

How to Deal with the Changing Landscape of Your Friendships

Drifting apart or losing friendships entirely is a natural part of life—and it's something experts call the "friendship curve." The less depressing news is that there are ways to feel at peace with it.

By **Kelsey Ogletree**

March 12, 2020



PHOTO: KLAUS VEDFELT/GETTY IMAGES

Remember those cute little friendship necklaces you exchanged with your BFF in grade school—maybe two halves of a heart that read "Best" and "Friends," or yin-yang pendants that fit together perfectly? At the time, you probably never imagined that one day you'd drift apart or that 20 years down the road, you'd no longer be in each other's lives altogether.

What is the "friendship curve"?

Truth: Friendships ebb and flow throughout the course of your life. This is what experts call the friendship curve. While the exact shape of this curve may look different for everyone (imagine a line graph plotting your friendships over time), there's research to prove that all friendships tend to go through evolutions. In fact, one study shows that people replace half of their close friends every seven years, which sounds harsh, but when you stop to think about how many life changes and stages you've gone through in the last decade alone, it starts to make sense. (Related: 'How I Lost, & Found, My Best Friend')

Take me for example: In the last decade, I graduated from college, moved three times, got married, worked for three different companies, and started my own business. All those major life changes naturally had an impact on my friendships too—and that's pretty normal regardless of the path your life takes, says Shasta Nelson, friendship expert and author of the book *Frientimacy*.

Given all these transitions, it's understandable that some friends will be along for the ride, although to different degrees, while others may fall off as friends completely. Think about it: When you're going to school, whether it's pre-K or college, you're spending great amounts of time with your peers, and that equates to greater development of friendships, says Nelson. (The same holds true for work since you're spending so much time with colleagues.) A 2018 study from the University of Kansas that examined friendship closeness suggests that it takes between 40-60 hours spent together to form a casual relationship with someone; 80-100 hours to transition to calling each other a friend; and more than 200 hours spent together to become "good" friends. That's a LOT of time.

So what happens when you move physically apart from your best friends, and you aren't getting in that face-to-face QT as often? Your friendship with them hangs on whether you can continue to keep putting in enough hours to keep knowing each other on that deep level, says Nelson. You've already invested so much time into these existing friendships, you might think they can just run on autopilot, but they still need to be tended to, says Nelson. It's a matter of maintaining as much connection (through phone calls, girls' trips, or just check-in texts) as you can. That's not to say you shouldn't spend time developing new friendships—that's super important, too—but dedicating time to your existing friendships becomes key when you can't be physically together. (FYI: Here's how to heal a broken friendship.)

In fact, time is one of the reasons that, as you age, you may find yourself investing in a few close friendships rather than many casual friendships—quality over quantity, if you will. "If you have a bunch of relationships that never feel 'deep enough,' and don't do a careful job of nourishing those deeper

relationships, you end up losing them," says Nelson. And hello, let's face it: Your time becomes even more precious as your life progresses with busy schedules, work, relationships, and perhaps kids clamoring for your attention—so you want to ensure you're directing what little time you do have toward things that will lead to the most satisfaction.

The Emotional Effect of Losing Friendships

Despite knowing that friendships can and will change and end, that doesn't make it any easier to deal with when those things happen. The flow of your friendship curve can create feelings of anxiety, fear, sadness, loneliness, and even depression, says Erica J. Lubetkin, L.M.H.C., a psychotherapist in New York City. "This is particularly true for individuals who had intermittent or inconsistent friendships as younger children," she says. "The experience [of friendships that drift apart or are lost] pushes buttons of insecurity and fear of loss and permanence." These feelings can be exacerbated if one friend makes efforts to keep the relationship strong but feels that the other is letting it slip away.

However, there's a strategy called "radical acceptance" that can help, says Lubetkin. This is the act of accepting that loss of friends is a normal human experience as you mature, and celebrating the development of new friendships with people who share your values and current interests, she explains. (Related: [4 All-Too Real Reasons Friends Break Up and How to Deal](#))

So while you don't have to force yourself to be happy about a friendship that ended or has become distant, you can find ways to cope and find peace. "Acceptance doesn't mean agreement," says Lubetkin. "We all experience pain in life, but we can avoid suffering. It may be time to interact with the experience in a new, healthier way."

To do this IRL, try reviewing what your old friendship provided, and celebrate what you can learn from the relationship in order to grow to become a better person and friend in the future. The transition period can be difficult, but it's important to remember that you have the ability to cultivate meaningful friendships throughout your entire life, says Lubetkin. As your life changes, so can your values for what you want and need in your friendships. When you consider it that way, it becomes a gift to be able to move on and begin to cultivate new, meaningful friendships as you grow, she adds.

How to Deepen the Friendships You Already Have

While moving on from past friendships is 100% OK, it's also normal to want to continue to grow (or rekindle) friendships you've already started. (After all, BFF relationships boost your health in myriad ways.)

There are three parts to a healthy relationship that make you feel bonded and trusting, says Nelson. The first is consistency with time spent together: "The more you put in hours, the more you feel like you have a future together," she says. The second is positivity: You need to have fun together without fear of being judged and feel accepted through expressive affirmation. The third component is vulnerability or those moments when you feel like you can show your friend who you really are or what you're thinking without fear of judgment or distance.

"Any friendship you've ever had is built on those three things, and any relationship that isn't as deep as you want [it to be] means that one of those things is lacking," explains Nelson.

Say you're feeling disconnected from a few friends you used to be really close with (in my case, two bridesmaids from my wedding). Before you chalk it up to drifting apart or just try to replace those friends with new people, ask yourself which of those three elements could make the biggest impact on your relationship, says Nelson.

If you're lacking consistency...Try scheduling a weekly or monthly phone call to get to know each other again. Commit to the consistency, or join something that's already consistent. (This is where all the cheesy advice on how to make friends as an adult comes in, but the theory behind it is valid: When you're part of something that's already happening regularly, like a community group or a sports team, it takes the work out of planning interactions on your own.)

If you're lacking positivity...The biggest mistake you can make with building and maintaining friendships is reading between the lines too much (raises hand). "Where most of our friendships die is that we take it personally [that the other person] is not doing the inviting," says Nelson. "We start fearing they don't like us as much as we like them—but the fact is most people aren't good at initiating, and most people aren't aware of how important consistency is." There's no doubt it gets annoying (and exhausting) to be the friend who's always trying to make the plans, but know that the more you do it, the stronger and more positive the relationship will be—as long as they keep saying yes. Over time, the question should become not who initiated it, but if you're both finding your time together meaningful, says Nelson.

You might guess that the consistency aspect of friendships is the hardest to keep up, but Nelson says that many people actually struggle with positivity the most. Things such as giving unsolicited advice rather than simply listening and being there for someone, as well as being easily distracted by your phone, can get in the way of those positive vibes, she says. (Note to self: To be a better friend, be a better listener... and put down your phone, seriously.)

If you're lacking vulnerability...this element takes time to develop. "The goal is not to just be vulnerable and tell somebody everything, but to do it incrementally, and be curious about each other." (Related: What It's Like to Hike 2,000+ Miles with Your Best Friend)

If you're struggling with a friendship transition right now or feeling frustrated with the process of developing new friendships, have faith knowing that you're not alone. When you look at waning friendships as either an opportunity to nurture that relationship back to health or to cultivate new connections that will be more meaningful, you can rise above the emotional toll.

ADVERTISEMENT