A guide to connection, conflict and growth

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BY DAPHINE NAKABIRI

The start of a new school year or transition to a higher grade brings fresh faces, renewed routines, and the evolution of friendships.

We meet new people and reconnect with old friends, often hoping these bonds will last. Yet, over time, even the friends we once considered our 'BFFs' can drift away.

This distancing can occur for reasons within our control, such as personality clashes, changing interests, or differing values, or because of external forces such as intense academic competition, dishonesty, or betrayal. These rifts can be painful and confusing, leaving us to wonder what went wrong and whether the friendship can be saved.

Emotionally, we often experience hurt, disappointment, and self-doubt. We replay conversations and interactions, questioning our own actions and worth. Trust, once broken by lies, betrayal, or ongoing rivalry, becomes incredibly difficult to rebuild. Many teens find themselves at a crossroads; struggling to mend the friendship or gradually drifting apart, sometimes without closure.

Socially, a falling-out can reshape your entire circle. Mutual friends may feel pressured to take sides, group dynamics can shift, and you might find yourself excluded from gatherings or online conversations you once were part of. This can lead to feelings of isolation or uncertainty about where you belong.

Bridget Namaalwa, a teacher at St Mbaaga's College Nadangira, observes that while these experiences are challenging, they are also formative.

"Though painful, navigating friendship struggles can teach teens invaluable lessons about boundaries, trust, empathy, and the qualities they truly value in relationships," she says. These lessons shape not only future friendships but also our understanding of ourselves.

Namaalwa advises, "Successfully navigating friendships requires a blend of self-understanding, mindful choices in who you befriend, and the development of skills to maintain healthy, lasting connections."

The following guide expands on essential strategies to help you build and sustain meaningful friendships through the complexities of modern teen life.

Know yourself

The foundation of any healthy relationship is a strong understanding of yourself. Self-awareness begins with recognising your own emotions; whether it is jealousy when a friend excels, insecurity in a group setting, anger over a perceived slight, or genuine excitement for a friend's success.

It also involves identifying your triggers. What situations consistently upset you? Is it feeling left out of a plan, hearing gossip, facing constant academic comparison, or receiving harsh criticism?

As a teen, self-awareness acts as an internal compass. It helps you distinguish between friendships that are supportive, encouraging, and mutually respectful and those that feel draining, one-sided, or toxic.

When you understand how a relationship affects your mental and emotional well-being, you can respond more effectively. This might mean having a courageous conversation, calmly setting a boundary, offering constructive feedback, or, in some cases, recognising that it is healthiest to distance yourself.

Talk it out honestly

At the heart of strong friendships is clear, respectful communication. While it can be intimidating, avoiding difficult conversations usually allows resentment to fester and misunderstandings to grow. When an issue arises that can be resolved, choosing open dialogue is a sign of respect for the friendship.

This means addressing concerns directly with the person involved, rather than venting to others, spreading gossip, giving the silent treatment, or pretending everything is fine. A direct, kind approach creates space for understanding. For instance, saying, "I felt hurt when I wasn't included in the plans, can we talk about it?" is more productive than posting vague, sad messages or complaining to other friends.



Know when to move on

Not every friendship is meant to last forever, and that is okay. As you grow up, your interests and what you care about can change, and sometimes friends just grow apart.

Sometimes a friendship becomes toxic, maybe there is constant drama, disrespect, or it just makes you feel bad about yourself. Holding onto a friendship like that can hurt you more than it helps.

Letting go does not have to mean a big fight or drama. Sometimes it just means quietly stepping back, choosing your own peace, and putting your well-being first. Learning when to walk away makes space for healthier friendships and helps you grow.

Set and respect boundaries

Healthy friendships require clear boundaries. Think of boundaries as the invisible lines that define where you end and your friend begins; they are essential for mutual respect and emotional safety. Setting boundaries starts with self-awareness, knowing your limits regarding time, emotional energy, and acceptable behaviour. It is okay to say, "I need some alone time to study tonight," or "I am not comfortable talking about that."

Equally important is respecting the boundaries set by your friends. Everyone has different needs for personal space, comfort levels with joking, and capacity for emotional support. A good friend pays attention to and honours these limits. Pressuring someone to share something they are not ready to, overloading them with your problems, or ignoring their requests for space are all boundary violations.

Fight fair

Disagreements and conflicts are a natural, inevitable part of any close relationship. The survival of a friendship often depends not on the absence of conflict, but on how it is handled. Maturity in conflict means avoiding impulsive, hurtful reactions such as yelling, sending angry texts, or publicly shaming someone online.

When emotions run high, the best first step is often to pause. Taking time to cool down allows for clearer thinking and prevents saying or doing things you might later regret. The goal of a difficult conversation should not be to "win" the argument, but to understand each other better and find a resolution. Seek compromise where possible, and learn the skill of "agreeing to disagree" respectfully on certain issues. Approaching conflict with empathy, trying to see the situation through your friend's eyes—can transform an argument into an opportunity for deeper connection.

Stop comparing yourself

In today's world, especially with social media, it is easy to fall into the habit of comparing yourself to your friends. Comparing grades, looks, or popularity breeds jealousy and silent competition. Remember, everyone has a unique path. Instead of comparing, celebrate your friends' successes and support their struggles. True friendship is built on mutual support, not rivalry.

Invest wisely

Meaningful friendships require intentional investment of time, attention, and care. However, balance is crucial. While spending quality time with friends is important for bonding, it should not come at the expense of your academic responsibilities, family commitments, or essential self-care.

Overcommitting socially can lead to burnout and stress, which can strain your relationships. Be mindful of investing your energy in friendships that are reciprocal, where support, effort, and positivity flow both ways. It is healthier to nurture a few deep, quality connections than to spread yourself thin trying to maintain numerous superficial ones.

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