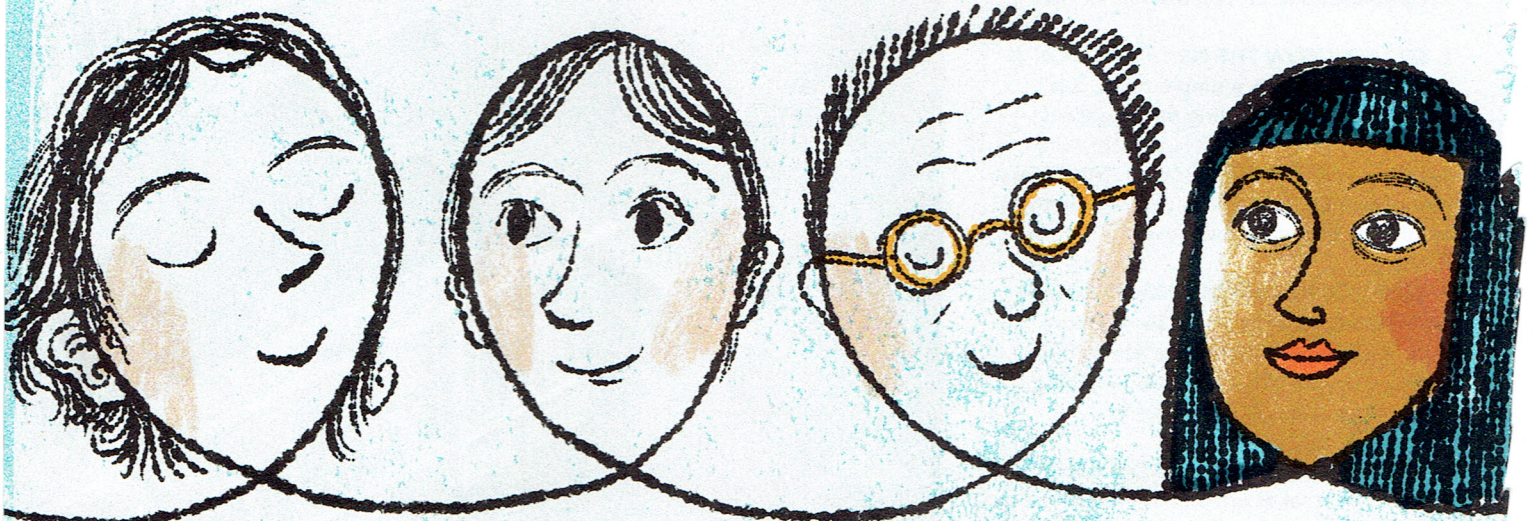
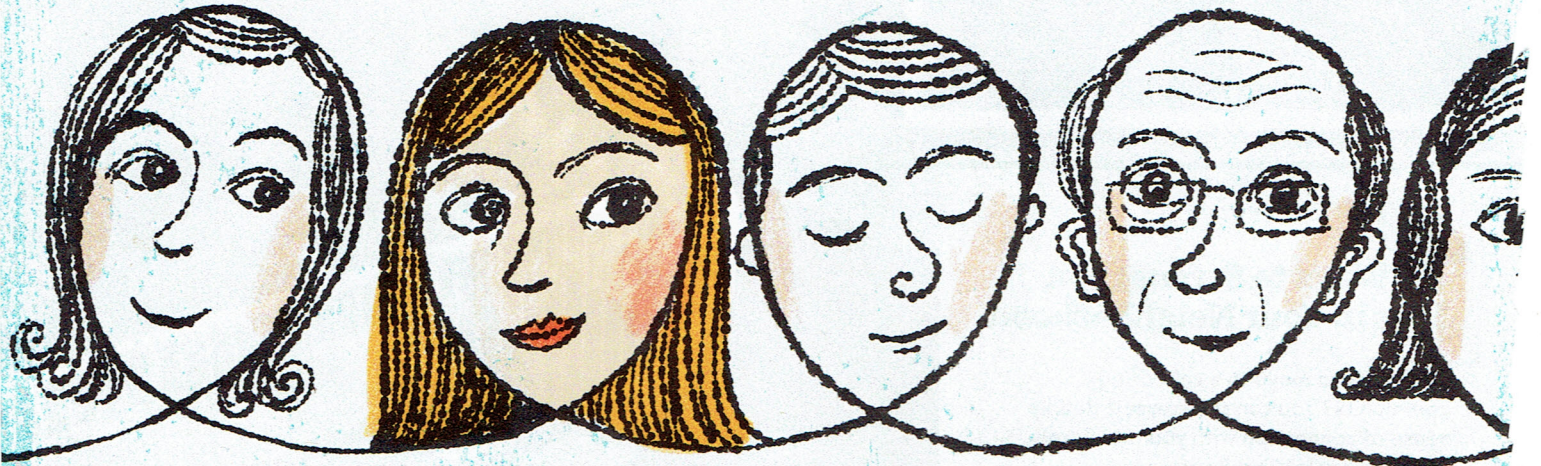


