

Friends Again

*No friendship is ever beyond repair, say our experts.
Here are three inspiring stories that prove them right.*

BY BARBARA RIGHTON



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For nearly 35 years, Cathy and Kelly Smith were sisters in name only. Cathy, 53, is the eldest of six siblings; Kelly, 38, is the youngest. By the time Kelly could crawl around the family home in Greenwood, Ont., Cathy was off to university.

When their parents died, they had nothing left in common; even their lifestyles were vastly different. Cathy designs computer programs and looks after farm animals in Durham, Ont., a two-and-a-half-hour drive from Kelly's home in Toronto, where the advertising executive works long hours in a downtown high-rise.

Says Cathy, "Kelly and I talked briefly a couple of times a year, if that. We look back and we hit our heads and say, 'What were we thinking?'" They're not alone.

Sisters, best friends, office mates, aunts, nieces, next-door neighbours – almost every woman over the age of two has experienced a friendship that has waned or soured. "All relationships of any real tenure or texture will have a drifting apart or a falling out as part of the ebb and flow of life," says Marion Goertz, a

registered marriage and family therapist in Toronto. Blame it on distance, a shift in priorities or even something petty. In one of Goertz's favourite books, *I Thought We'd Never Speak Again*, writer Laura Davis says breakups can be precipitated by the smallest of things: a broken promise, a betrayed confidence, a lingering disappointment.

The good news is that no matter what the cause of the rift, few friendships are ever beyond repair. While we can't avoid conflict, Goertz says we can see it as an opportunity to build an even closer relationship.

These days, whenever they can, Kelly, her husband and his daughter make the trek to visit Cathy and her husband in the country. They celebrate holidays with their brothers, and their families share »

meals around a long kitchen table. “When I think of what could have been lost forever,” says Cathy, “I can barely breathe.” Kelly adds, “If you had told me about this bond when I was 20, I would have said, ‘Never.’ Now I know that you never say never.”

In Kelly and Cathy’s case, the fresh start had a very specific four-legged catalyst, or two. In spring 2006, on Easter weekend, Kelly and her family made a rare visit to the farm. A week before, purely by chance, Cathy had run into an old family friend who raises horses nearby. She had brand new foals. Looking for something to share, “I asked if anyone wanted to go and see the baby horses,” says Cathy.

Two colts, Henry and Peanut, were just tiny things when Kelly first saw them, but she couldn’t get them out of her mind. Back home, she began to dream about Peanut in his little red halter. Kelly talked about him so much that by Thanksgiving she and her husband bought Peanut – and Henry, too. Cathy’s farm became their nursery.

Soon Kelly and her family were driving to Durham nearly every weekend, helping to put up new fencing, picking rocks out of the paddocks and cleaning the barn. “Kelly and I would spend time with the babies and I would show her what I taught them that week,” says Cathy. “And when she wasn’t here, I sent her reports on how they were doing. There was no strain; we just started to get along.”

In the process, the sisters’ three brothers and their wives and children started coming to the farm, too. “I swear that I almost ache in my stomach when I’m watching my family celebrating at the farm,” Kelly says. “A lot of times I just sit back and watch them and I literally feel that I want to squeeze them all so tight and it almost hurts. But it’s a great hurt.” Cathy adds, “I regret that we lost a lot of years, but that is so outweighed by

the gratefulness that we have something now.” (Is there someone you want to reconnect with? Tell us at canadianliving.com/may.)

BFF BREAKUP

For Susan George and Jeannie Welsh, the reconciliation is every bit as profound. The two women, both in their early 40s, are graduates of the University of Winnipeg who met on one of the school’s chat sites about nine years ago and became almost instant best friends. They started hanging out several times a week, going for coffee, even helping each other with housework. But Susan and Jeannie shared traits that made their friendship potentially combustible. Besides being competitive people, Jeannie says, they both tend to be blunt. And, she adds, “We both have high expectations of our friends.”

About two years ago, Susan and Jeannie and their partners went to work for a nonprofit organization. “We had a disagreement about some of the organizing,” Jeannie says. Then she says Susan sided against Jeannie and her partner. Jeannie felt betrayed. She simply withdrew – from the organization and from the friendship. Recalls Jeannie, “My internal part said, I miss you and I love you, but my external part said, Wait a minute, look at what you did when I needed you. It was heartbreaking.”

