



GROWN-UP GIRLFRIENDS

*Finding and Keeping
Real Friends in the Real World*



ERIN SMALLEY
AND CARRIE OLIVER



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Grown-Up Girlfriends: Finding and Keeping Real Friends in the Real World

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To protect the privacy of individuals, some names and details have been changed in the stories that appear in this book.

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Erin Smalley

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Carrie Oliver

INTRODUCTION

Erin

I clearly remember the day five years ago when I first felt a deep desire to write a book on female friendships. I was sitting in a Sam's Club parking lot, resting my arm against my very pregnant belly while eating a chocolate donut. For several days I'd been struggling with my desire to be "all things to all friends" while also trying to guide my first-grade daughter through her first friendship crisis.

I called my mentor-friend, Carrie Oliver, and asked her if she would join me in writing a book on female friendships. Immediately she agreed. We knew right away that we wanted to help women discover how to form the kind of deep, purposeful relationships that meet our longing for connection and make a difference in the lives of others.

Can I let you in on a little secret as we get started? Not all friendships are meant to be deep and intimate. Nor will you instantly bond with every—even most—new women you meet. In this book, we discuss the different types of friendships and offer some guidelines on how to determine which friends it's worth trying to go deeper with.

Friendships can provide both mountaintop experiences and painful valleys. In this book we discuss both. Our desire is not to learn how to hide the pain or to take the difficulties away, but to learn how to grow through the difficult times in a more effective and healthy manner—one that is honoring to the Lord, others, and also ourselves.

My friendships have taken on a new importance while I've been navigating the stresses of the past year. Our family has just moved twice in Siloam Springs, Arkansas—once into a rental house and then into a more permanent home. We are adjusting to living in a new community (our seventh in fourteen years of marriage), and my husband is settling into a new career as a professor at John Brown University. However, the most challenging part for me over the past six months has been dealing with cancer. My mom was diagnosed with lung cancer in January 2006, and my dear coauthor, Carrie, is fighting pancreatic cancer. Again, the Lord is teaching me about new aspects of friendship—of loving two women with cancer, dealing with my own grief, and allowing Him to bring others into my life to minister to me in the midst of such pain.

However, the bottom line is that five years ago the Lord knew this would be my world right now. In the midst of all of this, He has provided me with an overwhelming amount of support—some wonderful new friends and many long-standing “soul mate” friends.

I pray that He will use this book, as He has used these experiences in my life, to ultimately draw you closer to Him. Together let's join in this journey of learning about being a “grown-up” friend.

May your friendships be blessed in a mighty way.

Carrie

Over the years, I've seen God use friends to mold me, shape me, and help me become more like Himself. I believe He has used me in the lives of my friends as well. Yet I have never experienced the powerful force and working of friendship in my life more than in the past year.

As Erin mentioned, I am in the battle of my life. I was diagnosed with cancer in May 2005. I am still here with a mission in my life: to write this book, to heal, to look more like Christ with each day, and to love my friends as they have loved me. I have learned so much about friendship, purpose, God’s hand, forgiveness, laughter, kindness, support, connectedness, and prayer on this cancer journey.

I remember the day Erin called to suggest we write a book together on friendship. I was sitting at home in my husband’s office paying bills. I was glad to hear from Erin, and I said something profound like, “Sure, that would be fun!” Little did I know the journey God would be taking us on as He prepared us to write this book over a period of five years.

This book includes many lessons I’ve learned—both through my walk with friends and my times with clients in my counseling office. It also reflects the personal lessons I’ve learned through my failures, weaknesses, and difficult times.

When Erin and I began to actually talk about writing this book, we asked ourselves, “So why another book on friendship?” What was driving us to focus on friendships, and what could we possibly offer from our own experiences that might impact you, the reader, in your life and your friendships? Before long, we realized that our aim was to write about the uniqueness of a “grown-up” friendship, which stretches and encourages both women. Growing up means that we develop, mature, and become wiser, taking on the fruit of the Spirit and the character of Christ. It means we “put away childish things” (1 Corinthians 13:11, NKJV). So what does a grown-up friendship look like? We’ll address that question in chapter 2.