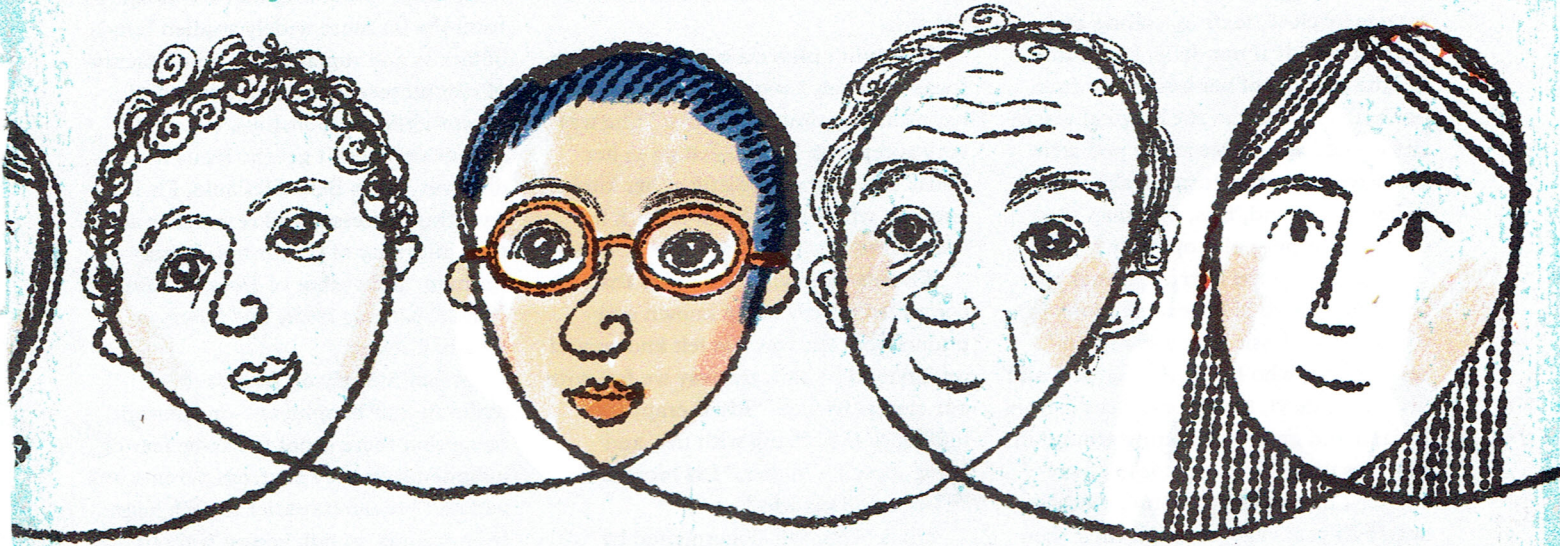
The Friendship

Marriage and family are great blessings. But at times, when it

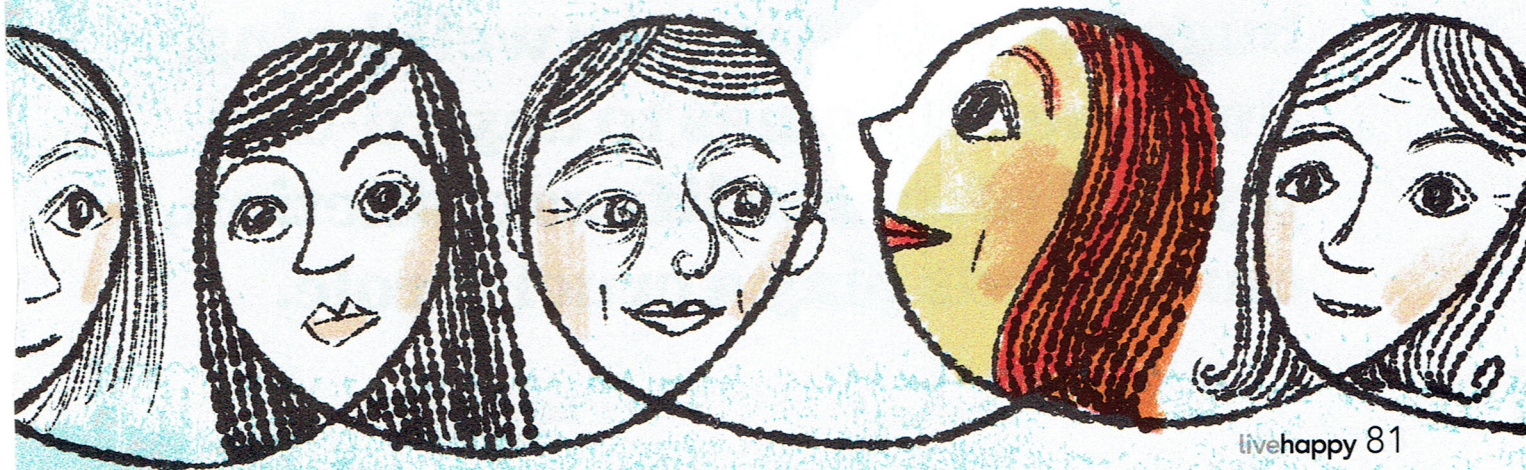


Prescription

comes to your happiness, your besties may be your biggest asset.



By Paula Derrow illustrations by Robert Neubecker



When Liz Hilcken went through a bad spate of depression in her 20s and early 30s, she didn't turn to her three older sisters, though the four sibs are extremely close, texting, calling and visiting weekly if not daily. Liz didn't tap the support of her husband either, nor her colleagues at the hospital where she worked as a nurse in the pediatric intensive care unit. Instead, she turned to her best friend, Elis, a woman she describes as her polar opposite.

"I'd seen all the horrible things that could happen to kids because of my job, so I was the classic helicopter mom," says Liz, 51, who has two daughters and lives in Seaford, New York. "Elis is from Ireland and grew up running around in pastures until dark; she doesn't have rules." The two met as young mothers nearly 25 years ago, through their then 3-year-old girls. "I was in a blur of depression," says Liz, "I'd recently lost both my parents and I was struggling as a young wife and mother," she says. "My sisters are the best, but when you're the youngest, you have to behave a certain way and follow the rules you were raised with." For Liz, that meant trying to be the perfect sister, spouse, nurse and mother.

In other words, it meant not always showing her authentic self, something it can be easier to do with friends than

family. "I would go to work or visit my sisters and smile; I'd pretend I was OK. I even pretended with my husband because I didn't want him to worry," Liz says.

She didn't pretend with Elis. "When I was with her, I wasn't expected to be happy all the time," Liz says. "She was very accepting. I could just go to her house and sit there quietly at her kitchen counter, whatever my mood, with no judgments."

There's a certain kind of joy that comes from truly being known and understood, the way Liz felt known and understood by Elis, the way we feel with our closest friends. "My therapy was talking to Elis, being with her, and being myself with her," Liz recalls. "That saved my life."

