

The thought of breaking up with a friend might make your stress levels rise, but first it's best to understand, and be comfortable with, the natural ebb and flow that inevitably happens in our relationships. Dana Kerford, Friendship Expert and Founder of URSTRONG, says, "It's very normal that we sometimes grow apart from certain friends and that not all friendships are meant to last a lifetime." Her URStrong Program empowers kids with friendship skills to create communities of kindness in schools and the fact that 'friendships change and that's okay' is Friendship Fact 4 within the programme.

"When we teach kids about the four friendship facts, I tell them they apply to their lives now – and when they are an adult," says Kerford. The other three friendship facts to understand when reviewing your friendships, are: No friendship or relationship is perfect; Every friendship is different; Trust and respect are the two most important qualities in a friendship. Explains Kerford: "We know that trust and respect are the foundation of a healthy, feel-good friendship. As adults we know better than anybody else that when distrust or disrespect seeps into a relationship, that foundation gets cracked."

It's clear that who you surround yourself with is key to your happiness. "Friendships are an important source of happiness, wellbeing, physical health, and longevity," states the 2019 research paper, 'An exploratory study of friendship characteristics and their relations with hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing' in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*. Relationships with the people around us and the quality of those

relationships sits in the top three of the seven key areas that impact our overall life satisfaction and wellbeing outlined in The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index. The World Happiness Report also includes 'social support' in its six variables used to assess happiness.

#### WHAT MAKES A GOOD FRIEND?

"Signs of healthy fulfilling friendship is a friend that's happy for your successes," says Dr Marisa G. Franco, author of *Platonic: How Understanding Your Attachment Style Can Help You Make – and Keep – Friends*. She refers to true friends as being "(A friend) that is there to help you and to support you during your low moments; a friend who brings up issues with you directly instead of just ghosting or withdrawing from you; [and] a friend who is engaged in mutuality, which means they're considering your needs and their needs at the same time and balancing both of them." She says people feel restored by healthy friendships because they can be 'authentic' in them.

"When we're feeling like we can't be our true selves around people, we tend to feel more drained after the interaction, because inauthenticity is inherently draining," she says. "So in those healthy, fulfilling relationships, we also feel restored, we feel safe – and safety's key."

It's good to remember that having a disagreement with a friend doesn't necessarily mean the end of a relationship. If the conflict is resolved, then this could move your friendship forward to a deeper level. "The idea is that we have a 'friendship fire', we confront the issue, we talk it out, we

## UN-FRIEND

*Out with the old and in with the new! A new year is a good time to start afresh, but should this include our friends? Friendships have proven key to our health and happiness, but when a friendship becomes detrimental to our wellbeing or becomes habitual with little joy, it may be time to consider cutting ties and making new, more meaningful and fulfilling connections.*

WORDS BY JANET STONE



### "CASUAL FRIENDSHIPS EMERGE AFTER AROUND 30 HOURS TOGETHER."

forgive our friend, then we feel closer and stronger," says Kerford, while describing the 'friendocycle'.

Childhood friends can feel like a comfy pair of slippers. They seem to know us like no-one else, due to the amount of time spent with each other growing up, having experienced so much together, leading to a feeling of being 'yourself' with them. "You do get to the point in those friendships that you've been through so much together, you've gone around the friendocycle many times and every time it just makes that friendship deeper and you eventually get to the point when you are locked in," says Kerford.

#### 'RED ZONE' FRIENDSHIPS

On the flipside, "an unhealthy friendship is where it feels bad, it feels hard, you don't have trust and respect, you might feel frustrated, or helpless," says Kerford. She explains that we don't always need a reason (such as a conflict) to take a step back from a friendship. "Sometimes a friendship can dip into the red zone, simply because friendships change, and that's okay. Sometimes just because we're changing, our interests are changing, maybe slowly over time it just starts to not feel good any more, it doesn't fill you up any more. It doesn't give you what you need."

There are a number of ways to distance yourself from an expired or toxic friendship, explains Dr Franco. "The beauty of friendship is that we don't just have to choose to continue or end (a friendship). There's so much in between, there's so much grey area, you could choose to perhaps make the friendship less intimate, you can choose to dial down the level of connection. I use the term 'low dose friends' for those friends you like at really low doses such as a once-a-month lunch friend."