I don’t know about you, but I know that I have not always looked very “adult” in my friendships! At times I have been fearful of conflict, I have been jealous, I have expected too much, I have been harsh and unkind. Yep, at times I have

acted like a selfish child who needed some help growing up. I also have had friends who were not grown up with me. I have been shunned, lied to, rejected, not thought the best of, devalued, betrayed, and gossiped about. Just like so many other relationships, such as marriage, parenthood, and work-related relationships, friendship requires effort, intentionality, prayer, understanding, and a desire for God to be at the center.

This book not only discusses how you can establish healthy friendships, it also helps you identify those relationships that could be potentially destructive. We talk about different types of friendships, acknowledging that not all friendships are meant to be deep and intimate. As we grow up we can better discern who God is calling us to be more intimate with, especially as we understand the purpose of the relationship.

As you read this book, my prayer is that God will become more real, more tangible, and more intimate to you, that you will be encouraged to experience friendship with greater purpose and a fresh passion. I love what Henri Nouwen, in his book *The Inner Voice of Love*, says about the meaning of friendship:

*God is faithful to God's promises. Before you die, you will find the acceptance and the love you crave. It will not come in the way you expect. It will not follow your needs and wishes. But it will fill your heart and satisfy your deepest desire.*¹

Blessings to you!

THE STORY OF TWO FRIENDSHIP BRACELETS

[Erin]

*Everything in life that truly matters can be
boiled down to relationships.*

—Gary Smalley, *THE DNA OF RELATIONSHIPS*

I have two friendship bracelets. One is a treasured gift from a close friend, and I wear it almost every day.

The other is decades old but has never been worn. When I stumbled across it again in my closet a few years ago, the small gift-wrapped jewelry box in which it rests was covered with dust. Amazingly, the wrapping paper was still in perfect condition—not a tear or rip anywhere. The colors, although somewhat faded, looked beautiful—hip, even. Groovy happy faces in purple, hot pink, yellow, and green patterns covered the gift. A small card still hung from the ribbon. A lump formed in my throat as I read the words:

Jenny,

Happy Birthday! I hope you enjoy your gift.

BFF (Best Friends Forever)!

Love, Erin

I couldn't believe I had held on to it for more than twenty years. Instantly, painful memories flooded my mind. *Jenny*. I hadn't thought about her for years. The party. I had tried to block it out. But here it was . . . the gift. Jenny's gift. I had forgotten that I never gave it to her.

In 1981 I was in seventh grade. My two best friends were Jenny Bower and Kelly Chavez. It's hard to describe our relationship exactly. Although the three of us were close, inevitably one of us would feel left out. We all seemed to strive to be the "queen bee"; you know, the leader of the pack—the most valued friend.

About the time I bought the bracelet, Jenny and I were going through a tough stretch. Apparently she felt that I was spending too much time with Kelly, and she felt left out. Jenny started ignoring me. Actually, she began giving me the silent treatment. Hurt, I began hanging out more with another friend named Glenda. Two opposing teams quickly formed: Jenny and Kelly on one side and Glenda and me on the other. Over the next week we gossiped about each other, ignored each other, and were just plain cruel. At the time, I had no idea why Jenny was upset with me. I figured it might be because Kelly and I had been walking to school together, most of the time without her. I tried to milk information out of Kelly—she would actually talk to me when we weren't in school—but she didn't seem to know why Jenny was upset either. And then it happened.

"Do you want to ride to the party together?" Kelly asked me over the phone.

Party? What party? I thought to myself.

"What are you talking about, Kelly?"

"You know . . . Jenny's birthday party."

I'm sure she could sense something was wrong. I didn't say anything—or breathe for that matter—for several long seconds.

“Jenny’s having a birthday party?” I asked.

“I think so . . . yes . . . well, maybe,” Kelly stammered.

“Hey, let me call you back. My mom needs to use the phone.”
And the line went dead.

I couldn’t believe what I had just heard. Jenny was having a birthday party, and I wasn’t invited. I was devastated. I immediately grabbed the birthday present I had wrapped for her just the day before and threw it into my closet.

The next day at school I found out that eight girls from my class had been invited to Jenny’s thirteenth birthday party. And I wasn’t one of them. All because Jenny and I had been in a fight—the cause of which I never discovered. I cried so hard that weekend. I felt rejected, displaced, and unloved—new feelings for me.

