How we choose our friends

Far from being a random meeting of like minds, the friendships we forge are a response to what we’re going through at the time. But does that make them temporary alliances? By Lorna V. Interviews Jenny Hulme

You might imagine that your closest friendships came about by happy accident – the colleague at the next desk who you bonded with while working for the boss from hell, or the only other person in your fitness class who struggled to tell left from right. But why we’re drawn to make friends with certain people and not others is a complex algorithm of circumstances, similarities, differences and life stages. Whether someone becomes a passing acquaintance or a friend for life is far less of an accident than we think.

Gabrielle, a 35-year-old architect, is a case in point. ‘Ever since primary school I’ve had a series of best friends, right up till now. And it’s only recently that it dawned on me that all of these close friends were people who were a bit rebellious and unconventional; they’d be the ones with the purple hair and motorbikes. Now most of my friends are artists and I don’t think that’s an accident.’

Is Gabrielle unconventional herself? ‘No,’ she laughs. ‘But I did always want to be an artist, and I ended up going into architecture because it felt like a safer way of having a creative career. I’ll probably always be drawn to creative types; I find them exciting and stimulating to be around.’ That may be true, but it’s also certain that her choice of friends is saying something about how she views and defines herself.

FEEL PART OF THE GROUP

As adults, a shared ‘social identity’ is a powerful predictor of who we become friends with, and which of those is likely to become a close friend, says Professor Lisa Fortin Louis Wood from the University of Puget Sound in Washington. ‘Our social identity relates to how we see ourselves in society, for example, as a member of a sports team, the supporter of a local gallery, a parent or a neighbourhood campaigner. Someone who affirms this social identity by being part of the same group makes us feel good about ourselves.’

This can be particularly relevant when you’re going through a major life change, when your choice of allies can either reinforce or reject your life choices.

It’s for this reason, for example, that if you’re going through a divorce, and the rest of your social group are all married, the social dynamic can become extremely uncomfortable. For a time, the person going through it will inevitably gravitate towards other people in the same boat, and can sometimes feel ostracised from their former gang.

New friendships are crucial during pivotal times when we’re winding down an old identity, looking towards a new one and experiencing what Wood calls an ‘emerging’ identity. ‘How we label ourselves,’ says...
Wood, 'whether it's working mother or struggling artist, is likely to determine who our friends are. When we claim a social identity and take on a label, we are claiming membership of this group.'

STANDING THE TEST OF TIME
Our life stages also influence the type and depth of the friendships we form. As American clinical psychologist and author Roni Cohen-Sandler puts it: 'The bonds are strong around milestones like antenatal classes and the college years. Even if you go on to make different lifestyle choices, you have a very strong foundation for the friendship.'

This was true for college flatmates Nicola and Stephanie. For the first few years after graduating, they remained best friends and were part of the same gang. Then one things happened. Nicola fell in love and moved in with her boyfriend and Stephanie got a promotion at work that involved moving to another city. 'Not only were our lifestyles vastly different, so were our spending styles,' says Stephanie. 'I wanted to go off to New York on a shopping weekend, while Nicola wanted to hang out at Ikea looking at flatpack shelves.' Did this life change spell the end of their friendship? They saw each other less frequently for a couple of years, but their shared history and similar sense of humour meant they always had plenty to talk about when they did get together. It meant when Stephanie moved back to Nicola's city, they soon picked up the friendship where they left off. Fast forward 10 years and they have sons of the same age and live in the same neighbourhood. What could have been the death knell for their friendship actually proved to be only a temporary blip.

It can happen that we outgrow our friends, and it's all right to acknowledge that. 'People feel sad about letting go and think that friendships should last forever,' says New York-based psychologist Vivian Diller. 'But our social network is constantly expanding, contracting and shifting. And that's normal.'

OPPONENTS CAN ATTRACT
According to psychologists we're at our most ripe for new friends when we're making radical changes in our lives, especially if we're reinventing ourselves in some way. Recent studies have identified that friendships provide emotional and social support when we're adapting to new environments and social roles, whether that's moving to another city, changing jobs, getting a divorce or even surviving a serious illness.

Though most experts focus on similarities, what of the friends who are radically different, or even the ones we're drawn to against our better judgment? Cohen-Sandler says opposites can sometimes attract: 'We do seek out people who have qualities we admire and wish we had in ourselves, so in a sense they complement us. A worrier might be attracted to someone with a “whatever” attitude, as that can be fun to be around.' Similarly, a health nut might choose to be friends with someone with a more indulgent lifestyle, either because it makes them feel more virtuous by comparison, or sometimes because it gives them permission to give in to temptation from time to time. 'Our opposites can also represent parts of ourselves we're not comfortable with, so a shy 20-something might be friends with a confident, outgoing woman, and get a vicarious enjoyment from listening to her adventures, while the adventurous one might love the attention,' says Cohen-Sandler. In short, having different types of friends gives us the opportunity to learn about ourselves.

OLDER AND WISER
It seems we get better at friendships as we get older – perhaps because our expectations change. As we become more mature emotionally, we tend to gather more friends who fulfill different functions. When we're young, having a Best Friend gives us a sense of security; we belong to someone. Instead of having a best friend to turn to for everything, we realise that it's unrealistic to rely on just one person, says Cohen-Sandler.

Diller agrees. 'When you reach your 40s, you have a clearer idea of who you have become, so you become less tolerant of spending time with people who drain you. And if you're single, your friends are almost like a substitute family, so you tend to hold on to the good ones.'
"In good times and bad, it's about being there. My group of friends is like an amazing safety net."

Becky Smith, 37, works in publishing and lives in London with her husband and two-year-old daughter.

We are great as a group, but have individual friendships and dynamics within it, too. We can be different things to each other - the comforter, advisor, listener - it all depends what's happening. It's never an issue; no-one ever feels put out or left out. Our bigger get-togethers tend to happen organically and we are really secure about each other's affection and love for each other. The occasions when the five of us go away together are the happiest times and have created the fondest memories.

Things have changed over the years we've known each other, but we all felt that it was something special from the beginning. Like when I first met Stella through a mutual friend. We met for a coffee and ended up staying in the café all day. After university we went travelling and shared a two-man tent for six months. Of course we had disagreements, but we are both big talkers and that bond from our first meeting meant something. All five of us have that connection that keeps us close.

Things that mattered in the beginning are different to what matters now - the friendship the five of us share has adapted to that. I had a twin pregnancy and lost one of my babies at 32 weeks. I remember one awful day after my daughter Daisy was born, when I just wasn't coping - the girls took me to Stella's house and Nici rocked Daisy to sleep while the others held my hand and made me cups of tea. They all looked after me, supporting me in just the way I needed, without me having to say a word.