about that too.

Our naked truth

I have sometimes struggled with creating and maintaining friendships. I have let my friends down and they have let me down. Close relationships have matured from the shaky foundations of sporadic text messages, and great people have left my life without explanation.

So I was surprised at how intensely connected I felt to the people with whom I scrambled through those mountains, and how quickly that intimacy happened. When you’re sleeping 30cm away from each other in tents, supporting each other as you struggle through treacherous terrain and seeing flashes of the best and the worst of a person in the same breath, the friendships you create are unique.

There’s nowhere to hide on the

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mountain. The result? The truest version of you spending time with the truest version of someone else; each individual stripped bare by circumstance. We weren’t writers, lawyers, shop workers and the unemployed; we were human beings with a shared connection and objective.

As we trekked, step after step, there were no facades and falseness – but shared stories, understanding and empathy were in abundance. It was utterly golden express friendship surrounded by dramatic peaks.

In her book, *The Friendship Cure* (Prelude, £9.99), Kate Leaver explores

The five phases of friendship

Relationship experts have identified a chronological pattern to bonding and establishing an enduring and valuable friendship

- **Curiosity.** You know the drill. You meet someone in a social situation and something about them gets your attention. You want to get to know them better.
- **Exploration.** This happens as you spend time together expanding on that initial attraction. This phase can feel like dating – a flurry of excited texts and a buzz when you think about being in each other’s company, unpicking your shared values and interests.
- **Familiarity** develops when there’s an understanding between fledgling

friends – you are doing activities together and hanging out, simply enjoying each another.

- **Vulnerability** comes from trust. The more comfortable we feel with another person, the more likely we are to show the sides of ourselves we might usually reserve for loved ones.

- **Intimacy** is the fifth stage of friendship – the end goal if you like. It tends to happen when there’s been vulnerability on both sides. Intimacy comes from a place of implicit trust but usually takes time, so be patient.



some of the foreign words for friendship that cover a nuance and diversity lacking in the English language.

Sisters in arms

According to Leaver, the ancient Greeks had six words for love, one of which was ‘philia’, to describe profound friendship. She writes: ‘It’s not a casual kind of friendship, it’s the sort you only achieve by going into battle together.’

We might not have literally gone into battle, but we did so figuratively – with our bodies, our demons and our stories. Leaver adds: ‘Philia is about fierce loyalty, emotional transparency, confidence and even sacrifice in the name of friendship; it’s the real deal, the ultimate in friendly commitment.’

Psychotherapist Hilda Burke says that while there are five stages of friendship development – curiosity, exploration, familiarity, vulnerability and intimacy [see left] – it’s possible to bypass some of these in extreme situations.

‘Vulnerability usually happens when some trust in the other person exists,

so we feel comfortable showing sides of ourselves we might normally hide, and it can happen quickly in extraordinary circumstances. When we suffer physically together, that can break through our usual layers of ‘I’m fine’ and provide an opportunity to get to know each other on a deeper level.’

The good news is that it’s possible to cultivate express friendships without going to the Himalayas! In helping me understand my bond with these women, Burke suggests I reflect on the way I let myself be seen by the other hikers. Was I more honest than usual? More present?

Emotional glue

The truth is I was both. I usually keep my emotions under strict control, berating myself for feeling too much or chastising myself for being overly emotional. But, when I was exhausted and overwhelmed in India, I cried openly – great, racking sobs. I have buddies who have never seen me cry, but these strangers did after a few hours.

It’s hard to know if these friendships

“Feeling that spark of friendship grow can be a real thrill, but beware of friendship that is so high-speed you end up with travel sickness”

will last. After all, according to a recent study, it takes two people 200 hours of face-to-face contact to forge a close friendship.* Will we stay the course?

Caroline Millington, author of *The Friendship Formula* (Head of Zeus, £10), suggests there’s a need to exercise caution in the ‘whirlwind friendships that can sweep you off your feet as quickly as a romantic relationship’. She explains: ‘Connecting with another, finding that you have a lot in common and feeling that spark of friendship grow can be a thrill. But beware of the

express friendship that is so high-speed you can end up with travel sickness.’

A trip of a lifetime, starting university together or joining a mother and baby group can create ‘situationship’, she says. ‘Express friendships can be a wonderful, unexpected surprise – just make sure you slow it down to ensure you make it endure a lifetime if it’s truly something special.’

I am not afraid

Is that possible? Lifelong? We still speak regularly, despite being scattered across the country. At Christmas, a notoriously difficult time for many people, and especially for those in our group who have been bereaved, we had a code word that we could text if we were struggling.

We’ve talked and laughed, and it has helped me see that perhaps my scepticism was based on a belief that friendship wasn’t something I was capable of or deserved. My heart had hardened and these women softened it.

Being vulnerable doesn’t come naturally to me, especially when I meet new people; when I feel as if I am too much and not enough at the same time. I hold back for fear of exposing my true identity too quickly and scaring people off. But, in India, I learned that I don’t need to be afraid of who I am, or temper myself.

I don’t meet new people very often these days but, when I do, I remember the generous, kind women I met on that life-changing trip, who taught me what it is to be unashamedly myself – that I am a person people like to get to know and spend time with. They reminded me what it is to be authentically myself without fear of rejection.

I hope these friendships continue to flourish but, if they don’t, I won’t judge them on their length, more on what they brought me. And I can tell you for certain – they brought me an abundance of joy and a change in perspective. And that’s more than enough.