Ironically, a week later Jenny and I were friends again. We never talked about the birthday party or why she had been mad at me. We pretended that nothing had happened.

The present I had bought her was a bracelet. On the bracelet was a friendship charm. I’m sure I was acting passive-aggressive, but after having felt so rejected, I never gave her my gift—I didn’t feel she deserved to wear a BFF (Best Friends Forever) bracelet from me.

When I discovered the box again a few years ago, I carefully unwrapped it. As I held the “antique” bracelet in my hand, a tear rolled down my cheek. The pain I felt in my heart was as intense as it had been more than twenty years ago. Girls can be so cruel—especially at thirteen.

I’m grateful to have another friendship bracelet—though it, too, remained hidden in a box for years. This one came from my sister-in-law, one of my closest friends. She’d bought it for me at one of the high points of my life. I was about to marry the love of my life, and I was also going to become family with her—my dearest girlfriend! Who would have ever thought

that I would end up marrying the brother of one of my best friends?

Kari and I had been friends since our sophomore year of college, when she'd reached out to me and helped me grow in my faith. We shared many of the same interests: jogging, eating sushi, and dating the same guy (at different times, of course!). One summer, she encouraged me to work with her at a Christian sports camp. Our friendship blossomed to a new level there, and we got to know and love one another even more. Before long I got to know her family—including her brother, Greg.

When Greg and I married, I had high expectations for the friendship between Kari and me. I dreamed of the years ahead when we would build our own households and raise our children together. I was sure we'd remain friends until we were old and gray.

But one week after Greg and I returned from our honeymoon, I could tell something was wrong. Kari didn't seem excited to see me. She was pretty quiet, and for the first time in my life, I didn't have anything to say either. When we did speak, it was simple small talk—definitely not the deep, intimate communication we had once shared. Over the next few months, the unspoken tension between us grew, and I soon began to fear that all my dreams of our friendship were going to disappear.

Looking back, I can see how difficult it must have been to be in Kari's shoes. Until I married Greg, she had been the only girl in this family. Not only did Kari gain a sister, but she felt as if she'd lost her best friend and her brother all at once.

Over the next seven years, conflict, tension, and resentment became commonplace. Sadly, the real issues between Kari and me never seemed to get addressed. We tried to put Band-Aids on our friendship—which worked fine. However, I soon

learned what the acronym “fine” really stands for—*feelings inside not expressed!* And that summed it up for both of us. Kari often felt displaced, and I was constantly confused, not knowing how to interpret what was really going on. Often, this led to the silent treatment and one of us withdrawing. Since both of us hate disharmony, though, one of us would inevitably pursue the other.

Actually, we still loved each other deeply but didn’t know how to communicate it. We didn’t know how to manage our own feelings or deal with the underlying issues, which left us disconnected and in disharmony. The biggest hurt, however, was not just losing our dream of being family, but ultimately losing our close, intimate friendship.

One afternoon as I was home typing a paper for my master’s degree program, I heard an unexpected knock at my door. I finished typing my sentence and cautiously opened the front door to see who the surprise visitor was. Wow! It was the last person I expected.

Kari stood on the front porch with tears flowing down her face. She looked broken. I reached out and embraced my sister the way I had wanted to for years. I had missed my friend so much and had wanted to comfort her in the midst of her pain, but I seemed to have been the one causing much of her discomfort.

I slowly guided Kari into my living room and sat her on the couch in front of the fireplace. I was both concerned and curious as to why she had come. I was uncomfortable, yet excited that she would open up to me again.

We engaged in small talk for just a minute until it seemed as if Kari was going to burst at the seams.

“I have something to say to you,” Kari said through her tears.

I held my breath. In the past, conversations that began this

way did not go well. However, this time something seemed different.

“I am so deeply sorry for all the pain we have experienced in our relationship over the years,” Kari said, crying. “I don’t want to go back and relive all the details, but I do want you to know how much I have missed my best friend over the years.”

I stared in disbelief. I had so longed to hear these words from her.

“I want to give you something,” Kari said as she handed me a small box.

It was beautifully wrapped in silver foil. Hanging from the gold ribbon was a card. I opened it slowly and cautiously.

Erin,

You are my closest friend and now my sister. I want to give you this gift as a reminder to both of us. A reminder of the love we share and the commitment we have to one another not only as friends, but as family.

