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ou wouldn't swap your best friend for anything, but there's something about having a group of mates - shared history, mutual understanding - that gives you a perspective on the world you can't find anywhere else. Your lives may change at different rates, and sometimes you'll be closer to one person than another, but chances are there will always be someone who understands where you're at and what led you there.

These are the friends who listen as you moan about your boss, help you pick out a dress for a date, or drop everything to look after your kids in a crisis. And the fact that it's sometimes difficult to find time to see them just means it's more important than ever that you do.

Here, we take a look inside the friendship between four women -

the flashpoints, jokes, good and bad times. Emma W, Emma K, Francesca and Gabrielle, all from London, have known each other since their teens. They talk regularly by phone and generally meet up at least once a month for dinner where, says Fran, 'we sit round, chat and have a laugh'. We catch up with them on one of those nights.

What do you envy about each other's lives?

EMMA K 'Fran has a really good partnership; they're very happy and their son Jamie is lovely. And I envy the fact Emma has a new man and he's incredibly good for her, even though she doesn't want to admit it. I also envy Gabby for

being in a long-term relationship. God, isn't that funny? I just talked about all their relationships...' GABBY 'I really respect Emma W for her job. It's mind-boggling that she's so patient. I think our politics are very similar but she puts her money where her mouth is. I wish I could be that giving."

Have you ever grown apart?

EMMA K 'There have been a few periods where

we've been less close but I always count the others as my best friends. For instance, Fran's had a baby and her circumstances are so completely different from mine that naturally we didn't have so much in common for a

time. As she was the first one to have a baby, it must have been quite a lonely experience because we just couldn't share the situation.' FRAN 'I certainly felt out of it for a while. And it's only in the past few months that I feel as if our friendships are back to normal. When I first had Jamie I was scared because I thought it would always be

me being knackered, and my friends going, "Oh, you're so crap; you can't go out." I did feel like I'd lost something for a while.'

work. Photograph

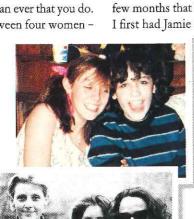
EMMA K 'It's happened many times in our relationship. Before it used to make me scared that we would just drift apart completely, but now so many years have passed that I feel it's okay, that we'll organically move together again.'

FRAN 'A big part of my heart is taken up with my son now so I would imagine you've been through periods of feeling neglected by me.' EMMA K 'We can put up with a lot more than you think we can. You always believe that you shouldn't put us through something, and I think you underestimate us in that way.'

Getting over the bad times

FRAN 'I lived in Australia for a year and a half, and part of the reason I came back abruptly was because I was living with a guy and he died suddenly. The three of them were just amazing. They listened to me for hours, sat through my weird moods, my acute depression, my going a bit bonkers - all the emotions you go through after a trauma like that.'

GABBY 'I've had big life events, whether that's the birth and death of a child [Gabrielle and





FROM TOP: Fran and Emma K aged 14; at a picnic in 1997; Emma W, Fran and Gabby soak up the rays in Tobago

