

'It feels unconditional': the secrets of lifelong friendships - according to lifelong friends

Friends are essential to our health and happiness, and even affect how long we live. But how do you keep a relationship alive when you are living in different places and can barely make time for yourself?



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Trish and Mick started chatting about music on a staircase in 1970, when Trish and her flatmates ("strange, slightly hippy people," Mick laughs) were trying to stop a neighbour's party guests, including Mick, from getting into their flat. Julia and Susan found friendship when they became neighbours at the age of seven. Susan's parents disapproved of Julia's single mother's lifestyle and forbade them to meet: "We developed a system of sound signals, found a place to hide notes to each other and met secretly in the local park," Susan says. Ian and Roger bicker gently over which was the first Nottingham gig where they shared a bill in 1965, but say that Roger persuaded their bands (Tony D and the Shakeouts for Ian; The Sons of Adam for Roger) to jam together on stage.

Friendships start with these accidents – choosing a locker at school, who's in the next room in your hall of residence, or attending the same protest – but staying friends over a lifetime can't be accidental. "Friendships are a voluntary type of relationship," says Mahzad Hojjat, a professor of psychology and friendship researcher at the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth. "In some ways they are the weakest tie, because you could just disconnect." What stops friends from doing this? As new research shows that socialising helps people to live longer, I spoke to friendship lifers who have stayed close over decades of good and bad times and everything in between. Are there any secrets, and do they have advice for the rest of us?

We become friends with one another because there is something we like and have in common with someone: this is homophily, or the "birds of a feather" phenomenon. "These are relationships that are seen as 'clicking' from the start," says Robin Dunbar, an emeritus professor of evolutionary psychology at the University of Oxford. Dunbar defines the "seven pillars of friendship" as similarities that predispose people to become friends: language or dialect, geography, educational experiences, hobbies and interests, moral or spiritual viewpoints, political views, sense of humour and taste in music. That holds for the lifelong friends I spoke to. Trish and Mick bonded over west coast American music; vocal harmony fans Roger and Ian went on to form a band together. For Susan and Julia, it was simply chatting: "We were able to have very long conversations and talking is one of my favourite things," says Susan.

This is partly why many long-lasting friendships form in your late teens and early 20s, at a time of intense firsts and memorable experiences, shared circumstances and enthusiasms. That's when Roger and Ian were gigging around the country in a Ford Transit van. Mick and Trish both had adventurous leanings. "We had an interest in travel, adventure, doing something different," says Mick. In their 20s, Mick coupled up with Trish's best friend, Sue; along with Trish and her then partner, Chris, they formed a tight friendship foursome, frequently travelling together. "We'd get in our old Morris Minor, drive to north Wales and end up in a field in the middle of nowhere," Mick reminisces.

But life pulls friends in different directions, as a tight-knit group of friends told me. Patricia and Tracy went to nursery together, Zerlina joined them at school and Yvonne was their netball and track rival (“A fantastic little sprinter,” says Patricia; “Those days are long gone,” counters Yvonne). Patricia had already spotted her in town, as one of the few other Black girls in 1980s Doncaster. “We weren’t the popular kids at school,” says Tracy. “We went against the grain, our youth culture was formed together.” They bonded, Zerlina notes, over not just hip-hop, but also their shared ambition and desire to get away: “Although we had great joy in that place – there was lots of fun and good times – we all had a hunger to leave. That was always on the cards.” They scattered to university and beyond, but have stayed very close. Zerlina says the strength of their bond means it has weathered waves of greater and lesser intensity of contact: “It feels unconditional, so it allows for space.”

The others echo this idea that even in the days before WhatsApp and Zoom, a hiatus never threatened their friendships. Ian and Roger eventually got “proper” jobs (Ian became a teacher and Roger worked for the railways); Ian also worked abroad for long stretches. Even after their longest spell out of touch (three years), Ian says, “I just phoned him up one day and it was, like: ‘Ey up, man!’” For most of their friendship, Susan and Julia lived at opposite ends of the country. “I was a city person living in London with a family and she was a doggy person living in the Pennines, but every time we met, the conversations would go on for hours,” says Susan.

Trish and Mick dealt with a more dramatic pull: their respective partners fell in love with each other and both couples split, breaking up the group. “It was a really bad time,” says Trish. “We had this real rupture,” says Mick. In fact, though, it heralded a new phase in their friendship, as a duo. “She was very supportive,” says Mick of Trish, who managed to stay friends with everyone involved. “I don’t like falling out with people really,” she says.

Adversity inevitably marks any long friendship and the ability to support each other through it is a hallmark of these ones. “We have been through births, deaths, marriages, relationship problems, fertility issues, sickness and they’ve always been there,” Patricia says. Five years ago, she suffered a severe stroke and nearly died. Her husband knew instantly she would want her friends; he called them while she was unconscious in hospital. “I woke up in St George’s hospital and Yvonne was at the foot of my bed with her kids,” says Patricia, remembering how all three friends supported her journey back to health and helped her through fertility worries, too.

Julia and Susan’s husbands died within weeks of each other. “We had all these black humour conversations before, starting with how miserable we were going to be and finishing up with how we could finally chuck a few things out and do something different,” says Susan, “but when it actually happened, it was such a shock. We were both reeling at the same time.” They could spend more time together, though: “We had lovely times.” Ian speaks with palpable emotion of Roger’s support through family tragedies and illness: “Nothing was ever too much trouble. He would always give his time and I think that’s the best thing you can do as a friend.” Roger echoes the sentiment: “That guy has never said no to me.”