As tears streamed down both of our cheeks, I unwrapped the paper and removed a small green box. Opening the hinged lid, I pulled out a beautiful, tiny bracelet. It was sterling silver and made with a continuous string of hearts. Kari took the bracelet and placed it on my left wrist.

“Erin, this is a symbol of our friendship—a friendship that will never be broken and that will never end,” she said. “You are my sister and I love you. I want this bracelet to serve as a reminder of the commitment that we share to walk through

the good and bad times together. I feel stupid admitting this to you, but I bought this bracelet a long time ago and never gave it to you.”

Can you imagine?

I embraced my sister—my friend—and we talked and cried for hours. It was the best talk we’d had in seven years. We both took responsibility for our actions and sought forgiveness. In the end, God performed a miracle in our relationship. He used a tiny silver bracelet to restore a friendship. Our relationship is not perfect, but it is definitely much richer. It still has both peaks and valleys, but the peaks—the good times—outweigh the challenges.

Only a short time after receiving my friendship bracelet from Kari, I was able to give back to her. Kari called, weeping, and I quickly found out that she had lost her second son to a premature birth. Together, we cried and grieved the loss of baby Roger’s life. A year later, Kari rushed me to the hospital when I began spotting during my third pregnancy. She sat by my bedside as an ultrasound was performed. Kari was the first to identify that we were going to be blessed with a son.

It’s amazing how our friendship has come full circle! We are raising our precious children and sharing life *together*—as sisters and as friends.

Today those two bracelets—the one from Kari and the one I never gave to Jenny—are much more than pieces of jewelry to me. They are symbols of a childish friendship and a grown-up friendship, and there is a big difference between the two. The first was characterized by fun times often marred by insecurity; the second by deep joy and connection forged despite honest disagreements and unintended hurt. One represents a season of great disappointment, when I often felt rejected and displaced. The other represents new beginnings and a commitment of love, acceptance, and forgiveness.

To this day, my heart bracelet almost never leaves my wrist. It's a constant reminder of what God has in store for us through relationships—especially female friendships.

More than anything else, my coauthor, Carrie, and I desire that this book will show you just how important our friendships with women are to God. There are many books out there about female friendships; however, this book is different because it focuses on what God has taught both of us about developing grown-up friendships, such as the one I now enjoy with my sister-in-law. He has a purpose in all of our relationships, including the difficulties we encounter, and we can turn to Him for insight into our fears and reactions in the midst of challenges. Ultimately, we hope that this book will enable you to unwrap the “true gift” that God has for each of us through our female friendships.

WHY DO WE NEED FRIENDS ANYWAY?

Ever wonder why we have such a deep desire to connect with other women? I have. In fact, I have become even more curious as I have watched my daughters experience their first ups and downs with friends. My interest was especially piqued the first time my older daughter, Taylor, was wounded by a friend.

It happened several years ago, on a sunny, warm spring day in the Ozarks. I was standing, as I did every afternoon at 3:45, in a grass-covered field on the corner of North 15th Avenue.

My son, Garrison, made excited cooing noises as he saw the big yellow school bus come to a halt. He knew his sister Taylor and her friend Shelby would be scooting off soon. The bus sputtered up to the curb, and the screeching doors flew open. As Taylor trudged off the bus, I contemplated the look I saw in her eyes. Deep in my heart I recognized it. Hadn't I

seen that look somewhere before? I began to panic, thinking, *Surely, it can't be—not yet! She is only seven years old.*

Soon the tears were flowing freely from my blond, pigtailed daughter. I was not quite certain what to do. How in the world could I possibly help Taylor when it was difficult for me to know how to help myself when I was hurting? I grabbed Taylor and wrapped my arms around her. I got down on my knees, looked deep into her hazel eyes, and asked her to tell me what had happened.

“Shelby doesn’t want to be my friend anymore!” There it was! I knew I had recognized her look. Taylor had now been initiated into the world of pain that began back in the days of Adam and Eve.

Just three short weeks earlier, Taylor had come home from school announcing the arrival of her “new best friend—Shelby.” Shelby had just transferred to her school, and as Taylor had been taught to do, she quickly befriended the new student. We discovered that Shelby lived right down the street from us, so the girls became fast and furious friends, spending as much after-school playtime together as they could.