It has been well-documented by psychologists that social connections like family or a spiritual community are crucial to health and happiness. Indeed, a 2010 landmark study at Brigham Young University found that people with strong social ties have a 50 percent lower risk of dying than more solitary sorts, even if the socializers smoke or drink excessively. Certainly, a loving family has a huge influence on our well-being. But when it comes to day-to-day joy and ultimate life satisfaction, our friends play a crucial role.

Friends and Family: What's the Difference?

There's something unique about friendship, something that sets it apart from the far more widely studied bonds of family and romance. "There's plenty of vibrant research on marriage and parent-child relationships, but friendship doesn't get the focus it deserves," says Bella DePaulo, Ph.D., a visiting professor and researcher at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and author of *How We Live Now: Redefining Home and Family in the 21st Century*.

In fact, we rely on friends to maintain our happiness—one reason being that there is not the same fear of judgments we may get from parents or a partner. "It can be easier to seek help from friends, to talk honestly about our health and behaviors without fear of worrying or angering them," says psychologist Terri Apter, Ph.D., author of *Best Friends: The Pleasure and Perils of Girls' and Women's Friendships*. "It can also be easier to vent or moan to a friend and get uncomplicated positive feedback in return."

Uncomplicated positive feedback is not necessarily something that most relatives are known for, however beloved they may be. "In friendships, there tend to be fewer hierarchies," says Ruth

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Nemzoff, resident scholar at the Women's Study Research Center at Brandeis University. But "In families, parents tend to have power over children, and older siblings may have power over the younger," Ruth says.

Marriage, too, comes with a wealth of complications that generally don't arise with pals. "Unlike with a romantic partner, with friends, you don't have the tension that comes with thinking about the future, or the complications that can arise with sex," says Rebecca Graber, Ph.D., a lecturer in psychology at the University of Brighton in England.

A Matter of Choice— and Mutuality

We also don't get to choose our parents and siblings the way we do our friends. That simple act of choosing, say researchers, can bring a wealth of happiness benefits that may extend from childhood on. "We tend to expect help from our family, so we take it more for granted. But friendships are voluntary, so we often feel deeply grateful when our friends help us out," Ruth says. And gratitude, as a raft of positive psychology studies have shown, is intimately linked with greater happiness.

Ricki Frankel, 53, felt deeply thankful for the unconditional love and support she got from her former sorority sisters during and after her divorce. "We'd do group emails regularly and they were *completely* there for me," says Ricki, an instructor at Stanford Business School. "It was comforting to have this group firmly and unequivocally with me during that difficult time."

That solid connection and support may foster the kind of pick-yourself-up attitude that helped Ricki get through her divorce and to love again, and that nudged Liz through the darkest days of



her depression. In an as-yet unpublished study of an international group of women ages 35 to 56 done at the University of Leeds in England, Rebecca found that women with these kinds of high-quality friendships were more resilient and had better life coping skills. "The same is true in children," she says. In the May 2016 *British Journal of Psychology*, a study by Rebecca and colleagues reported that children in low-income neighborhoods with just one close friendship were more resilient than those without a good friend. "For both boys and girls, those with better friendships were likelier to get through difficult times without doing things like using drugs or disengaging," Rebecca says.

More evidence that the benefits of friendship start early: A 30-year Swedish study of 996 adults published in 2013 found that eighth-grade children who felt happy with their friends were more satisfied with life and friendships when they were in their 40s, compared with kids who felt rejected in eighth grade.

Keeping It Casual

Of course, not every friend has to be a best friend, or even someone with whom we share our most intimate thoughts. One of the unique benefits of the friendship bond, both Ruth and Rebecca have found, is that most of us have different friends for different parts of life. "You can have your shopping friends, your book club friends and your running friends," Ruth says. "Even if

