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Pure Sex, Pure Love

Third Wheel: Is the Married vs. Single Dynamic Causing a Strain in Your Friendships

By Dr. Christine B. Whelan

Anita, 26, had two close friends in college. These were the girls she could always call for a chat, who would be interested in planning a fun trip, going shopping, or confiding secrets. But a few years after college, both women got married—and Anita felt left out in the cold.

“They're really not my best friends anymore” she told me. “Their husbands have become their best friend and it has put distance between us.”

Anita said she feels pressure to find a guy and settle down so she can reestablish her friendship with these women, as part of a couple. “It's like they're part of this married club that they're waiting for me to join in. But I'm not planning on getting married anytime soon and possibly never so it's annoying that they think my life is incomplete because I'm not in a relationship or I'm not married.”

Former Friends

Are your friendships suffering because some of you are in relationships and others aren't? According to my national Harris Interactive research, 84% of women and 78% of men report that they have become estranged from or lost friends because they were at different stages of life. A recent survey on Busted Halo© had similar results: 65% of respondents said they have lost or become estranged from friends because they were doing different things with their lives.

We're all on different paths, and especially in that decade after college— when some people are marrying earlier than others, some are having kids sooner than others—friendships can feel strained.

Ask yourself this: If you are single, are you calling your married friends less frequently because you assume they'll be busy? If you are married or in a relationship, do you prefer doing things with other couples, and leave out your single friends?

Are you ditching your friends because they are at different life stages—or are they ditching you?

Toll Taking

Amelia, 25, said a close friend of hers got married and “suddenly dropped off the face of the earth.” Mike, 27, said he lost friends after high-school graduation, as each person went their own way: some to college, some to jobs, some in new relationships. And Elizabeth, 27, said she feels estranged from her friend two children: “I don't want to hear about her complain about her amazing husband and gorgeous little girls when I have problems finding a decent date.”

At the beginning of a relationship, your friend might be putting all her energy into her new love—and might not have a lot left for you. And getting married can mean moving, living together for the first time and adjusting to a new schedule, all of which takes time away from emailing, phone calls and get-togethers with friends. Single or married, these life changes take a toll on friendships.

Here are a few scenarios. What have you done in these situations—and might you act differently in the future?

Scenario #1: It's 7 p.m. on a Thursday and your evening plans just fell through. Are you more likely to call a single friend or a married friend to see what they are up to?

85% of respondents—both single and married—said they'd be more likely to call a single friend than a married friend.

Are single people perceived to have more free time, to be more likely to go out, or to be less likely to have firm plans for the evening? Are married people assumed to be hanging out together all the time, or to be less interested in an impromptu event? These assumptions can be hurtful to both single and married folks: Single folks may resent being the “backup plan” but married folks wonder why the phone calls and invitations have dried up.

Scenario #2: You and your spouse are having a dinner party. You are inviting two couples and you have a single friend you'd like to invite...or another couple. How important is it for you to have equal numbers of guys and girls at your dinner party?

According to Busted Halo© respondents, 36% say it's somewhat important to have equal numbers of men and women at a dinner party and 36% say it's not important. Singles frequently complain that they are left out of dinner parties or weekends away because the host or hostess wants even numbers of couples.

Even when a single person is included, he or she can feel left out of the fun: Christine, 23, said she was once unknowingly a 7th wheel at a weekend down the shore. "While they slept in the bedrooms with their loves I got the couch. Come the next morning, I went and got breakfast foods and cooked a huge table, but all the couples slept until noon. I'm never going somewhere with 3 couples ever again," she said.

Scenario #3: You want to offer some advice to a friend about how to handle his or her relationship. Are some topics off limits when friends are in serious relationships?

Busted Halo© respondents are split 50/50 on this question.

"Dissing the friend's significant other is rarely acceptable," said Lisa, 24. And David, 24, said he'll listen when his buddy has relationship problems, but won't give advice. "He will tell her and then you won't be allowed to see him without her anymore. You have to keep your mouth shut if you ever want to see your friend. The best you can do is listen and maybe give a suggestion but never any criticism."

Here's my take on all these issues: Pick up the phone, send an email and reach out to your single and married friends alike. Dinner party numbers aren't nearly as important as having people you love by your side, and an honest friend offers tactful advice when appropriate. Marriage is sacred, but friendships are a blessing that should be cherished and nurtured—regardless of your relationship status.