While Susan and Jeannie’s story has a happy ending, experts agree that, however it happens, a falling out between friends can be as painful as a divorce. Certainly the depth of the hurt parallels the depth of the relationship, says Leah MacInnes, a registered family therapist in Victoria. “If someone you just met says something insulting to you, it will likely just roll off your back. It’s usually the people who »

HOW TO REKINDLE A RELATIONSHIP

- Start small. Toronto therapist Marion Goertz suggests sending a note or a card saying, “Thinking of you and hoping you are well.”
- Go slow. Rebuilding trust may take time, says Leah MacInnes, a therapist in Victoria. If there’s no response to your card or invitation, maybe enough time hasn’t passed.
- Be gentle with each other. Winnipeg therapist Lori Yusishen says, “If you do have a coffee date, don’t dive into heavy stuff on the first conversation. Start with what you remember as being good, solid common ground.”
- Consider how you communicate if you talk about the falling out. “Use ‘I’ statements, such as, ‘I felt lonely, I was offended,’” says MacInnes. “Avoid accusatory ‘you’ statements.”
- Try to be empathetic. MacInnes encourages us to ask ourselves, What’s going on in her life? For example, is her marriage falling apart? Is her health OK? Is she under a lot of stress?
- Don’t give up. This advice comes from Kelly Smith, who reconnected with her older sister after two decades of being apart. “Forgiveness and second chances are two of my favourite things. If the friendship meant something to you and a lot of time has passed, just make the call. Call. Now. What do you have to lose? If the other person still does not want the relationship, at least you can move on instead of always thinking about what could have been.”



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are more important to us that trigger the big reactions." But even then, adds Lori Yusishen, a therapist in Winnipeg, "what is big and nasty for one person may not be for another."

Initially, Susan was bemused by Jeannie's reaction. She did her best to smooth over the disagreement, but says her emails were all but ignored for a year. Then things changed.

In late 2008, Jeannie's partner got a job in Ottawa. "I didn't want to move with things the way they were," Jeannie says. She called Susan and the two met for coffee. "The conversation was a bit stilted and awkward," Susan recalls. "Finally, I said with my usual directness, 'I've really missed you' and she replied, 'Don't you dare make me cry in public!' That broke the ice."

Next, Susan offered to help Jeannie pack. "Before we knew it, we had many boxes packed and five hours had passed," Susan says. "It was like old times. We had another visit or two before she left for Ottawa, all with fierce hugs and expressions of love."

Since then Susan has visited Jeannie in Ottawa and the two regularly communicate by phone and email. "When we talk, we express just how thankful we are that we have this connection again," says Susan. "We hate it that we live across the country now.... Though, who knows, maybe that's also a good thing!"

SECOND CHANCES

Geography can be hard on friendships, but there is one thing that's worse. In her book, author Laura Davis talks about the ultimate reason for reconciliation, the death of a loved one. "When people die or we go through a life-threatening crisis, it can make us realize that we may

never get another chance to make peace with the people who have mattered in our lives," she writes.

It was a death that inspired Katie Daigneault to get back in touch with her old boss, a man she had valued as a mentor and a father figure, and lost to a life too busy with work and two young daughters.

Katie was sitting in her Vancouver living room one night last August watching the news on TV. There was a report of a light-plane crash. The next day she learned the names of the two people in the plane; one of them was her former boss's only daughter. After six years of their dropped connection, "I emailed him," says Katie. "It was like picking up as if we never left off."

Katie and her ex-boss now email back and forth every few weeks and are planning a lunch soon. For her, the empathy she felt after his loss taught her a valuable lesson about friendship. "It's a really good wake-up call," she says, "because all along you realize that you miss these people whom you have let drop out of your life, and you don't have any better excuse than, Oh well, it's just not convenient to see them."

Katie has made a pledge to renew other lost friendships. For her, "friends represent happiness and joy." She adds, "We have so many different subsets of friends. We have our work friends, our neighbourhood friends, friends from our kids' schools." And they are worth our time and our love, no matter what, because, as she says, "They are all vital connections with our world." *All personal names have been changed.* ■