



# *Purposeful Pals*

Manage expectations for varying levels  
of friendships in your life

BY LISA A. BEACH







**D**o you have a BFF? If so, good for you — literally!

Research continues to show that one of the top factors in determining our well-being and longevity is social ties. And a 2015 study by Brigham Young University found that being socially disconnected can be as detrimental to our health

as obesity, physical inactivity or smoking.

And yet, despite all our social media connections and digital interactions, experts say we're lonelier than ever. According to the Pew Research Center, the average size of Americans' core social networks has dropped by about one-third since 1985. What gives?

"Though we may know a lot of people, that doesn't mean we feel we have meaningful connections," says Shasta Nelson, author of *Friendships Don't Just Happen!: The Guide to Creating a Meaningful Circle of Girlfriends and Frientimacy: How to Deepen Friendships for Lifelong Health and Happiness*.

Nelson explains that creating deep friendships is both an art and a science — embedded with a formula for success. For her books, she tapped into her decade of experience as a trained pastor focused on building community. She also dug into research about trust and relationships, discovering three commonalities she feels are needed to build healthy friendships:

## FRIENDSHIP TRIANGLE

1

### POSITIVITY

Relationships should feel good, be enjoyable and provide more reward than pain. It takes five positive interactions to counterbalance a single negative one to maintain healthy relationships, Nelson says. "They don't have to be perfect, but they do need to be enjoyable," she notes. "That can look like laughter, kindness, empathy and validation."

2

### CONSISTENCY

Relationships need regular interaction and time spent together to create a pattern of building memories. "Time together leads to trust and the feeling of commitment,"

Nelson says.

3

### VULNERABILITY

Relationships need vulnerable sharing to get to know each other's stories, hearts and minds. "This helps us feel understood — to feel known," says Nelson.



She dubs these factors the “friendship triangle” and says we need all three to create and sustain friendships.

“When we want to make new friends, pay attention to these three factors,” Nelson points out. At the base of the triangle is positivity (“I should smile to make this person feel good!”) along with consistency (“Let’s get together the first Saturday of every month.”) and vulnerability (“I’m really nervous about my upcoming job interview.”) But these are the exact same things we also need to deepen existing friendships.

Nelson says we can also use the friendship triangle as a diagnostic tool. If a relationship doesn’t “feel good,” it means it lacks one (or more) of these key factors. We can pinpoint what’s missing and either repair the friendship or walk away if it’s not working anymore.

Now, back to that initial question: Do you have a BFF? If not, don’t sweat it. Take comfort and find satisfaction with relationships that sit on various levels of the “frientimacy spectrum” that serve us in different, meaningful ways. For example, your friendship with some fellow moms may have served you well when your kids were younger, but those relationships may have fizzled once the kids got older.

“What most of us want is a BFF, but there’s no way to get that without starting at the bottom of the friendship triangle,” says Nelson. As we practice the three key factors, we nurture our friendships. Some people may never reach best friend status, but they still provide value, Shasta says.

Nelson stresses the importance of building a pipeline of relationships, dovetailing those three factors into your interactions.

Enjoy all the girlfriends in your life, and don’t dismiss those who might not be BFF material, but could very well still make good friends. ■

“Though we may know a lot of people, that doesn’t mean we feel we have meaningful connections.”

— SHASTA NELSON, AUTHOR



**Nelson, center, is** joined by women who participated in her 2018 TravelCircles trip to the Amazon in Peru.

## TIPS FOR MAKING AND SUSTAINING FRIENDSHIPS

Looking to expand your social circle or nurture the friendships you already have? Relationship expert and author Shasta Nelson offers these tips:

1

A new relationship needs consistency to grow, so joining an established group is helpful. Joining an existing group provides structure and consistency, and you won’t have to do all the initiating and scheduling. Some examples include a book club, networking or hobby club, association, class or church group.

2

Consistency is almost always the most challenging friendship factor, even with local friends. Nelson says it’s difficult to feel positive about a friendship if there’s not interaction, so consistency becomes the foundation for the other two relationship factors that Nelson stresses: positivity and vulnerability.

3

Identify who you’re going to prioritize and aim to have more consistency in those relationships. Figure out a plan, such as starting a group brunch or scheduling one-on-one get-togethers. It’s best to schedule the event to occur on a repetitive date, such as the first Friday of every month.

4

Determine how you can “fill in the cracks” between in-person get-togethers, perhaps through phone calls, texts and social media.

