



“ This isn't *The West Wing*, it's an episode of *Friends* ” Rachel Sylvester

From Times Online

July 14, 2009

# 10 tips to improve your friendships

**Women are thought to naturally have closer, more enduring relationships with each other, but the reality is a lot more volatile and delicate**



(Scottish and Newcastle)

Samantha Lyster

RECOMMEND? (13)

You regularly spring clean your home, your make-up bag, even your romantic relationship, but it may be those tried-and-true friendships with other women that could benefit most from a thorough clear-out.

Women are supposedly natural "bonders", forming faithful nurturing friendships with each other that stand the test of time - at least, that's how the thinking goes. Yet researchers from the Universite du Quebec at Montreal, Harvard University and Emmanuel College in Boston recently found that female same-sex friendships are significantly less tolerant, more volatile, and likelier to degrade based on a single negative incident than male same-sex friendships.

We should review our friendships on a regular basis, says therapist Ursula James, to access if they are having a positive or negative impact on our lives.

"As with any relationship, self confidence and assertiveness play a role," says James, who is based in Marylebone, London. "If you are the one who makes all the effort, re-evaluate the relationship. Better to make room for new, good friends than hang onto someone who harms you emotionally."

So how do you achieve happy, stress-free and trusted friendships? For those of us (ahem), who haven't always handled friendships in the best way, the experts have some advice:

## 1. Look at your own behaviour

Life coach Hannah Nutley says the first step is to look at yourself and examine how you behave in friendships. "It's important to understand your role in the relationship," she says. "Taking responsibility for the way you interact with someone, and how it

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affects you, is the first step to creating changes.”

2. Take a step back

Mark Vernon, author of *The Philosophy of Friendship*, advises that people are patient with their friends, even if they are being annoying, because one day that could be you. “Everyone has periods in which they are not very good at being a friend,” he says. “So when your friend is not being a good friend, remember that the same will apply to you, sooner or later.”

3. Honesty is sometimes the best policy

Vernon also advocates airing any grievances with a friend rather than letting resentment build up. However, do so in a calm, measured way to minimise any potential for an argument. “Sometimes,” he says, “for the sake of a better friendship, friends have to risk speaking honestly with one another, in spite of the risks.”

4. Make the effort

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Ursula James says that even though the relationship is platonic, it's still a relationship and just as you would with a partner, you need to make an effort. "Friendships, like all relationships, need maintenance," she says. "It doesn't mean we have to constantly call." Rather, recognise that being a friend requires reaching out, organising time together and paying attention to your friend's needs.

5. Take the lead to improve the friendship

If you find that actually, it is always you making the effort and not getting any support back, then Hannah Nutley suggests trying to make subtle changes. "If you are the shoulder to cry on for a friend, then re-focus the conversation on what you want to talk about," she says. "We lead change by behaving differently and thereby creating the space for both ourselves and the other person to 'show up' differently.

It takes practice and commitment to make the change stick but fundamentally it will better equip you for both this friendship and other relationships."

6. Stay positive

Psychologist James Brook advises that we try to remain positive and optimistic, even in the face of adversity. "Research shows that people are more attracted to individuals displaying positive emotions and attitudes and who look for positive meaning, even in adverse events," he says. "Conversely, research shows that people who are generally negative and pessimistic tend to repel others, who choose to spend their time with others with a happier, more optimistic outlook."

7. Forgive yourself

Talane Miedaner, author of *The Secret Laws of Attraction*, says that often people who are judgmental or critical of others, are also hard on themselves. "You end up holding loved ones to the same high standards you have, whether they have agreed to these standards or are even aware of them", she says. "The magic cure for this unpleasant trait is to forgive yourself first. When you stop being so hard on yourself, you will have room in your heart to forgive others too. Another way to think about this is to realize that you are doing the best you can at the time, and so is everyone else."

8. Feel the love

Hypnotherapist, life coach and author of *Get The Love You Want*, Glenn Harrold, suggests using visualising techniques to build strong friendships. "Think of a friend you care about or want to develop a stronger friendship with," he says. "Close your eyes and imagine a strong feeling of love coming from your heart and reaching their heart, and silently focus on the word 'love'.

"When you do this, avoid judgment or discrimination and continue to project a feeling of love towards them through your heart connection. After doing this a few times you will notice a stronger bond with this person."

9. Listen

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Philip Underwood, author of *Change your Thinking - Change your Life*, says that when our friends talk to us, we need to be properly prepared to listen to what they have to say. "Listen with the intention of understanding - with the heart not the head," he advises.

10. Know when and how to say goodbye

Should you find that a friendship is causing more harm than good, then recognise it and face it, says Liz Pryor, author of *What Did I Do Wrong?*, a book about female friendships. "Don't slip out the back door, avoid, stammer, ignore....particularly with a long time friend...address it," she says." Through E-mail, a letter, phone or in person, let the friend know what you are doing. It doesn't make us cruel, mean, failed people to end a friendship...it's life in that moment, you can even call it taking a break, but tell her."

Have you ever had a bad friendship breakup or one that you rescued after a row? Tell us your stories below.

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