But of course, there are also fights, or at least disagreements. Ian says he and Roger “nearly came to blows” in their gigging days. “We got on each other’s nerves and what would start off as banter would turn into something quite serious.” Mainly, though, it’s minor stuff: Trish and Mick remember fighting over a French hire car and various holiday “tensions, anxiety and stress”, as Mick puts it. “We don’t really annoy each other,” says Trish. “When I talk to Pat, we don’t always agree on everything, but there is a respect that you can disagree with someone and it’s OK,” says Yvonne.

Although there seem to be few serious transgressions, I'm interested in how friendships weather these. According to Hojjat's work on forgiveness in friendship, several factors determine if a betrayal is survivable. "How severe the transgression is; intent: was it done with the purpose of hurting you or was it accidental?" Then there's how you deal with it. "Are you going to apologise to your friend, repair the friendship and take responsibility; is the apology sincere? That matters a lot in whether or not the person is going to forgive you." There's a fascinating gender bias, too: women, she says, hold female friends to higher standards than male ones; men are more forgiving of male friends. "Everybody is less forgiving of women!"

Is there a secret to nurturing lifelong friendship? "I think there's absolutely no secret to it," says Susan. "If there was, the secret could be revealed and we could all have marvellous friendships: it doesn't work like that." Friendship, though, she notes, has an advantage in being free from the weight of expectation of romantic relationships, the tendency to project into an uncertain future. "I didn't meet Julia and think, I'm going to know her for life."

From all my conversations, I think there *is* a secret and it's consciously choosing to value the friendship above other things. For a start, that means tolerance and understanding. "I vote Conservative, he votes Labour," says Trish. "I voted for Brexit, he voted against it, but these things don't matter to our relationship. It would be stupid to fall out." Mick agrees: "Our friendship is important enough to really value the differences between us. We're at ease with each other's differences." It's similar for Ian – who is "to the left of Karl Marx" – and Roger, who is more of a centrist. "My advice is not to stew on things – let it go," says Ian. Roger remarks on the "degree of tolerance" that has characterised nearly 60 years of friendship.

Most describe their friendships as feeling natural and inevitable, but that doesn't mean they are effortless. "You have to make an effort with any relationship," says Tracy. "My advice would be just pick up the phone, send the text, because life is so short." The experts agree: there's no substitute for contact. "Without contact you can't do the maintenance," says Hojjat. Friendship, Dunbar explains, is a two-process mechanism. The first is cognitive: finding things in common. "The other is this biological underpinning through the endorphin system. This is primarily things such as physical touch, laughter, singing and dancing, eating ... drinking alcohol together." You need to see each other for endorphin-fuelled bonds to form and be maintained: "Invest time," Dunbar advises. In her personal life, Hojjat says she used to feel she made more effort to keep friendships alive; working on the topic has let her make peace with that. "It makes me really appreciate the long-term friendships that I've had. Make time for your friends. Good friends you have had for many years are rare and they are very valuable. So you really have to protect them."

Why? Research shows overwhelmingly that friendship is good for us. "It's not their primary purpose, but friendships have this massive effect on your mental health and welfare, and on your physical health and welfare – they even affect how long you're going to live," says Dunbar. "If you look at the data, the effect is far stronger than all the things your family doctor worries about on your behalf. This is my pitch for the NHS: just find everybody a friend or two."

What the lifelong friends have told me confirms how life-enhancing friendship is in the wider sense, too. There's a quiet pride in the other – their achievements and their qualities – in all the friends I speak to, and a sense of how deeply enmeshed they are in each other's lives: past, present, partners, children. Ian describes how Roger's sons sought him out at a party to tell him they loved him, too: "My generation, men didn't say things like 'I love you'. I'm filling up just thinking about it."

“She’s thoughtful, she’s caring, she’s warm,” says Mick of Trish; she says he “actually thinks about stuff: he’s very good at relationships and solving problems”. Patricia’s friends vibrate with love and pride as they tell me she contributed a chapter to a book on Black community mental health while recovering from her stroke. “It’s kind of breathtaking,” Zerlina says. They all emphasise how Patricia’s expansive gift for conveying feeling, her emotional honesty, has enriched their bond. “I’m inspired and in awe of them,” says Patricia in turn. “I didn’t realise when we were going round the pubs in Donnie, being weirdos, doing stupid things, I didn’t know they would be such a part of my family.” Our five-way Zoom gets a bit teary here.

Even the longest friendships – and the shared history they represent – end eventually. Julia has Alzheimer’s and is now in a care home; Susan has continued to visit. “She takes my childhood with her,” says Susan. “There’s nobody else alive now that was with me when I was a child.” She’s discovered something powerful, however, about their friendship since Julia’s diagnosis and decline: that language wasn’t needed to keep their lifelong conversation going. On her most recent trip, although what they said was nonsensical, “I felt we were getting on just as well as if we were talking in a sensible way.” For these friends who first bonded over their shared delight in chatting, the delight was still there, Susan says, transcending language. “She taught me that at the end of her life when you would think she had nothing else to teach me.”