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Connections

TIME
BONUS SECTION

Making Time for Friends

Calls and e-mails can't substitute for getting together. Here's how some women manage to do it

By KAREN BANNAN

AMY HOLCK AND AMBER WHITE WERE INSEPARABLE when they were kids. Even though they went to different schools, they got together most days after classes and spent entire weekends with each other. Their closeness continued when they were students at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. The bond remained after college, but they found it harder to stay in touch. Holck moved to Colorado for a year, and even when she went back home to Houston, the women's schedules kept them apart. Holck, 28, a program coordinator for a youth ministry, often works late, and White, 28, a public relations specialist, logs plenty of hours in the office herself. Add their romantic lives, and there didn't seem to be time even for lunch. "We'd both look at our calendars, and there'd be no time that worked,"

Holck says. "Amber is in a serious relationship, and I was planning a wedding. That, plus work, kept us both busy."

Yet they missed the contact, the chance to unwind with someone who knew the other so well. Realizing that mornings were the only times they could carve out of their schedules, the friends decided about two years ago to have breakfast together. Now they meet at least one Thursday or Friday morning each month. Those early-morning sessions have brought their relationship back to what it was during their more carefree adolescence. "Since our meetings are fewer and far between, we've really learned to value our time together," says Holck. "Even if I'm exhausted, I make the time to meet at 7:30 and spend time with Amber. I just can't imagine not having her in my life."

Researchers say men and women respond to friendship differently. While men are more likely to bond over a football game and talk about gadgets, women tend to seek intimate relationships in which they can re-

gather, however, the talk still tilts toward the personal. "The one finding that psychologists agree on is that for males, a friend is someone you do something with, while for females, a friend is someone you are with," says Marianne LaFrance, professor of psychology and women's and gender studies at Yale.

A networking group called the Ladies, nine businesswomen who live and work in New Jersey, was formed 10 years ago for entrepreneurs. Members, who are ages 36 to 52, still take turns talking about specific work issues. But they're just as likely to discuss coping with a quarrelsome teenager or caring for an aging parent as they are to analyze a

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veal more of themselves. "A woman's inclination to get together and be supported by women friends is a basic process that has its roots in ancient neurocircuitry," says Shelley Taylor, professor of psychology at UCLA and author of *The Tending Instinct: Women, Men and the Biology of Relationships* (Times Books). She says having a close friend can be a life-enhancing experience in more ways than you might expect. "There's good evidence that friendship is an important tool for down-regulating stress," she says. "It restores psychological well-being and has definite health-protective benefits. It also prolongs life."

THE PROBLEM IS THAT THE DEMANDS OF being a wife, mother and worker leave many women with very little time to spend with friends. Technology helps. You can grab a quick cell-phone chat while you're stuck in traffic or keep in touch via e-mail or instant messaging. But that kind of communication is no substitute for face-to-face and heart-to-heart contact, so busy women are increasingly taking a page from the men's playbook and getting together around specific activities. Once they

marketing problem. "One of the things we realized pretty quickly is that, especially if you're an entrepreneur, your personal life affects your business life," says Joanne Dennison, 43, who co-founded the group. "Our favorite saying is 'Leap, and the net will appear.' We are the net for one another." Last year the group added an extra layer of intimacy to its web of support. Each member took a decorative angel inscribed with her name to the December meeting. Then the women passed the angels around in a circle while one member read a poem. When the poem ended, each woman found herself holding the name—and angel—of her new individual cheerleader. "Your angel is the person who is going to push you even more than the rest of the group. They do the extra and above for you during the year," says Dennison.

In these multitasking times, many women find that it makes sense to combine seeing a friend with another pleasurable activity. Diana Kollmeier, 37, of Babylon Village, N.Y., an executive sales assistant and single mom with a 9-year-old son, and Faith Algazi, 34, a graphic design-

er who lives 20 miles away in Jericho, N.Y., have been friends for more than six years but didn't see each other as often as they wanted. The solution, they decided, was to find an activity they could share that would help bring them together on a regular basis. After considering several options, including a weekly racquetball game and matching gym memberships, the two joined a karate class at a center halfway between their homes.

Kollmeier thought the classes, which meet for an hour two or three times a week, would help them get into shape and give them a little more motivation to see each other. Still, she was surprised when she realized not only how much closer the karate time has brought them but also how it has changed them emotionally. "Karate helped us accept each other's differences with greater patience and understanding," she says. "As a woman, a mother and a single parent, the obstacles are endless. Faith has become a significant supporter in my life. Her friendship is one of the things that keep me going every day."

Paula Gerden, 51, a divorced foreign-currency trader in New

The Ladies, a group of New Jersey businesswomen, meet to discuss work and family. They paired off for extra support after anonymously exchanging the inscribed angels on the table





Algazi, far left, and Kollmeier found that taking a karate class together helped them become closer friends

York City, creates time in her schedule for friends by purchasing season tickets to the Metropolitan Opera. A few days before each performance, she invites one of her girlfriends to be her guest. "The great thing about the opera is the intermission," says Gerden. "You have 40 minutes where you're alone together talking about whatever you want. It's just a magical evening all around."

Women who can't manage weekly or

even monthly get-togethers can still find ways to nurture their friendships. Jane Chittick, 52, gathers with six of her childhood friends once a year for an all-girl slumber-party weekend. The tradition, in its 15th year, started in 1988 at a high school reunion when Chittick invited her friends to stay at her mother's Morton, Ill., house during the event. After a night of talking and laughing, the group decided to meet at a different location every sum-

mer. During the rest of the year, the women, who live across the country and in Canada, keep up with one another via e-mail and the occasional phone call, but the annual getaway, free of husbands and kids, provides a treasured way to recharge their friendships. "When we get back together every year, it's like the time that's passed didn't even happen. You just pick up where you were, and there's no gap," says Chittick. "The connection is just there."

Karyn Munsie, 37, of Sydney, says she feels the same way when she gets together with her friends Sandra Page-Cook, 36, of New York City and Suzanne Skyvara, 36, of San Anselmo, Calif. The three, who met 13 years ago when they all worked in Australia, gather once a year in a different location around the world. Although scheduling, funds and time zones—Munsie is waking up when Page-Cook is just going to sleep—are obstacles, the women say their friendship is important enough to make the trips a priority. Says Skyvara: "You can talk to another woman in a way that you could never talk to your husband or your boyfriend. Most men will try to solve a problem, whereas women will just sympathize with you. I'd say our friendships are not only supportive but nurturing too." The women have already planned their next trip—a vacation to the Italian coast—in 2004.

Even though the emotional benefit of spending time with a friend is indisputable, some women can't shake the guilty feeling that whatever extra hours they have should be devoted to their families. But UCLA's Taylor insists that such interludes are essential. "Women especially need to understand that making time for friendship isn't a self-indulgent activity," she says. "It's an important aspect of the resources that they bring to the stressful times in their lives. Holding out for that friendship time is a very important thing to do." ■

