



Bosom Buddies

How and Why Female Friendships Are Made

BY NANCY A. SHENKER

Daily Dose of Friendship: Joanna Crisella (left) and Jennifer Cook (center) enjoy a 16-year friendship and work together at Lighten Up Massage Therapy in Chappaqua, owned by Cook. They meet every day at Starbucks. "We talk about our hopes, our dreams, our goals," Cook said. They have serious discussions, work meetings and laugh together, too. Joining them on a recent Saturday was their friend Sophie Benkewitz.

When my father died suddenly, his obituary ran in the *New York Times*. That week, I received a call from my friend Nancy, calling with her condolences and emotional support. I first met Nancy in third grade. We bonded because we both loved to write and fabricate outrageous stories. Throughout high school, we shared intimate secrets, good times and even a couple of boyfriends.

The last time I had spoken to Nancy before that phone call was five years earlier. We hadn't had a falling-out. We had just been busy. Yet, when she saw the obituary and sensed that I might need an old friend to comfort me, she suddenly appeared.

And that, in a nutshell, is what true female friendship is all about.

As I spoke to Chappaqua women about friendships with other women, the word "trust" kept coming up in conversation. It extends beyond the trust that someone can keep a confidence or be relied on to watch your kids. It's the type of trust that transcends time and life changes. It's ultimately the trust that your girlfriend will be there for you—when

you need to talk, when you need to cry, when you need to laugh.

Cheryl Dellasega, Ph.D., is a psychologist specializing in female relationships and the author of *Surviving Ophelia* (Ballantine), *Girl Wars* (Simon & Schuster), and *Mean Girls Grown Up* (Wiley). She sums up female friendship with, "Men bond to 'do' things together. Women bond to share emotions, forge social connections, and find support."

A landmark UCLA study even goes so far as to suggest that female bonding stems from a distinct chemical reaction. When a woman is stressed, brain chemicals (the hormone oxytocin) are released, prompting her to engage in "befriending" and nurturing behaviors. These social ties, in turn, result in more oxytocin production and an even greater feeling of calm.

The Softer Side of Friendships

Let's put science and theory aside for a moment, however and move on to the "softer side" of female friendship.

Helaine Brick-Cabot, an attorney and business owner from

Chappaqua, speaks of one friend she has had for 40 years. She lists honesty, loyalty and the ability to 'be there' for the other person as the key factors that have held this and other friendships together. "Having common interests is also important," she stated, "although it's also wonderful to share 'history' with old friends."

As women's lives change, the nature of their friendships evolves too. Phyllis Palmer Jacobson, owner of Petticoat Lane and Phyllis' Leather Shop in Chappaqua (and a 28-year Chappaqua resident), talked about her oldest friend, with whom she has been close for 55 years. "The friendship has lasted because we have not put too many demands on being friends," she asserted. "As we've gone through changes in interest, location, husbands, kids, we offer advice but try not to judge." She laughed as she realized, "I've known most of my good friends longer than any of my husbands."

Sometimes friendships also withstand the challenges of business. Norma Menkin's good friend Gail Tessler was the first person she ever hired into her business. Norma, who

lives in Millwood, decided to form Gainor Staffing in 1982 with Gail. They have survived three recessions together and even timed their pregnancies so they would have minimal impact on their business. Their husbands have even become friends over the years and their children have grown up together.

Not all of a woman's friends are people who date back to childhood or early adulthood although those bonds tend to be the strongest. Brick-Cabot reflected, "As I've gotten older, I have been much more selective in choosing friends. To me, friendship is a great responsibility... I now only make friends with women who I believe feel and act the same way."

Conflict among female friends is a topic that many women are hesitant to talk about. Like marriages, long-standing female relationships require extra hard work to overcome issues. "Jealousy and competition get in the way of even the best of friendships," admitted Jacobson.

"We as women tend to be afraid of conflict," stated Nan Mooney, author of *I Can't Believe She Did That: Why Women Betray Other Women at Work*.

(St. Martin's Press). "This results in situations where women don't speak up about problems and allow them to fester. Small issues may get blown out of proportion when they're not discussed, and can even result in long-term friendships falling apart."

How do we teach our daughters to be "good friends" to others? "Role modeling is important," said Dellasega. "An important lesson to also teach girls is that friendships, like most relationships, go through seasons and changes. A girl (or woman) needs to realize that sometimes she will be closer to one friend than others or that one of you may have needs that change the relationship dynamics."

