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How To
Break Up
With Your
Friends

Finding Meaning,
Connection, and
Boundaries in
Modern
Friendships

Book Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

I bet you felt like an asshole for picking this book off the shelf.

An even bigger one for buying it.

And yet, notice how quickly you were drawn to it.

The truth is, I chose this title to get your attention, not because I think everyone needs to go through their contact list with a machete. While I certainly do believe, in a world of chaos and clutter, it is imperative to be discerning and thoughtful about just who you remove from your life, *it is at least as important to understand who you are keeping in your life and how to be better in those relationships and expect better from them.* But these days, no one is walking into a bookstore looking for a book about how to be a better friend.

And that's the problem.

We have accepted mediocrity in ourselves and in our friendships for far too long. And yet, nothing has more power in its ability to help give us fuel, inspire joy, and create true meaning than friendship. Friendships are highly impactful for women. And yet, despite priding ourselves on our big friend networks, I believe we are actually the biggest offenders in dialing in mediocrity. We're afraid to ask for what we really want and need, afraid to rock the boat—and in turn, live with friendships that often take more than they give. Today, so much of our time is curated

(perfect Instagram feed, anyone?), and yet there seems to be so little thought about the people we keep in our lives. Why are we so tired and frustrated all the time? Well, let's start here, shall we?

Clichés surrounding female friendships try to limit what are actually complex, important relationships. The most damning of these is the notion of competition as an aspect of every female friendship—that we're all fighting over guys, or jobs, or other friends. The flip side to that “mean girl” trope is that female friendships are sugary trips to the spa—without any tension or conflict ever. This is a time of enormous potential for women—individually and collectively. We've learned through social justice movements that we're strongest when we support each other. It's so important that we create strong networks of friends in order to foster this potential. This isn't just about being liked; there is a real responsibility here. Sometimes, that means letting go of some of the relationships that aren't pulling their weight. It certainly doesn't mean that they didn't provide value along the way. They should be respected. But you don't owe them the rest of your life if, after careful consideration, you decide they aren't working any longer.

In researching this book, I found that in so many legacy friendships the participants could no longer remember what they actually liked about the other person. It seemed that their only motivation in keeping the relationship was to be liked, or rather, not to be disliked. When this is the motivation, the relationship has run out of gas or has been built upon faulty architecture. Being liked (or not disliked) should never be the goal. Rather, acting and being seen as authentically yourself, delivering and embracing genuine stewardship—and all the responsibility that entails—are far more worthy goals. And yet, they require courage and take so much more work that it is easy to see why choosing the default factory settings for friendship has become the

norm. It is also easy to see, then, why some of our potentially most important relationships have become watered down. Suckers of energy, rather than givers.

I, myself, have a complicated relationship with relationships. In 2005, I lost my dearest friend in the world, Jocelyn, in the most shocking and horrifying way. Much was unclear in the days after, but what was totally clear was that I was left with a gaping hole in my heart that most surely could never be filled. The love and support of other friends were crucial at this time, but the only way I could survive was to numb myself and to accept that joy would no longer be a part of my life portfolio. I could feel happy, I could feel excited, but joy had left the building. This strategy worked for a long time. In fact, I don't know if I ever would have questioned it, until I found myself—actually the world found itself—in a bizarre and scary situation. Up until recently, if asked, I would have said I thought I was a pretty good friend. I make myself available for people in my life; I feel like I'm a good listener and give decent advice. I can be funny and daring and outspoken. However, I guess it took an event as extreme as my friend's death—a global pandemic, millions infected, hundreds of thousands dead, and stay-at-home quarantine orders for months and months—to jar me back to the truth: an understanding of what friendship really was, and what I had numbed away, all those years ago.

In the midst of my quarantine, eyeballing a “Zoom happy hour” invitation with irritation, I had a revelation. Why was I so annoyed that this person—my friend—longed to connect with me, having not seen me for months? It was in that moment, a moment I had felt numerous times over the past months, with various people, that I began to take stock. As I looked back, I also realized that there were certain people for whom I genuinely felt homesick; I really longed to see and sit with them and share. I started to look

at each friendship in my life, and clear divides started to form between those I really didn't miss or feel the need to see at all and those whose presence in my life I missed. This isolation, this forced vacation from my friendships, while painful, irritating, and frankly scary, had given me an opportunity to reflect on the important people in my life and how these relationships were affecting me (and them). *Why hadn't I done this before? How could I allot such a significant amount of my most precious time to these relationships with so little analysis or reflection?*

Well, I would start now.