Each morning the two girls ran to the bus stop, greeting each other with an embrace. They then jumped onto the bus and squeezed close together in one of the green vinyl bus seats (the ones that make you freeze in the cold months and sweat in the heat). They discussed their wardrobe, their homework, and their latest crushes—Billy Bob, Bubba, or Jimmy Joe (remember, we lived in the Ozark Mountains!). After school, when I met the bus, they’d typically ask if they could meet at the park again in fifteen minutes.

Then came that day when Taylor slumped off the bus alone. Thinking she might have misunderstood the situation, I tried to console her. Shaking her head, Taylor handed me a note from Shelby. In short, it said:

*Taylor,
I don't want to be your friend anymore!
You don't talk to me as much as you
talk to Megan. Best friends talk to
each other more, you know . . . so if you
want to be my friend your going to have
to prove it!*
Shelby

So there it was. My little girl was experiencing the pain that I've felt, not only as a young girl, but as a thirtysomething-year-old woman. I wanted to assure her that this would be the last time that she would ever feel such sharp pain and rejection, but I knew that wasn't true.

Fortunately, Taylor and Shelby soon mended their relationship. My daughter's pain diminished, and she continued to desire to make and keep friends. And five years later, both Taylor and her sister, Maddy, are experiencing the highs and lows of friendship. Meanwhile, I've been exploring the roots of our need for friendship.

CREATED FOR CONNECTION

If relationships bring such deep pain, why do we women long for them so intensely and hurt so much when they disappoint us?

The first place I looked for answers was the Bible. I noted that God recognized our need for relationship early on, when shortly after creating Adam, He said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him" (Genesis 2:18). Even though Adam was close with his Creator,

God desired to give him something more—a female companion. And so God created Eve. It was a perfect relationship . . . until the deceiver entered the picture and convinced them to go against what the Lord had instructed them to do. Satan slithered into their lives and corrupted what God had intended for good.

Of course, Satan’s meddling resulted in the first squabble between friends. After God found Adam and Eve hiding and ashamed, He asked them what had happened. Adam pointed his finger at Eve. Like any woman would do, Eve then blamed the source of her temptation . . . the serpent. Neither party was willing to accept responsibility for his or her actions. It’s easy to come down hard on Adam and Eve, but if we look at our own track records, we have to admit that our relationships aren’t in much better condition.

Aside from showing us where our friendship troubles began, the book of Genesis tells us that Adam and Eve were created *differently* for relationship. Adam tended the Garden (see Genesis 2:15), he named the animals (see Genesis 2:19), and he tilled the ground (see Genesis 3:23). He was the protector and provider of all that the Lord had granted him . . . including Eve.

Eve’s role in Genesis was very different. Eve is described as the companion and child bearer. In Genesis 3:16, God said, “You will bring forth children; yet your desire will be for your husband” (NASB). Notice that God explained Adam’s role in terms of his work but described Eve’s in terms of her relationships.

Although Adam and Eve’s story points out some of the pitfalls of relationship, Scripture offers us a look at some precious female friendships as well. Think about how Ruth followed Naomi to a foreign country, leaving her family and giving up all she ever knew. Ruth clung to her mother-in-law

after Naomi had told her to leave not just once—but four times! Ruth then followed Naomi’s precise instructions and was blessed through each response. The legacy Naomi leaves through Ruth is amazing—Ruth is later referred to in Scripture as a “virtuous woman” and is recognized for her strong character (see Ruth 3:11, NKJV).

What about Elizabeth and Mary? I always have found it fascinating that just a few days after finding out she was carrying the Messiah, Mary went to Elizabeth’s home and stayed with her for about three months (see Luke 1:39-56). Elizabeth must have offered Mary so much wisdom and joy. In many ways Elizabeth was a mentor to Mary, as she had been down her own path of difficulties . . . especially the heartbreak of infertility. Think about how much faith and reassurance Elizabeth could offer Mary when she found herself in an unexpected situation. Elizabeth was used in Mary’s life in a great way!

My search of Scripture made clear that while both men and women are made in God’s relational image, women *crave* relationships innately and are driven to be in relationships in a way most men do not fully understand. Just as the Lord desires to be in relationship with us, we desire deep relationships with others.