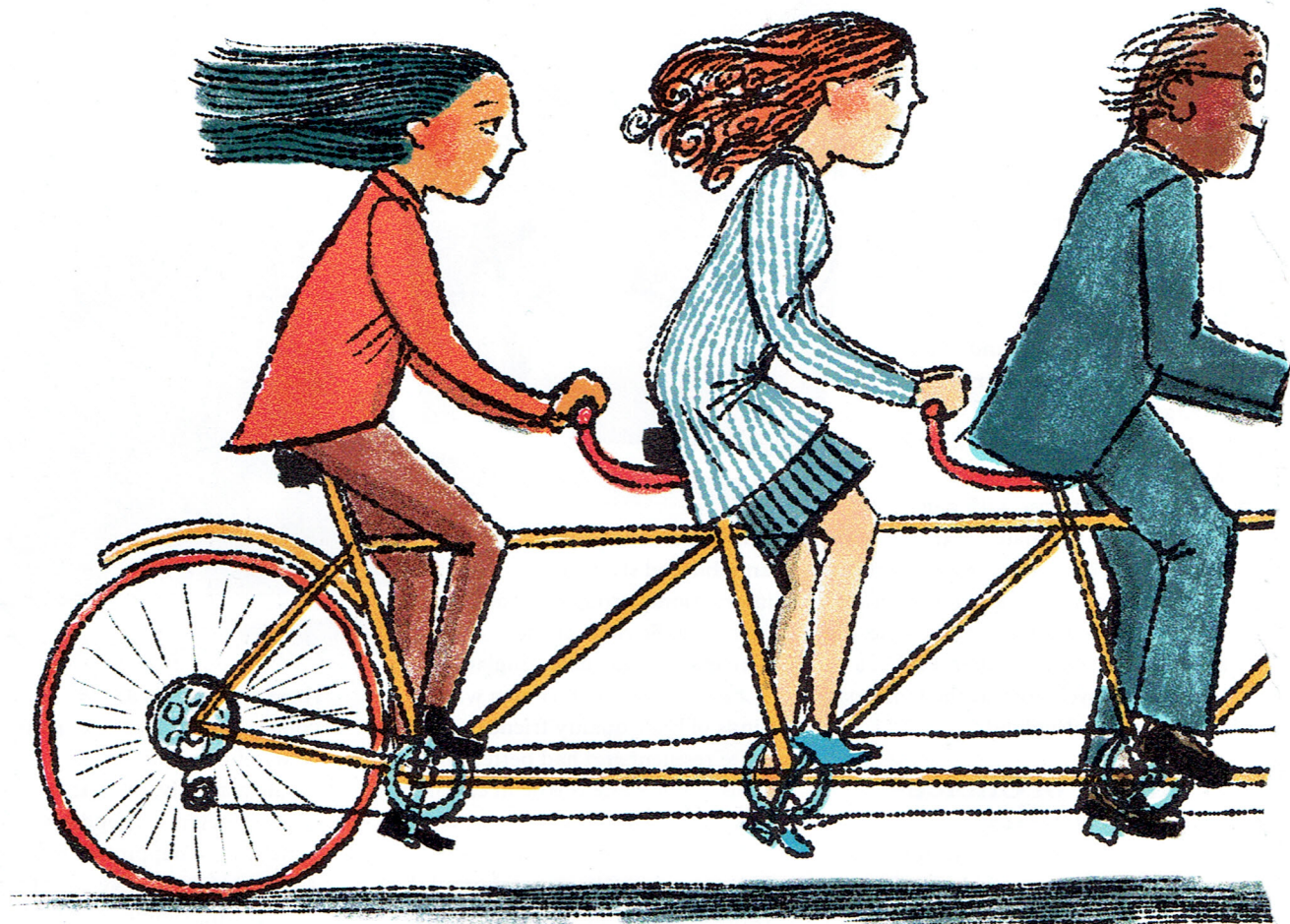


these friendships are casual, the more cohorts you have, the more parts of yourself get valued."

Surprisingly, the fragmentation that can characterize friendship is also beneficial to happiness: Because you don't necessarily give your friends all of yourself, friendships can feel less complicated and, often, more fun than the bonds of family or marriage. "With all my sisters in my life, I never thought I'd need anyone to just play with," says Liz. "But with my girlfriends, I don't have that stifling history. I can just enjoy myself."