What I realized was twofold: (1) the huge value differential between the various friendships in my life that had gone unexamined, some for decades, and importantly, (2) how my own self-imposed numbness had crippled my ability to be a really *great* friend, despite all outward indicators to the contrary. In my attempt to avoid pain and reduce expectations, I had removed all of my vulnerability. I'm not alone—we live in a society that condemns any sort of vulnerability as weakness (as opposed to embracing the truth that real strength can only come from vulnerability). So, it's easy to see why I, and society at large, seem to have stepped away from the power of true friendship and enabling a complete human experience in favor of the far safer, 140-character-type exchange. Because the truth is, when you really start to examine your friendships, you have no choice but to examine yourself—who you really are, what you really want, *what you're really made of*; people these days are running, not walking, away from any time of deep self-reflection or intimacy with themselves, so how can we possibly be truly great in relationships?

And yet, what greatness lies on the other side of all that hard work.

Let's start with living longer lives (scientifically proven!). Living fuller lives. Feeling a greater sense of importance

and influence. Feeling more loved. Feeling more love. Feeling more respected and heard. How about just feeling more? Having more fun. Creating more memories. The list goes on and on when you throw away indifference or playing it safe and really go for true, meaningful connection in friendships. So, I decided to give it a whirl and started by examining my “Zoom happy hour”—irritation friendship.

I started to realize I was very good friends with someone I wasn’t very good friends with at all anymore. I’m not sure if that makes sense, but after reading that happy hour text from her, I felt a mixture of frustration and guilt from simply seeing her name on my screen. Upon further reflection, I’d been feeling that way for quite some time but had just been pushing these feelings further and further down. How had we gotten here? Was it just me? Was it her too? I realized I had been going through the motions for a long, long time. Furthermore, even if it had just been me going through the motions, there was no way the experience could have been fulfilling for her either, no matter which way you sliced it.

I was able to pinpoint the moment (years earlier!) when I believe all of this began. Living in Los Angeles, you have friends that live far away—maybe not by miles, but factoring in traffic, it can take me more than an hour of harrowing driving to see some of my friends. One of my really great friends lived on the exact opposite end of town, and so it was particularly difficult for us to meet. I began noticing that every time we were supposed to meet on my side of town, something always “came up” for her, and those plans were rarely kept. I remember talking in detail, over and over again, with a mutual friend about how annoyed I was. This mutual friend concurred that she had also been on the receiving end of what seemed like some selfish behavior. But strangely, I never brought it up directly with the friend in question. I found myself increasingly irritated every time I

drove to see her, and so I gradually saw her less and less. She never stopped trying to set dates, however. In isolation, this was not necessarily a big problem—and from the outside looking in now seems like something that should have been pretty easy to address and resolve. But I didn't. So, my irritation about travel times now extended into many other channels of our friendship. I found myself waking up to the fact that we are not really friends at all, despite both of us espousing to all that we are the best of friends.

I had many questions, but what I was sure of was that I was left feeling frustrated and irritated by this relationship, instead of feeling nurtured and supported. Was this simply a legacy friendship that had run its course, and we had hung on too long? Or was this relationship a victim of the times? In the face of overscheduled schedules, busy lives with our priorities out of whack, allowing for too many things left unsaid and solvable problems left unsolved, had we turned something once great—a true friendship—into nothing more than an eye roll? A once great energy source into a great energy suck?

Finally, during quarantine, something profound happened: an eruption of understandable rage and hurt in the face of yet another unspeakable act of murderous violence against a Black person in the United States, with the killing of George Floyd. Weeks of unrest, peaceful protests, some protests invaded by violent elements, organizing, rethinking, and reassessing our values and behaviors. The impact on relationships of all kinds has been immeasurable. Each of us has had to confront with honesty the part we have played and are playing in perpetuating a system that values some people more than others. A personal inventory of our own contribution to systemic racism is necessary. This becomes particularly painful when examining the relationships in our own lives. How do we really treat other people? Are we hospitable and welcoming to people different

from us? Or do we casually and narcissistically distance ourselves from anyone who challenges our power and status? Can we see flaws in past beliefs and actions and be willing to be accountable? As we'll explore throughout the book, it is imperative to have a variety of friends in your circle. But how do we do this in a way that is respectful and sincere and not in a way that perpetuates the problem we seek to overcome? More about the importance of these ideas as we move through the book. Regardless of the difficulty, it is obvious that we must find a way. Earnestly creating friendships that reflect our deeply held values is the way to move forward.