CONFIRMATION FROM SCIENCE

As a nurse, I knew there had to be some physiological reasons for our need for intimate friendships as well. Shortly after my search to understand the girlfriend phenomenon began, I came across an intriguing research article that offers further insight into why women desire female friendships.¹ In this UCLA study, two female researchers, Shelley Taylor and Laura Klein, noted vast differences in the behavior of the male and female scientists during high-stress times in the laboratory. What they noted was that during these stressful

times, the males seemed to *isolate* from others, while the females *congregated* together.

Intrigued, Drs. Klein and Taylor began pulling together information from animal research and studies examining the interaction of hormones and the nervous system. They reported that when the hormone oxytocin is released as part of the stress response in a woman, it buffers the fight-or-flight response and encourages her to tend to children and gather with other women. When she engages in this tending or befriending, studies suggest that more oxytocin is released, which further counters stress and produces a calming effect. While both men and women secrete oxytocin, estrogen enhances its effect. This calming response does not occur in men, says Dr. Klein, because testosterone—which men produce in high levels when they're under stress—seems to reduce the effects of oxytocin.

In their findings, Klein and Taylor also cite a Nurses' Health Study from Harvard Medical School that reported that the more friends women had, the less likely they were to develop physical impairments as they aged and the more likely they were to be leading a joyful life. In fact, the results were so significant that the researchers concluded that not having close friends or confidants was as detrimental to a woman's health as smoking or carrying extra weight.

This has led researchers across the country to suspect that when women hang out with their friends, they actually counteract stress. No wonder women's groups such as Mothers of Preschoolers (MOPS) and the Red Hat Society are growing in record numbers!

Since friendships serve as a buffer against stress, it's not too surprising that they promote good physical health. In her book *Friendshifts*, Jan Yager reports that having healthy female friendships can lead to:

- a longer, higher-quality life
- better odds of surviving serious medical events, such as heart attacks
- less chance of developing a respiratory infection or cancer
- less chance of experiencing depression²

My study of the Bible and research reports confirmed that my own desire for friendship was a part of my God-given design. Friendship is a means God uses to fulfill His good purposes in our lives . . . both through the heartwarming and the heartbreaking experiences. He uses these relationships to provide support in times of need and to bring us to our knees so we can better see our need for *Him*.³

Because friends provide a lifeline to women, we naturally desire these relationships. Yet many of us who long for friendships wonder why they seem so elusive. The truth is, friends don't typically knock themselves over rushing to our door. Building relationships takes time—and a willingness to risk. Because time is in short supply and risk is not at the top of most of our wish lists, we often overlook opportunities to connect with other women.

While most of this book focuses on building “grown-up” friendships—those that draw us and others closer to Christ—you can't experience those types of relationships unless you're building bonds with other women. Let's take a few moments, therefore, to consider what you can do to begin building relationships with other women, even if you've found it difficult to do so in the past.

BACK TO BASICS: BUILDING FRIENDSHIPS

We believe that, for most women, four factors are the principal barriers to building new friendships: life transitions, personality issues, personal comfort zones, and busyness.

Let's take a look at each, along with some ideas on how to overcome them.

Life Transitions

Challenge

In the past ten years, how many of these changes have you experienced: finishing school, marrying, having children, moving to a new town, going back to work, being promoted, or leaving the workforce? Any one of these can leave you with little energy or time for friends. Yet it is at exactly these times that you typically need new friends most.

Solutions

1. Look for others in the same place you are. If you meet someone going through the same type of change—or if she has dealt with it in the past—have the courage to invite her over for a cup of coffee. Don't miss the opportunity to talk with someone who might understand what you're going through. You never know what will come of the simplest interactions—in the most unexpected places.

I know two women who became great friends because they were standing side by side in a grocery store and noticed they both had children from China. They struck up a conversation and made plans to get their daughters together later in the week. And that was that—it was the beginning of a dear friendship.

2. Join a group or start one. Many groups of women with a shared interest or experience meet regularly across the country. MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers) was always helpful when I moved to a new community because the women attending were in the same season of life as I was. I would scan the crowd and listen—trying to identify one woman I thought I might connect with. Then I would

invite her to do something—such as have lunch together after our meeting.