Another reason less-intimate friendships confer happiness benefits is because we have to do some work to keep them going, according to Rebecca. All that texting and calling to make a date (something we don't do with a spouse), may make us value our friends more—which contributes to the pleasure we take from them. Think about it: You may not get the same jolt of delight when your spouse comes home (since he or she comes home every day) as you do when you finally manage to connect with a pal after umpteen emails and calendar reconfigurations.

You don't even have to see your friends in person to reap the benefits. A now-famous 2008 report in the *British Medical Journal* found that when our



friends are happy, we may get happy, too—even if we don't see or speak to them. The findings suggest that happiness can spread to up to three friends within a given social network, albeit within a fairly close geographical distance. Researchers found that if a happy chum lives within a mile, your chances of becoming happy increase 25 percent. In contrast, a happy sibling living within a mile increases happiness by only 14 percent; a cohabitating spouse by only 8 percent and happy co-workers not at all.

Quality or Quantity?

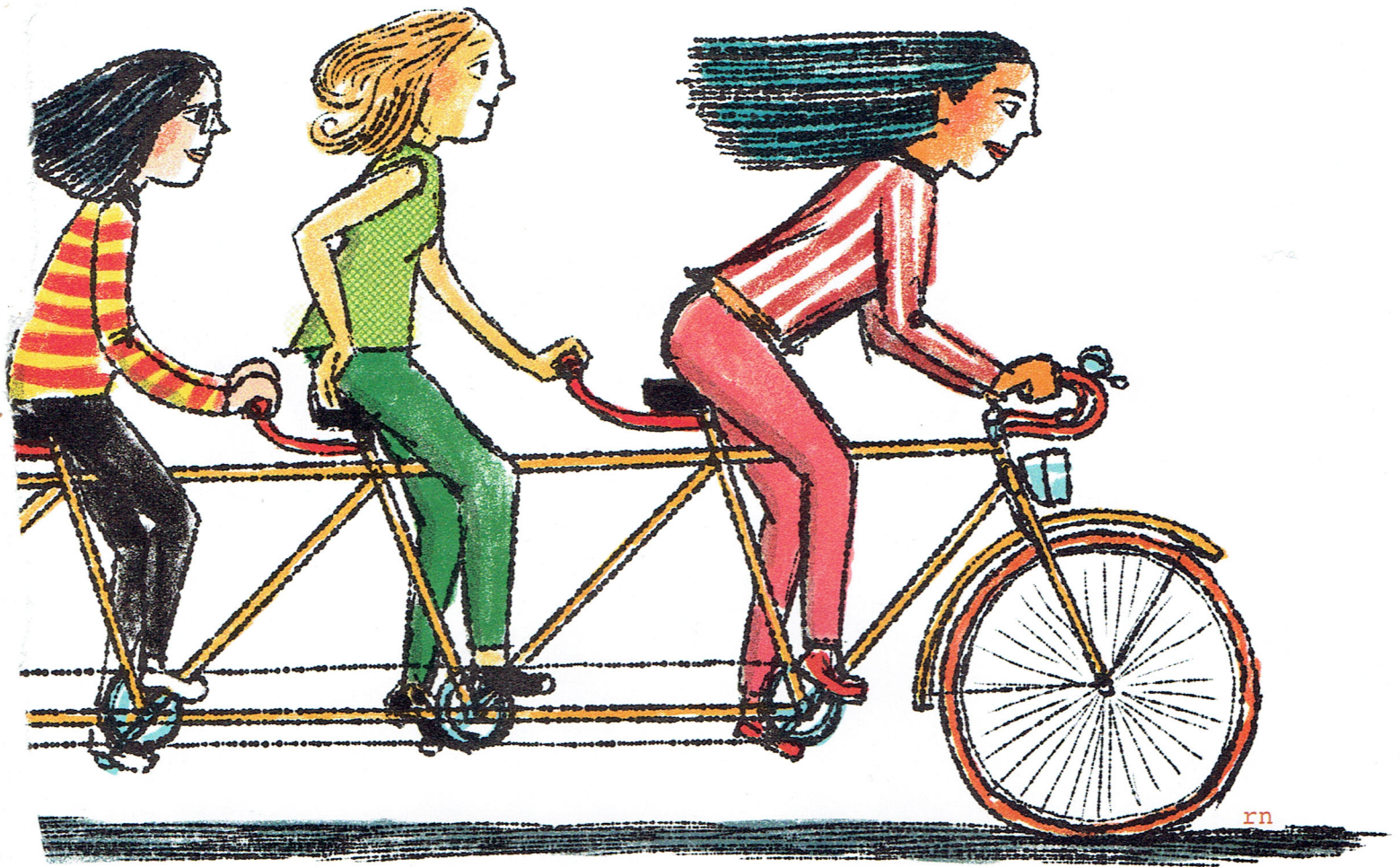
Ultimately, though, researchers agree that having at least one close, intimate friendship trumps a large network of casual pals every time. "There is no ideal number of friends you must have to get the benefits," Rebecca says. "If

