

Why best friends make the best lovers

Billy Crystal's character in When Harry Met Sally famously argued that sex gets in the way of friendship - but - can friendship also get in the way of sex?

Claire Rees finds out why, in the most successful relationships, the two go hand in hand...

When Monica and Chandler finally become engaged in *Friends*, she gushes, between tears, “All my life, I never dreamed I’d be lucky enough to fall in love with my best friend.”

As they cry, the audience cries too, watching a couple so equal in their compassion for one another they are both on their knees, holding hands like school friends in the playground.

Fans of the TV show will remember Monica and Chandler squabbled like teenagers, had pet names for each other, and were constantly hugging.

They were best friends. And they were going to spend the rest of their lives together. But what next? Did any of us wonder if she was making a mistake turning down the smouldering moustachioed Richard (Tom Selleck)? Sure, he broke her heart, but didn't they have more 'spark'?

Top sex therapist Tracey Cox recently wrote an article where she claimed so-called soul mates often have the worst sex lives. Why? Because apparently the stronger our bond, the weaker the sexual chemistry becomes.

And it can apply whether - like Monica and Chandler - you're best friends who became lovers, or whether you're lovers who are lucky enough to also be the best of friends. The thinking is that this same beautiful intimacy, which makes us yearn to merge as 'one', can have such a devastating effect on sexual desire that if we're not careful, it can completely fizzle out in the familiarity.

Perhaps we can blame fairytales – Cinderella betrothed herself to a strong silent stranger, missing out on years of giggles with Buttons. We crave that 'spark', no matter how toxic.

So some of us grow up thinking that the bad boy is preferable to the one who remembers your birthday (the former doesn't know what colour your eyes are – but the sex will be out of this world!).

But just as the coveted spark can be lethal, on the other hand we all know the depressing signs a relationship has hit irreversible 'pal' territory. I remember the stomach sinking feeling when a boyfriend of a few weeks handed me a birthday card that referred to me as 'his chum'. Shudder. And that was the end of that.

Sex therapist Stephanie Jamies, clinical supervisor for Relate Cymru, thinks we need to find a happy medium, and argues fireworks and friendship can go hand-in-hand.

“Good friends have the basis for

an excellent, long-lasting relationship,” she says.

“Close couples share common values, respect and they know what makes each other tick, and there's nothing un-sexy about that. You can have a friend who you don't see for years, but when you catch up with them it's exactly the same – that's how powerful friendship is.”

And a relationship deep rooted in friendship will be more likely to survive any inevitable knocks to your sex life.

“Sexual chemistry changes over time, and those mad, hanging-from-the chandelier early days don't last for ever,” says Stephanie.

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“So couples who are also great friends are more able to bridge the gaps when the lust goes away for a while, more so than the couple who isn't as close, where it becomes easier to walk away and move on. Good friends who respect each other will stick around.”

There are plenty of examples of clearly loved-up celebrities who also manage to boast all the qualities of a great friendship. Last year, Cat Deeley and Patrick Kielty wed in a secret Rome ceremony, after being friends for 10 years, while Ashton Kutcher was Mila Kunis' first real kiss on screen in 1998 – now they're the cutest couple in Hollywood.

Angelina Jolie describes partner Brad Pitt as her best friend and the only person she can really talk to. Justin Timberlake recently raved that marrying his 'best friend' Jessica Biel was the best decision he ever made.

But there is always the danger that when she's finishing another sentence, and he's holding back your hair after too much sangria, things have got so relaxed neither of you are bothering any more.

“Living with our soul mates shouldn't be our cue to become complacent and take what we have for granted,” says Stephanie.

“Maintaining the sexual chemistry is still very important and we have to consciously work on it.”

And true friends are often better equipped to rediscover that spark.

“I encourage clients to look at how they play together, which is where couples who are friends can have an advantage,” says Stephanie.

“Good sex is actually about being childlike and having fun, we shouldn't take it so seriously all the time. Go for a walk on the beach and play in the sand, hold hands, forget about your hair-do. That re-found sense of play can translate into the bedroom.”

And lucky you – forget fantasy thrills from a handsome stranger – years of closeness can be more conducive to experimenting sexually.

“Trust is a lovely, big element of a good, healthy sex life – and trust and intimacy go together,” says Stephanie.

“Friends know they can bare all and allow themselves to be vulnerable, knowing they are safe and the other won't hurt them.”

So how can we make sure we remain passionate friends, rather than sexless pals? Start by retaining those pieces of that separateness that made you fall in love in the first place.

“Remember you are in a couple, but you are an individual,” says Stephanie.

“Accept that not all your life needs will be met in the relationship, talk to your friends instead of always going to your partner with problems – that can keep the spark alive so that it's exciting when you get back together.”

And rest assured that while good sex will come and go, real friendship will mean it should never become too distant a memory.

“Love and sex is a bit like a fire,” adds Stephanie.

“When you start out, it's roaring up the chimney but the flames die down and what you're left with is warm embers. And that, if you're lucky, is the glow of friendship. And if you fan the embers of the fire, the flames will return.

“If there's warmth there, you can always bring that back.”

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