Many communities have a Bible study group called “After the Boxes Are Unpacked” for women who have just moved. They come from all walks of life but have the common ground of being in an unfamiliar place. If you have gone through a divorce, churches often offer divorce recovery groups. If you are single, try the singles group at your church. You might be thinking, *No way! I am not going to that group!* We want to encourage you to at least try it—with an open mind. An open mind is one that is open to conversation, open to listening to others’ experiences, and open to sharing what you are comfortable sharing.

Personality

Challenge

Ever met someone with a natural ability to connect with others? She has so many friends you wish she would let a few come your way! Perhaps her personality makes it easy for her to establish friendships. Maybe her family taught her the art of reaching out to others.

Making friends may not come as easily for you. It’s not just a matter of whether you’re naturally outgoing or shy either. Both types of women have the ability to form close friendships, and both may have difficulty making friends at times. Sometimes an outgoing person talks too much or too freely, making others uncomfortable. A quiet person may hold too much of herself in, never letting anyone too close. Either may be a terrible listener or may run from conflict and intimacy, using a ministry, job, or family obligations to hide from others.

Even if your personality makes it relatively easy for you to meet new friends, don’t overlook those whose personalities

seem very different from yours. The truth is, you don't have to connect only with those who share your temperament. As a matter of fact, you'll often be drawn to someone who is your complete opposite. (We'll look more closely at personality differences in chapter 6.)

Solutions

If making friends is difficult for you because of the way you are wired, consider these helpful hints:

1. If you are uncomfortable in large groups, attend functions with fewer attendees or that break into smaller groups (such as Bible studies).
2. If you have a hard time meeting people, allow others to introduce you to their friends.
3. Keep an open mind and an open stance to making friends. Let others know that you are feeling a bit isolated and looking for new companions.
4. Become really great at asking people questions about themselves. This lets them know that you are truly interested in their lives—not just your own well-being.

Comfort Zone

Challenge

Oh, how we love our comfort zones. *Merriam-Webster* defines a comfort zone as “the level at which one functions with ease and familiarity.”⁴ We gravitate to the familiar because we know it, it feels normal, it is easy, and it feels just right.

Our comfort zones may keep us from forming friendships with people in different life stages. If we're single, we sometimes feel uncomfortable hanging around married women. If we are married, we tend to hang out with other women who are married. When we have kids, we begin to make friends with women who have kids too—especially kids our children's ages.

You've probably heard that God works at getting us out of our comfort zones. That's not to say it's terrible to like the things in our comfort zones. I know heaven will be "just right," after all! The problem with our comfort zones here on earth is that they are narrow, limiting, and growth inhibiting. They prevent us from becoming more like Christ and discovering some of the gifts—such as unexpected friends—that He has for us when we risk being uncomfortable.

Solutions

1. Even when you're comfortable, try to keep an open door. After moving to several small towns, I understand how easy it would be to remain friends with the same gals you have known your whole life—and never make any new connections. However, as the transplanted woman in town, I can testify to how much it meant to have women reach out to me when I was new in their town. I know it blessed me, and I think about how easy it would have been for them to miss the blessings of new friends.
2. Be open to friendship with women who are different from you. I am currently in a Bible study with women from all walks of life—young and old, married and single, kids and no kids. It has allowed me to reach out and connect with women I never thought I would have anything in common with.

One of my favorite people there is JoAnne. She is much older than I am and in a completely different season of life, but we've connected in a deep way. We became prayer partners and have prayed each other through some very challenging times. We were definitely outside of each other's comfort zones—yet all we had to do was share our hearts and hurts. The key was the willingness on both sides to reach out. Keep in mind that all women share

many of the same day-to-day responsibilities—laundry, grocery shopping, making meals—whether they are single or married, working or retired. Find ways to share those tasks and do them together regardless of the season of life you are in.

Busyness

Challenge

Who can't relate to this one? Though women used to be busy together, now we are busy *and* isolated from one another.

When women begin working more hours outside the home, their energy levels may decrease. By the end of the week, they may feel as if they've been sucked dry and don't really feel like reaching out to friends. Many single moms are so busy trying to hold their households together, they can't imagine finding time to make friends. I think the evil one uses the busyness of our culture to keep us isolated and alone.

