



WHEN YOUR BFF GOES MIA

Women rely on their girlfriends to celebrate life's ups and survive its downs. That's why having a once-loyal sidekick slip away can hurt like hell. Learn how to crazyglue the bonds of friendship.

By Leslie Goldman

Earth to Miranda! She's living on planet Mom.

From the moment I spied Jordan,* with her dark hair and kooky glasses, on our first day of college orientation, I knew she would be That Friend. The one who would listen to me blubber after my dating disasters and have me laughing my ass off by the end of the night. The one who would huff beside me at the gym and go along with

ill-fated experiments, like our infamous Friday Night Jell-O Shot Dinner Party. And for a long time, she was.

But in addition to having a wicked sense of humor and a life-of-the-party aura, Jordan was a consummate flake, a quality that came into sharp focus after college, when work demands made girls' night trickier to plan. We both got married, and while my husband and I remained happily child-free, she got pregnant

right away. We lived about five minutes away from each other, yet I saw her about as often as Amy Winehouse changes her eyeliner. Soon my real-life BFF was nothing more than a postage-stamp-sized photo on my Facebook page.

BUDS ON THE ROCKS

Behind the warm fuzzies of women's friendship lies this reality: Even the most loyal friend can expect to lose many pals over the course of her

life, says Irene S. Levine, Ph.D., author of *Best Friends Forever: Surviving a Break-up with Your Best Friend*. Losses can be triggered by moves, marriage and pregnancy, evolving interests or career changes, or something as serious as X sleeping with Y when Y belongs to U.

Which is too bad, because friendships have benefits that reach far beyond having someone to go dancing with until 2 a.m. "When we're with friends, we talk, we laugh, we're active, we hug, we have skin contact. All of these can increase endorphin and serotonin production and lower blood pressure, encouraging better health and longevity," says Mary Jo Barrett, M.S.W., director of Chicago's Center for Contextual Change. Last year Harvard researchers reported that strong social ties protect against memory loss as we age.

In post-college years, though, those benefits are harder and harder to come by. In a recent survey conducted jointly by Duke University and the University of Arizona, sociologists learned that women today report having an average of only two close confidants, down from three in 1985; nearly a quarter of the women surveyed reported having no one at all in whom they could confide.

The resulting social isolation can lead to depression or worse: In another study, researchers from the University of California, San Francisco, found that among women with breast cancer, those with a large circle of friends were four times less likely to die of the disease than patients without close pals.

IT'S A GIRL THING

If female friendships serve such an important function, maybe that's why we get in so deep—and hurt so bad when they end. "Because women are emotionally invested, far more than most men, losing a friend can be devastating," Levine says. In fact,

"Women give more; therefore, they expect more from friendship than men do. You can be emotionally vulnerable with a friend."

—Andrea Buchanan

we're biologically hardwired for intimacy. The programming began millions of years ago as we gathered around the fire, sewing bison-skin miniskirts and protecting the cave kiddies from predators. Close, effective communication was essential for survival. Meanwhile, men bonded while they were out hunting wild boar. Even if they weren't emotionally close, their shared purpose made them "friends," a prehistoric tradition that can be observed every Super Bowl Sunday, when packs of men sit around a TV not quite interacting but still feeling connected and content. That's why we relate more to the through-thick-and-thin brood in *Sex & the City* than the fist-bumping buds in *The Hangover*.

"Women give more; therefore, they expect more from friendship than men do," says Andrea Buchanan, editor of *Note to Self: 30 Women on Hardship, Humiliation, Heartbreak, and Overcoming It All*. "The expectation is that you can be emotionally vulnerable with a friend and know that your trust will be reciprocated."

Women also tend to think they'll hold onto friends for life, while men have an easier time letting go. "They'll say, 'He was great, but he turned into a douchebag,' and then move on to the next guy," says psychiatrist Paul Dobransky, M.D., author of *The Power of Female Friendship*. "Women feel hurt when they lose a friend, even if she lied or was cruel to them."

FRIENDS TO THE END

Maybe that's why, despite Jordan's repeatedly flaking on our plans and apparently forgetting how to use a telephone, often for months at a time, I remained hell-bent on making our friendship work. She would blow me off one, two, three times in a row—but when she'd finally show up for brunch, we'd quickly slip into our old easy connection.

Eventually I needed to decide whether I should simply be happy with the tapas version of friendship Jordan had been serving me or demand the full meal and risk being left with an empty plate. After a few years of sporadic contact, I e-mailed her, and for once she responded immediately. As it turns out, raising a baby had instilled in her a respect for the value of scheduling, and

she has yet to flake on our new bimonthly dinner dates.

Frequent nurturing, like keeping these dates, is crucial to maintaining even the best friendships, Levine says, or they run the risk of splintering. "It is possible to keep the friends you made during your twenties and thirties, even when you find yourself in completely different situations," says sociologist Jan Yager, Ph.D., a friendship expert and coach and the author of *When Friendship Hurts: How to Deal with Friends Who Betray, Abandon, or Wound You*. It may take time and effort, but when you're laughing on the couch together over a bottle of wine or crying on her shoulder over a pint of Rocky Road, you'll know it's worth it. [^]

*Name and some details have been changed.

KEEP HER CLOSE

Five secrets for making friendships last, no matter what obstacles life throws at you

> DON'T LET HER DRIFT AWAY
"We're often drawn to people based on common interests and circumstances—and when life changes, the friendship can become vulnerable," says psychiatrist Paul Dobransky, M.D. Try to think of these "friend shifts" as a temporary setback and give each other some extra TLC. If you're a mom, get your partner or a sitter to watch the kid and go out and have a cocktail with your girlfriend. Child-free corporate climber? Hit the zoo with your bud and her baby.

> STOP OBSESSING OVER THE WAY THINGS USED TO BE
Rather than grasping at the past, reconnect

by accepting your new lives and roles within the friendship when they change. "The key is taking the time to find out what's important to each other now," Dobransky says.

> QUIT MAKING EXCUSES
Make a firm commitment to find some time for each other, even if it's a phone date. "When you make vague plans and don't follow up, you run the risk of weeks turning into months and months turning into years, and suddenly you're strangers," says sociologist and friendship expert Jan Yager, Ph.D.

> DON'T LET FACEBOOK REPLACE FACE TIME
Think of texts and e-notes as

supplements to—not replacements for—person-to-person interaction. "As humans, we're innately wired for in-person socializing, not electronic mini check-ins," Dobransky says.

> BE THERE WHEN IT COUNTS
When the pressure is really on at work, your boss knows you'll drop everything and stay late to finish that project. When one of your friends is going through a rough time, she should know that you'll offer her the same kind of dedicated support. "It's less about the words you say, and more about being there for someone you love when she needs you most," says Mary Jo Barrett, M.S.W., of Chicago's Center for Contextual Change.