The variety of friends any one woman may have in her life—as her circumstances change—are captured in an amusing excerpt from the iVillage Web site, "The 5 Friends Every Chick Needs" by Ame Beanland and Emily Terry. They fall into these categories:

1. The "I've Seen You with Braces and Bell-Bottoms" Friend (the long-tenured relationship)
2. The Biological Buddy (one who mirrors your family status)
3. Your Own Personal Martha Stewart (the resourceful friend with solutions to problems)
4. Your Sister-in-a-Suit (a friend at work)
5. Wild Woman (the friend who's impossible to shock).

Girls' Night Out

Men often wonder what women do when they get together with their female friends. Dellasega points out that most married men consider their wives to be their best friends, while more married women think of their girlfriends as

best friends. Dellasega herself enjoys getting together with girlfriends over the holidays or going into New York City for a weekend.

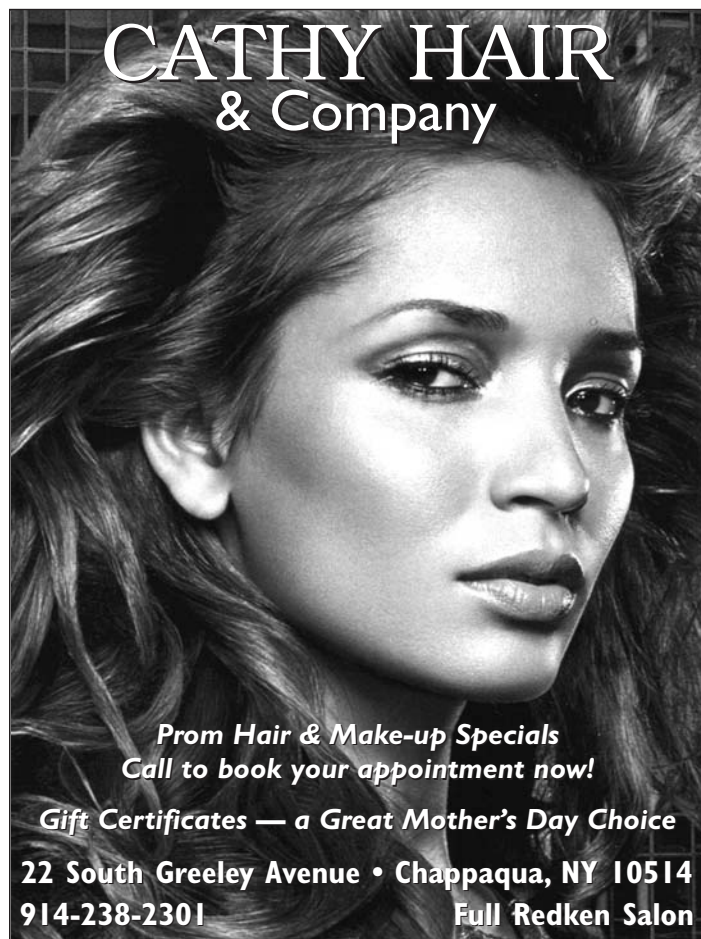
Phyllis Jacobson described a girls' night out as one filled with gossiping and laughing. She also confessed that when she meets her friends for tennis, "We play for an hour and then talk for two." When Chappaqua resident Joan Popkin described getting together with her oldest girlfriend, who she's known since seventh grade, she said, "We love to make each other laugh but we also listen to each other's issues."

Timelessness, trust, honesty, tolerance (and perhaps even a dose of oxytocin) are all ingredients of long-term female friendships. We love those women we shared pajama parties (and even boyfriends) with in school, and we love them just as strongly—but differently—as middle-aged women. We are hurt when they betray us, and struggle to keep in touch as our lives become more complicated. But when we're feeling "needy" and hear that familiar voice on the other end of the phone, or get a speedy reply to that online message, or meet to cry (or laugh) over a rushed cup of coffee, we know deep down that few things are as valuable as a close female friend.

"As I've gotten older, 'I've come to appreciate my friends so much more,'" said Helaine Brick-Cabot. I recognize what a blessing it is to have others in my life who care about me so deeply and help me be a better person."

NANCY A. SHENKER is a regular contributor to *Inside Chappaqua* and the founder/principal of theONswitch, a business consultancy specializing in start-ups and transformations. She counts among her girlfriends Nancy (elementary school), Beth (high school), Joan (college) and Stephanie (sister-in-law). She has two teenage daughters, who are developing their own lifelong friendships.

Women and Friendship is also the topic of this month's edition of *Yada...Yada...Yada*, a regular program on NCCTV that covers issues of special interest to women in our community. *Yada...Yada...Yada* airs every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday on Channel 75.



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