Solutions

Even if your overall energy level is low, look for those times when you are not as worn down to connect with other women. That may be on the weekend or a holiday from work. Or perhaps you are an early riser and could get together before heading to your job or beginning your duties at home. Remember the need to keep balance in all areas of your life—work, home, the Lord, and yes, friendships. If one area is taking up all of your time, reevaluate your schedule. You may be shaking your head, saying, “Easy for you to say!” Yet consider the following ideas on connecting even when you're busy:

1. *Look for women who are busy with similar responsibilities.* Maybe you are working long hours during tax season. Do you know another woman who is a bookkeeper

or an accountant who would love to meet for a cup of coffee before heading home late at night? Or maybe you are a single mom who is so exhausted when you get home that you don't want to cook. Why not invite another single mom and her kids over for pizza? Always be on the lookout for others who have the same kind of schedules and duties. See if you can walk with each other through these seasons.

2. Leave room in your schedule for friends. It is so easy to make the blanket statement that "I'm just too busy." Sure, you're busy, but what are some creative ways you could make space in your schedule for friends? If you're a working mom, don't spend every lunch hour running errands or catching up on paperwork. Schedule some time for lunch with another working mom. If you're working full-time while taking classes, could you arrange to have dinner with a classmate in the student center between work and class?
3. Don't try to combat loneliness with activity rather than companionship. When you feel lonely, be careful not to fill your life with so many activities that you have no downtime to devote to friendship. Remember that connecting requires an open stance—if you always seem too busy for friends, others may get the message that you are not open to a new friendship. Leave room in your schedule for lunches, movies, or coffee with a new or an old friend!

As you take steps to initiate new friendships, trust God to help meet your friendship needs. Seasons of loneliness are not all bad, because they cause us to rely on Him even more and allow Him room to help us grow. In fact, when we invest the time and take the risks necessary to build solid friendships, we're in the perfect position to become a grown-up girlfriend.

In the next chapter, we'll explore exactly what that means.

The grown-up girlfriend . . .

. . . derives deep joy and connection, not fleeting fun marred by insecurity, from her relationships.

.....

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How would you describe the importance of friendships in your life? Do you feel you have the time, energy, and people skills you want to devote to your friends?
2. Can you think of a stressful time when you found yourself turning toward your girlfriends for support and encouragement? How did God use those women in that situation?
3. Do you have a memory of a childhood friendship that went sour? Can you compare and contrast it with friendship difficulties in adulthood? Do you see any similarities in things you did, said, or felt?

4. Are any of the four barriers listed on page 14 preventing you from forming meaningful friendships? If so, what is one step you could take this week to reach out to someone new?

NOTES

Introduction

1. Henri Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love* (New York: Random House, 1996), 4.

Chapter 1

1. S. E. Taylor et al., “Biobehavioral Responses to Stress in Females: Tend-and-Befriend, Not Fight-or-Flight,” *Psychological Review* 107, no. 3 (2002): 411–429.
2. Jan Yager, *Friendshifts* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 3–5.
3. Ann Hibbard’s book *Treasured Friends* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004) has also contributed to my appreciation of the benefits of friendship.
4. *Merriam-Webster* online, <http://www.merriamwebster.com>.

Chapter 2

1. Kass P. Dotterweich and John D. Perry, *Friendship Therapy* (St. Meinrad, Ind.: Abbey Press, 1994).
2. Cathy Lynn Grossman, “Starbucks Stirs Things Up with a God Quote on Cups,” *USA Today* (October 19, 2005).

Chapter 3

1. Leslie Parrott, *If You Ever Needed Friends, It’s Now* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 18.
2. Matthew Kelly, *The Seven Levels of Intimacy* (New York: Beacon Publishing, 2005), 113–116.
3. Karol Ladd and Terry Ann Kelly mention the three levels of friendship—acquaintances, good friends, and soul mates—in their book, *The Power of a Positive Friend* (West Monroe, La.: Howard Publishing, 2004). I drew on their book while further developing the friendship basket concept. Leslie Parrott’s book *If You Ever Needed Friends, It’s Now* helped me determine a range for the number of friends each of us has at various levels of intimacy.
4. Hibbard, *Treasured Friends*, 33.
5. Ladd and Kelly, *The Power of a Positive Friend*, 31.

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