

Issue Date: View January/February 2008, Posted On: 11/1/2007

Relationships: When Female Friendships Fizzle

by Elizabeth Heubeck



You and your old friend no longer have much in common. What do you do, break up?

The moment I met Julie, I felt an instant connection. It was our first week of college and we were seated across from each other taking a Spanish entrance exam. One look at her and I could tell she felt exactly as I did — longing to be doing anything but dredging up vocabulary in a language largely forgotten over the summer. We soon became close pals, swapping clothes and sharing secrets about crushes while stuffing our-selves with pizza in our dorm rooms. That was 20 years ago.

Since then we've grown up — and apart. Julie has sworn off carbs, so eating pizza during our infrequent lunch dates gives me little pleasure, particularly as I watch her chew daintily on salad greens. I wish carbohydrates were the only things that have come between us. But our child-rearing philosophies, political perspectives and general outlooks on life seem to have veered in opposite directions as well. I don't know whether to continue our friendship, call it off or leave it in its current state of limbo.

Breaking up is hard to do

Apparently, I'm not alone. Many women have no clue about when or how to cut loose a friend. So says Irene S. Levine, PhD, a professor at New York University School of Medicine, who has compiled data from 700 women and their personal experiences of fizzling friendships. (Visit her blog at www.fracturedfriendships.com.)

Levine isn't surprised to find that women suffer great angst over rocky relationships with their girlfriends. "Women expect more out of their relationships than men," she says. "They depend on female friends for emotional support. So it's more emotionally laden for women to cut off a friendship."

Consider Leslie, a 39-year-old Baltimore native. Over a year later, she still feels the sting of an emotionally charged breakup with a friend of 27 years. "She always looked out for me," Leslie says. "She was like an older sister to me." But once her friend found others to nurture — a husband, then a daughter — Leslie got squeezed out of the picture. Yet it wasn't until her childhood friend told Leslie flat-out that she didn't have time for her "histrionics" — a statement that hit Leslie like a slap in the face — that she knew the friendship was over.

When to call it quits

Like many women who sense a relationship souring, Leslie continued to hang onto her friendship long after it had stopped bringing her any satisfaction. Even when the signs of a broken friendship are glaring, we often fail to heed them, experts say. But you can learn how to tell when it's time to call it quits.

"If the friendship is a one-way street, and her needs are always stronger than yours, it's time," says Nancy O'Reilly, PsyD, a clinical psychologist and host of the radio program *Courageous WomenSpeak*, aired on Voice America, the Internet talk radio station (www.voiceamerica.com).

All too often, it takes a life-altering situation to recognize that a friend is no longer emotionally available to you. "If something happens that's devastating, like a serious illness, and your friend is not available when she is needed most, that warrants a breakup," O'Reilly says.

Sometimes, the very things that first attracted you to someone later repel you. Take Melinda, a 41-year-old real estate executive and mother of two. In college, she befriended a fellow student whom she describes as "the life of the party." They lived together in college and socialized constantly. But several years after college, when Melinda was establishing her professional life, her friend's insatiable desire to party and her drunken escapades began to seem a lot less appealing. "The catalyst, for me, was when she booked a flight to Daytona for spring break, years after we had graduated from college," Melinda recalls.

Melinda's story is familiar, according to Levine. "The large majority of failed friendships just grow apart, like a slow death," she says. "They don't involve any great transgressions."

How to end it

There's no perfect way to tell someone you no longer want to be friends. And, obviously, catching your best friend in bed with your husband warrants an entirely different sort of breakup from one where you simply no longer have much to say to each other.

Most experts advocate a helpful confrontation.

"It should be constructive. Tell her, 'We've had a change of values, attitudes, life view,'" O'Reilly says.

It sounds easy enough. But many women shy away from confrontation at all costs.

"Confrontation isn't pretty, it's not nice. It's not what we as females have been taught to do," O'Reilly acknowledges.

Melinda can relate. When she wanted to call it quits with her college friend, she took the easy way out. "I was a total wimp about it. I just didn't return her calls," she admits. "I'll do anything not to hurt somebody's feelings."

When O'Reilly counsels women about relationships, she emphasizes that confrontations are not necessarily bad. "Women get confused between confrontation and aggression," she says. Confronting someone with facts, rather than emotion, can be a positive experience for both parties, she says.

But that's not always easy when feelings are at stake. Cindy, a Canton mother of three, recalls finally exploding at a close friend — a woman who had been a maid of honor in her wedding — over the phone after having been jilted by her one too many times.

"Whenever she started dating someone, she'd act like I didn't exist," Cindy says. The last time it happened, she drove Cindy completely out of her life. It became too much for Cindy to take, although in retrospect she acknowledges that she may have been a bit harsh on the phone. "My hormones were in full swing; I had just given birth," she says. After that exchange, the two friends saw each other only once. Now, admits Cindy, an accidental meeting would be strained.

That's normal, as women simply aren't accustomed to social situations that are anything other than rosy, Levine says.

"We're just starting to realize that friendship doesn't have to be forever," Levine says. "It's dynamic and it may change over time."