you have one or two people you can call true friends who aren't your partner or your family, you're in a good place." Indeed, a 2015 survey of 25,000 people done by researchers at Chapman University in Orange, California, found that the two biggest predictors of life satisfaction were quality of friendships and job engagement. "Quality beats out quantity across all dimensions, ages and genders," says Brian Gillespie, co-author of the Chapman study.

The question is, what counts as a quality friendship? Brian and his colleagues teased out three aspects they believe bump a bond from *eh* to *essential*: companionship (a person you can count on to show up at a big birthday or other milestone event) expressive support (a friend with whom you can talk about anything, including sex) and instrumental support (a friend who will do things with you or for you—like pick up when you call at midnight to cry about a breakup). Friendships

with these components—*quality* friendships—play an important role outside the marital relationship, according to the Brian. "They can relieve stress in the marriage because they serve as a sounding board, especially important if you are having problems with your spouse," he says. "Friendships that have all of these qualities are also the most satisfying kind. And the more satisfied you are with your friendships, the more satisfied you are with your life (see "Friendship by the Numbers" for more findings from Brian's study).

Having quality friendships, as opposed to a larger groups of casuals, may be especially important in middle age, when people are juggling kids and ailing parents, and may not have time for girls'/boys' night out. "Once people reach their 30s, 40s and beyond, they tend to prune away the acquaintances and shift into higher quality, more substantial friendships," Brian says.



Those are the kind of friendships that sustain us for the long haul.

As Liz copes with the kinds of dramas that typically come with middle age, she remains glad that there's one constant in her life: her unwavering, deeply comfortable bond with her best friend. "Whatever is going on, we can still laugh together, relax together, tell stories from all our years of friendship," says Liz. "If someone asked me, 'Who is your person in life?' well, Elis is my person." ^{lh}



Friendship by the Numbers

Conventional wisdom holds that women are somehow "better" at friendship, wired for deeper emotional connection. But that may be shifting, particularly in men younger than 35. "While men older than that are more likely to fall into the stereotypes of how male friends interact, doing activities together rather than baring their souls, the younger generation are more like women in friendship: They have similar numbers of friends as women, and similar numbers of high-quality friends," says Brian Gillespie, who, along with colleagues at Chapman University, surveyed 25,000 men and women on the quality of the friendships in their lives. Here are some key findings:

- 4.0:** AVERAGE NUMBER OF FRIENDS WITH WHOM MEN FEEL COMFORTABLE discussing their sex lives.
- 3.9:** AVERAGE NUMBER OF FRIENDS WITH WHOM WOMEN FEEL COMFORTABLE discussing their sex lives.
- 5.3:** AVERAGE NUMBER OF FRIENDS MEN CAN COUNT ON TO SHOW UP for big birthdays or life events.
- 6.1:** AVERAGE NUMBER OF FRIENDS WOMEN CAN COUNT ON TO SHOW UP for big birthdays or life events.
- 5.3:** AVERAGE NUMBER OF FRIENDS MEN CAN TEXT or call in the middle of the night in crises.
- 5.4:** AVERAGE NUMBER OF FRIENDS WOMEN CAN TEXT or call in the middle of the night in crises.