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Men and women can never be friends – but sex has nothing to do with it



Billy Crystal and Meg Ryan in *When Harry Met Sally* (Credit: Everett Collection / Rex Features)

Can men and women ever be just friends? It is the eternal question that *When Harry Met Sally* set out to answer in 1989, and endless romcoms¹ have continued to debate in the decades since (*Friends with Benefits*², *13 Going on 30*³ and so on).

5 According to one new survey, the answer is a straight *no*. Social network *MeetMe* polled⁴ 6,500 of its users and found that more than half of people said they have fantasised about sleeping with their best friend of the opposite gender. What's more, nearly 40 per cent (four out of 10) reported actually having slept with said⁵ best friend, while two thirds admitted they would if the opportunity presented itself.

10 The numbers seem pretty damning⁶. Yet could the truth be more nuanced? Research published in February this year would suggest so. Instead of focusing on the “sex part” that

¹ romantic comedies

² *Friends with Benefits*: amerikansk film fra 2011

³ *13 Going on 30*: amerikansk film fra 2004

⁴ spurgte

⁵ denne

⁶ nedslående

Billy Crystal's character Harry was so preoccupied by, it looked at what I have always suspected to be the real problem between the genders: how they *define* friendship.

15 Evolutionary psychologist⁷ Professor Robin Dunbar, at Oxford University, found that while women view their best friends as something in between sisters and soul mates, men see theirs purely in terms of convenience. He came to this conclusion by exploring how people's friendship circles changed when they left school for university.

20 "What determined with original friendships whether they survived with girls was whether they made an effort to talk more to each other on the phone," he explained. "Talking had absolutely no effect on boys' relationships at all. What held up their friendships was doing stuff together. Going to a football match, going to the pub for a drink, playing five-a-side⁸. They had to make the effort."

25 He went on to look at the differences between the sexes: "Women clearly have much more intense close friendships. Guys tend not to have that relationship. They tend to have a group of four guys that they do stuff with. That is much more casual. With guys it is out of sight, out of mind. They just find four more guys to go drinking with."

This will be familiar to any woman who has had both the pleasure and disappointment of a close male friend – particularly in your twenties and thirties. At first, things are wonderful. Life is full of great catch ups⁹, and laughter over pints of beer. They listen to your woes, and you help them with their woman problems. It's the friendship neither of you knew you needed.

30 Only then, something changes. They start a new relationship. They move to a new postcode (really, it doesn't have to be far). They get a new job with a ready-made¹⁰ social life. They get a new flatmate. Whatever the change, they suddenly have a replacement for you, and can't seem to find the time to meet you for that coffee.

35 You, naively, keep trying. You call them, you send jokey pictures and do exactly what you'd do if a girl friend was growing distant: bombard her with the attention you wish that she was showing you. Except with a male friend, it just doesn't work.

40 Whether it is nature or nurture¹¹, most men simply do not view friendships in the same way as women. Sex is hardly the issue – it is the practical problem of how much time and effort they are able to put into a platonic¹² relationship. As the study says, there's always another drinking buddy around the corner. [...]

⁷ *evolutionary psychologist*: psykolog, som ser på mennesket som et socialt dyr, der har tilpasset sig omgivelserne

⁸ (her) hyggebold

⁹ *catch ups*: (her) gensyn

¹⁰ (her) medfølgende

¹¹ *nature or nurture*: arv eller miljø

¹² platonisk, dvs. nært forhold uden sex



Justin Timberlake and Mila Kunis in *Friends with Benefits* (Credit: David Giesbrecht)

I've lost count of the male friends who have disappeared over the years. Often, it coincides with the arrival of a new girlfriend. But contrary to popular interpretation, it is rarely to do with that new girlfriend's jealousy. As one former male friend charmingly told me: "I have to hear all my girlfriend's emotional stresses now. I don't have time for yours."

45 With male mates like that, it's probably no surprise that all my efforts go into my female friendships. And now the academics have backed my choice.

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