

FEAR & FRENEMIES

Why do we cling on to friendships long after they've died?

I met a woman recently and we clicked. We shared similar outlooks, voices, body shapes. She's now my new best friend, which begs the question: what happened to the old one? You'll find her under the stairs with the wooden tennis racket and formal dress I just can't bear to throw out.

Some women's friendships have natural use-by dates, but so many of us choose to hold onto them long after they've turned sour. We may well have nothing in common, have met through our husband who is now our ex, or have known each other since school. So why are we so afraid to let them go?

When I was young I had a best friend who I thought was for life. But when she started the 'I hate Rachael club' and refused me entrance, I realised she wasn't.

But I forgave her and was soon bagging her a seat on the school bus. As a teenager, I just chose to

ignore my best friend's bra lying behind my boyfriend's couch, thinking she must have left it there when we all crashed after the last party. Each time I go in to speak to my friend about how upset I am and vow to get an apology, I instead walk out having said sorry myself.

I want to be liked, just as much as the next woman, which is why I do the 'pick me, pick me' dance around the woman in the office who looks right through me, and the woman at the party who insists I speak to her back and the mother at the school gate who spends her whole time flirting with the teacher.

The alternative can be too frightening. Speaking up takes courage and risk. Memories of note exchanges in the back of class, the silent treatment at lunchtime and gangs of girls refusing me entry to their posse have me shaking in my stilettos. But we're adults now, and we can make conscious choices about who we choose to spend our precious time with.

Women's friendships are so intense. They're like love affairs, just without the sex.

When I break up with a man, I have one rule: no contact. To stay in contact post break-up unnecessarily draws out the pain.

Handling friendship break-ups isn't any easier. I have girlfriends who were in my life for years that I still hide from when I see them in the street, rather than face them and face why we no longer speak. If only I knew then what I know now.

Some friendships are for life and some are for just now. When we understood that, then we can feel the natural ebb and flow of our female friendships. Some we may be close to now, others we'll be close to again and some will become acquaintances and others will leave and move on.

Yet they all contribute to who we are. When we were little, we defined ourselves by how many friends we had, how many Easter eggs and so on.

Now we're big girls, we need only look inward for the best friend we can find – ourselves.

● *Rachael Oakes-Ash is the author of Anything She Can Do I Can Do Better (Random House, \$22.95). Email Rachael with any relationship problems you may have, romantic or otherwise.*

