



The power of female friendships

Good friends may be hard to find, but when you connect with someone special, they're worth hanging onto and great for your wellbeing, **Melissa Field** discovers.

Ever grabbed a glass of wine with your best friend when you've had a shocking day in the office or a shouting match with your stropky teenager? That's known as the "tend and befriend" response to stress which, unlike the male "fight or flight" response, is due to the hormone oxytocin being released.

UCLA's Behavioural Responses in Females study found that women's hormonal response to stress differed from men. In women, the release of oxytocin encourages them to tend to children and gather with other women for support and protection. As a result of this nurturing/cocooning response, more oxytocin is released, which further counters the effects of stress. The evidence seems to point to the fact that strong friendships – particularly

with other women – not only make us happier, they make us healthier too. The less stress, the less likelihood there is of complications from raised blood pressure, high cholesterol and increased heart rate. More broadly, the landmark Nurses' Health Study from Harvard Medical School found the more friends women have, the less likely they are to develop physical impairments while ageing and are more likely to lead a "joyful" life.

Sydney-based psychologist Jocelyn Brewer agrees. "Social connection, especially amongst women, is good for our health," she says. "Female friends provide a protective factor. From an evolutionary

perspective, the community or clan helped us survive when we shared resources, especially food. In a modern world, it might be that a 'got your

back' girlfriend can come to the rescue if we slip over in the shower while living alone. Just knowing you have someone like that in your corner makes us feel stronger and more confident.

"The act of talking and sharing our experiences with like-minded friends

also helps us process the feelings and perceptions of our lives and feel valued."

Amanda Kuhn, 41, knows just how powerful the support of a good

“To have someone you trust is great for your self-esteem.”

girlfriend can be. Six years ago, in September 2011, her husband Wade was diagnosed with leiomyosarcoma tumour. His initial prognosis was so bleak he wasn't expected to make the Christmas of that year.

"I'd only known my best friend Rachel for three years at that point," says Amanda. "We'd bonded in the office kitchen on her first day at work over our homemade spaghetti bolognese lunches and our friendship grew from there." When Wade was diagnosed, Amanda says Rachel really stepped up. "She even listed her cherished VW Golf for sale – without me knowing – in order to raise \$25,000 to help fund Wade's treatment. When I found out, I stopped her selling her car for me but I've never forgotten that loyalty.

"Her support – from trying to sell her car to feeding me when the last thing I wanted to do was eat, to letting me call her in tears in the middle of the night when I was sleepless with worry over Wade – carried me physically and emotionally through the toughest time in my life," she says.

Thankfully, Wade survived and has been in carefully monitored remission for the past five years – and Amanda's bond with Rachel has grown ever stronger. "She's like a sister to me now. I know she'd do anything for me and I'd do anything for her," she says.

Many women do find their tribe in school or uni but struggle to form close female friendships in adulthood – the workplace can be a competitive minefield or the school gates can be just as daunting for mums as they are for kids. So how to find good friends in adulthood?

"The 'approach' to a new friendship can feel odd – we worry that we will seem desperate or lonely and needy,"

says Jocelyn. "It's best to let those worries go and be honest, open and fun – if you meet someone you think you'd like to befriend, get in touch – arrange to do something that gives you the opportunity to have a shared experience without the pressure of it being too much like a date/interview."

Don't rush things. "Friendships take time to develop and percolate – time to share experiences, build rapport and trust," says Jocelyn. "When making new friends, we should seek to be our 'true' not 'best' selves and allow time to cement the connection."

Teaching our daughters how to form nourishing and supportive female friendships is a skill best learned young if possible, says

friendship expert Dana Kerford, founder of the URSTRONG program, which runs friendship development programs for girls and boys into schools in Canada, the US, the UK and Australia.

"As a former teacher, I noticed girls especially performed poorly academically

when they had issues in their friendships," says Dana. "I realised it was vital to teach them the value of good friendships – based on mutual respect and trust – so that they could carry that with them into their adult friendships."

Life as an adult isn't always easy but to have someone you've chosen and whom you love and trust in your corner is great for your confidence and self-esteem. "The sooner girls – and women – learn this, the better," says Dana. "When women realise they're stronger when supporting one another rather than falling into catty 'Mean Girl' behaviours, there is no limit to what can be achieved, no matter what age." **AWW**



Amanda and Rachel

How to make a bestie



1 Online and reality

Jocelyn Brewer says there are definite benefits to social media friendships, but real world connections remain the gold standard. "Social media can help find connections when geography or other factors make it difficult. But social media sharing can negate the need to communicate in real life. To form a deeper connection, take the relationship into the real world."

2 Stirring stuff

Physical activity is not just good for the body, it's great for the soul. And we do better when we have friends around to spur us on. It doesn't have to be complicated – a brisk stroll in the lunch hour with a workmate, a scenic walk on the weekend. Check out the activities on offer at the local swimming pool, sports club or community centre: great places to widen your social circle.

3 Tea and sympathy

Sometimes the old-fashioned catch-ups are the best, and if you're raising money for charity at the same time, that makes it all the better. Ten cents from each pack of Twinings Morning Tea goes to Carrie Bickmore's Carrie's Beansies 4 Brain Cancer (right).