All of these questions prompted me to look at each one of my friendships—the people who took up a lot of my space (and I theirs). Perhaps what shocked me the most was that I had never considered doing this before. I wrote a whole book detailing how to critically analyze how you spend your time. There are diets that ask you to write down everything you eat to get a better handle on what you're consuming. Why shouldn't we think about our nearest and dearest more pragmatically? What if we did the work? Made the effort? Made a plan? Maybe if we took stock, our lives could be that much richer, that much more meaningful.

So that's what I did, and it has changed my life. With this book, I set out to try and take all of my learnings and condense them into the major categories I believe will help illuminate and inform the meaning, importance, practice, and ritual of what a good friendship can be. Just as every human is different, relationships are full of nuance and aren't one size fits all. So, I won't pretend there is a single formula that works, but I do believe there are beliefs and practices that can help shape your world, along with one of the most important aspects of that world—your friendships—to help create a life really worth living.

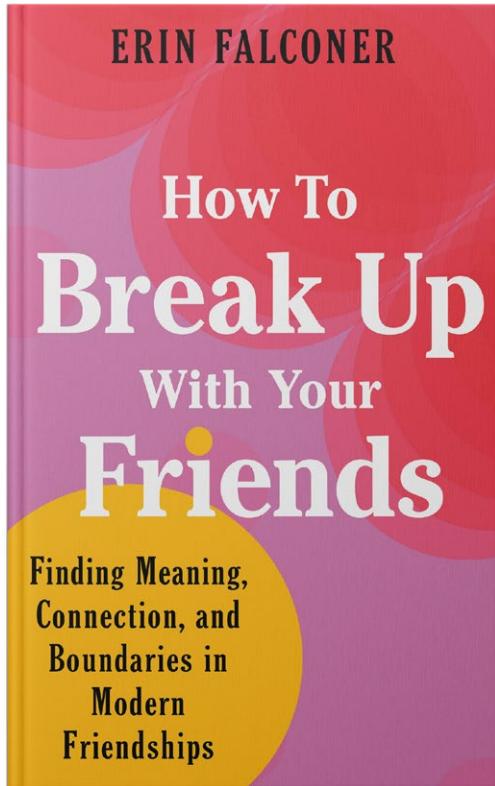
In this book, you will:

- Learn how to take stock of who is in your life, their role, and if the relationship is serving you (and them) in its current form.
- Learn how to treat yourself with respect, love, and kindness so you can model this for any current or future relationship.
- Clearly understand what your role and expectations are in each relationship, so you can understand the time and emotional energy you are expected to give to any one person at any one time.
- Understand the importance of nurturing good friendships and what the anatomy of a truly healthy, rewarding relationship looks like.
- Understand how your current views on friendship are based on your earliest friendships—and pivot around who you've become.
- Learn the critical value of rupture and repair within each relationship and how to stop fearing constructive confrontation.
- Learn how to deepen the friendships you're in, the ones that really matter, and how to have the tougher conversations for those that don't.
- Do a deep dive to understand the full spectrum of who you are and your personality type so you can create a friend profile for creating new friendships moving forward.

You grabbed this book *wanting, needing* to know how to set free what no longer serves you in friendship. And we will most definitely get to how to break up with your friends, but before we can contemplate that with any efficacy, we all must understand the astounding importance of modern friendship and how to be a truly great friend.

Certainly, no one can replace the best friend I lost. She was truly one in a million. But can there be other incredible friendships—sources of strength, love, and dare I say joy? If we are willing to put in the work; ask for what we want; and be honest, accountable, and vulnerable, then we have the power to tap into a greatness that only true friendship can unlock.

So, let's begin.



Erin Falconer is the author of *How to Get Sh*t Done*, a digital entrepreneur, and the editor-in-chief and co-owner of Pick the Brain, one of the most trusted self-improvement communities online. She was named “one of the top digital entrepreneurs in Los Angeles” by LA Confidential and one of the “Top 7 Women Changing the Digital Landscape for Good” by Refinery 29. Erin has a master’s degree in clinical psychology. Learn more at erinfalconer.com.

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