"It is about getting strategic as well, thinking about what works and what doesn't work in each friendship, what feels good and what doesn't feel good

#### ARE YOUR FRIENDS UP TO SCRATCH?

Dr Bruce Y. Lee, Professor of Health Policy and Management at the City University of New York School of Public Health, has created 10 criteria for assessing whether or not someone should remain your friend. He says: "If someone met one or more of the following 10 criteria, that person was a candidate to be cleansed from my friendship circle."

- 1 Have they not been there for me when I reached out during the tougher moments of my life?
- 2 Were they judgemental when I revealed that I was going through tough times?
- 3 Did they not make an adequate effort to stay in touch?
- 4 Did they fail to make enough effort to really get to know me?
- 5 Have they not been open about themselves and their lives? Were they instead presenting a front or charade to me?
- 6 Did they fail to tell me or warn me about important things that I needed to know?
- 7 Did I wonder about what they were saying or doing behind my back?
- 8 Did they date my significant other while I was still with the significant other?
- 9 Did they not seem to cherish our friendship?
- 10 Did they not change any of the above behaviours even when given the opportunity to do so?

any more," says Kerford. "That friend that maybe you don't feel comfortable meeting one-on-one, you might feel okay with in a group setting."

Your approach to ending a friendship should depend on the closeness of a friendship, says Dr Franco. "I think if it's a newer friend, you can try to kind of fade on them and 'be busy', but if it's an existing friend, if you don't tell them directly, you're going to trigger something called 'ambiguous loss', which is when we have a lot of difficulty processing a loss because we don't understand why it happened."

She advises not to 'attack' your friend. "Use 'I' statements such as, 'I've just been feeling like maybe we're not compatible in the same way because of this, this and this'," says Franco. "You can also acknowledge all the good the friendship did for you. Like, 'I'll still cherish these memories or these moments that we had together.' You want to put some effort into making that break-up not toxic. You're telling them about the impact on you and why you feel uncomfortable."

So you've got rid of the draining friends who no longer make you feel good. Now what? Deep, connected friendships take time and effort to form. A 2018 study titled, 'How many hours does it take to make a friend?' published in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* found casual friendships emerge after around 30 hours of time spent together, followed by friendships around 50 hours, good friendships begin to emerge after 140 hours, and best friendships do not emerge until after 300 hours of time spent together.

#### MAKING NEW FRIENDS

"The challenge for adults is that we need to create time for our friends, so those fleeting moments at school pick-up or that quick little catch-up isn't enough for us to develop a deep connection. The depth of a friendship is determined by the depth of those conversations. If we are not getting beyond the surface stuff, e.g. 'how was your day, what's new?', then the friendship is not going to get any deeper either," says Kerford.

She describes the three main factors involved in forming a close, connected friendship: "One of them is Consistency, where you see the person regularly. That is something that for adults they don't necessarily have and why they might form friendships with


people they work with, or their children's friends' parents because they are seeing those friends a little bit more regularly.

"Vulnerability is another element that is required to form a close friendship, so making sure you are being open and honest and making those connections.

"The last one is Positivity. You know the friendship actually feels good and it fills you up, you leave with positive emotions. It doesn't mean you have to talk about positive things the whole time, it just means the friendship actually is fulfilling and gives you something you need."

Joining a club that interests you, such as a dancing, sporting or a book club can be a good way to make new friends as adults. "This capitalises on something called the 'mere-exposure effect', which is our tendency to like people, the more we interact with them. So you can expect that even if it feels awkward to join the group at first, two to three months in, you'll start actually liking one another," says Franco.

"It's not just about showing up – it's also about engaging with people when you get there," she says. "I think some people join these groups and then they don't really say 'hi' to anyone and they're on their phone the whole time. It's called 'covert avoidance', where you show up physically but check out mentally. So you have to overcome covert avoidance by engaging with people," she stresses.

A willingness to meet friends is crucial for wellbeing, says Ruth Fitzgerald, Professor of Social Anthropology, University of Otago. "I would encourage people to take it seriously because it's connected to your subsequent happiness – having that group of people that you can share something with." 



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