

WLT NEW FRIENDS (GSOH ESSENTIAL!)

There are plenty of new ways to meet the man of your dreams, but what if all you're after is a bunch of new mates?



Grace Timothy hunts for a BFF

66 I am a certified girl's girl. I have surrounded myself with girlfriends ever since I was old enough to say, "Let's swap shoes!" At school, a shared appreciation of Angel Delight was all it took to form a lasting friendship. I topped up those mates throughout university and so my gang of BFFs was formed - Nikki, Bec, Poppy, Hattie, Natasha, Kim and Holly. They cheered while I had my first kiss, and consoled me when I got dumped. We danced around our clutch bags then held each other's hair back after too many vodka shots. I went travelling with Kim and Poppy; shared a house with Holly; sampled spas with Natasha and snogged countless boys with Nikki, sometimes the same ones! Then I hit my mid-20s and everything changed. Some of my friends moved abroad (Nikki, Natasha, Kim and Holly), one had a baby (Bec) and two stayed in London (Hattie and Poppy), while I moved to Brighton, where I work as a freelance writer from home. So now I have to start all over again.

I'm 28 and I'm lonely. I have nearly 500 friends on Facebook but nobody to call in

a crisis or for a spontaneous night out. Over the past year, 27,997 women in their 20s joined Friends Reunited, which is an average of 77 people a day seeking to reconnect with lost mates. So I'm hardly alone.

TOO MUCH ME TIME?

"It's common to feel friendless in your 20s," says relationship expert Corinne Blum. "Whether you've moved away from the town you grew up in, or taken a different life path to your mates, it can cut out entire social groups."

"You don't have as much time for friends when you're working full-time," says Marla Paul, author of *The Friendship Crisis: Finding, Making and Keeping Friends When You're Not a Kid Anymore* (Rodale, £7.99). "The older you get, the more challenging it is to meet people, and you can lose confidence in yourself."

During another night on the sofa with just a glass of wine for company, it struck me that there are hundreds of initiatives for women looking for love - online dating, >



Facebook chat, hell, even dating in the dark. But how do you go about meeting new girlfriends without seeming stalker-like? Chatting-up girls in the toilet queue at a bar doesn't lead to friendship, and nor does striking up conversation about make-up in the doctor's waiting room. Believe me. I've tried.

HELLO...? ANYBODY...?

First, Corinne advises getting outside. "Do things you wouldn't normally do - go to a museum exhibition, attend a dance class, join a book club, or volunteer for a charity. Follow your interests and you're bound to meet like-minded people."

She's right. Like me, 28-year-old business development manager Gayle, from Liverpool, found herself sitting indoors most Saturday nights when her friends had all settled down. "When they all got married or had babies, I found myself isolated with nobody to call on for nights out," she explains. The solution for Gayle was a nationwide social networking site, City Socialising**. You sign up, create a profile, then add your name to various guestlists for meet-ups, including nights out and group trips to cool events, like Notting Hill Carnival and Wimbledon. Gayle says, "My first meet-up was a trip on the Liverpool Wheel, followed by cocktails on the docks. Since then, I've been on four or five events a month and finally feel like I've got my social life back. I met two of my now best friends and it's given me confidence to approach other people about hanging out. I've also tried lots of new things I wouldn't have otherwise."

Another route to new friendship is through sport. Lisa, a 28-year-old chartered accountant, from Chichester, found herself outside her circle of friends when they went to university and she started working. As a solution, she joined her local netball league. "I did it to get fit initially, but I ended up hooking up with a bunch of old school mates that I'd lost touch with who also played in the team. It

proved invaluable because we'd chat about our day at work before a match, then go for drinks afterwards. We now meet up outside of netball too."

If, like me, the thought of socialising in trainers turns your stomach, there are plenty of hobbies you can take up in your heels. The WI is enjoying a cool-over right now, spearheaded by trend-setters The Shoreditch Sisters, in east London (worth joining if you're into crafting, music and all things vintage. Visit shoreditchsisters.blogspot.com).

Fashion student Hollie-Anne, 22, discovered her local WI meeting in Nottingham via Twitter. "It's not all about blue rinses and jam jars!" she says. "It's mostly women in their 20s and 30s who fancy doing something different to going to a bar in the evening. Although approaching a clique of women can be scary, the minute one of the other girls clocked my Mulberry Alexa bag, she cooed over it and broke the ice. Not only have I met a fab new group of mates, I've come out of my shell socially."

Others think outside the box to expand their social circles: Zoe Hardy, a 26-year-old PR from Cornwall started a supper club. Invite colleagues, friends of friends, or set up a Facebook group looking for people

"Make like you're dating your new BFF - don't come on too strong"

to join your dinner-party circuit. You and three others host the dinner party at your respective homes, and guests rotate after every course. Each host invites one friend, who brings along three others. So if you serve the starter to one group of four guests, they then move on to the next house for main courses, while another set of four guests arrive at your house for mains. Zoe says, "By the time you serve dessert, you will have met 12 new people, so I guess it's similar to speed dating - only without the pressure of impressing a guy. Instead, you get to meet new people from all backgrounds, without leaving your own home!"

GOING STEADY

So you've met some new people, but how do you build a real friendship? Or, to put it another way, what about the second 'mate date'? "Invite individuals for coffee, lunch or dinner outside of the group," says Marla. "It'll signal that you see them as a potential friend and would like to get to know them



COMPANY SAYS

"I often try out cool new classes and events at weekends, to write about in the mag, and have made tons of new mates in the process. Result!"

LENA, FEATURES ASSISTANT

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London

Love Art London

A buzzy club offering exclusive access to unique art, from private graffiti tours, to tea with a tattooist. For anyone wishing to amp-up their mid-week social life. ● www.loveartlondon.com

Nottingham

Jumpers for goalposts

Head to Alley Cafe to take part in crafty competitions involving Fuzzy Felt and crayons, while listening to retro vinyl. ● hellothor.com/index.php?gigs/coming-up/

Leeds

Buns & Roses

Proving the WI has never been cooler, this crafty bunch meets for book clubs, knitting and even sushi-making. ● www.bunsandroses.co.uk

Manchester

Sugar Junction

No ordinary vintage tearoom, nestled in Manchester's cool Northern Quarter, you'll find kitsch tea parties, cake decorating and funky flower arranging. ● www.sugarjunction.co.uk/

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Milgi

A lively vegetarian eatery offering eclectic music and an art club! Perfect for craft addicts wanting to mix cocktails with life drawing or origami. www.milgilounge.com ☺