

The secret support networks that

KEEP US STRONG

As a new report reveals, good friends are much more precious than money. Three readers nominate the special people they turn to in a crisis...



'My sister helped me to believe I didn't need a man'

Corin Riordan, 38, is a full-time mum from Oakham, Rutland. She and her ex-husband Edward* have two young children, Pippa, 11, and Freddie, seven. I'd always looked after my little sister Toni – especially after our dad died of a heart attack when I was 25 and she was just 13. But I never expected her to have to look after me.

Toni was my bridesmaid when I married Edward in 2000. I was thrilled when I fell pregnant with Pippa almost straight away. Edward helped manage the pub my family owned, and we both loved being parents. But by the time

Freddie was born in February 2004, working and living together had become stifling for both of us. Still, I was devastated when, in 2006, we finally admitted our marriage was over.

My friends were fantastic, but most were married and busy with their own lives. So, distraught, I called my sister Toni, now aged 27, who was working in a bar in Tenerife at the time.

Within hours, she'd quit her job and moved back to Oakham to take care of me. I hadn't asked her to but she insisted, 'I want to help.' Suddenly, the tables were turned.

She'd bring round bottles of rosé and sit with me while I cried. She stayed over to watch *Sex And The City* box sets with me. And she'd whisk me off to Leeds for a girls' weekend. One night, we danced around my kitchen to Simon & Garfunkel and suddenly things didn't seem so bad.

Gradually, she helped me see that Edward and I could be friends again, for the children's sake. And when she had her own daughter Lily, two years ago, we had even more in common.

Toni was there when I needed her the

most. She built up my confidence again and helped me to believe I didn't need a man in my life.

Now, we're closer than ever. We even look so similar that strangers often mistake us for twins – much to my pleasure! I finally feel strong and happy again. I'm even planning on training as a teacher. But I couldn't have done it without my little sister. ➔



Toni (left) helped sister Corin survive divorce

MAKE IT WORK FOR YOU – AFTER DIVORCE

Charlotte Friedman, from Divorce Support Group, says:

*** Tell family first** Some shared friends may choose sides, but your family can offer unconditional support.

*** Get expert advice** While family and friends are great, you may need professional financial or legal help, so try citizensadvice.org.uk for help. For independent emotional support, try divorcesupportgroup.co.uk

'My new support group understood exactly what I was going through'



Liz (left) got so close to Headway friends Orla and Angela, she was invited to Orla's wedding

Liz Mizen, 46, lives in Lee-on-the-Solent, Hampshire, with her husband Kirk, 52, a health and safety instructor. They have two daughters, Kelly Ann, 27, and Charley, 21.

I was on holiday in Italy in September 2008 when I started to feel cold. I put it down to flu, but back home five days later

I woke up racked with a horrendous headache. I was rushed to Southampton General Hospital and diagnosed with a heart infection, which had spread to my brain and caused a haemorrhage. Kirk was warned I might die in the operating theatre as doctors battled to save me.

I beat the odds but my life changed beyond recognition. Standing made me feel weak, and things I'd taken for granted, like driving to the shops, were suddenly life-threatening.

My old friends struggled to understand that a glass of wine might bring on an epileptic fit, or that my vision was blurry. I had to give up my job as a primary school carer and fell into a deep depression.

Then, in July 2009, on my way to a hospital visit, I noticed a poster for the brain injury charity Headway. I forced myself to go to their support group in Portsmouth a few days later.

As soon as I sat down, I burst into tears. These were people who knew what I was going through. I was assigned mentors,

MAKE IT WORK FOR YOU – AFTER ILLNESS OR INJURY

Luke Griggs, from brain injury charity Headway, says:

*** Join support groups** Your existing friends may be learning to adapt to the new you, so finding friends who've been through similar experiences means you can help each other.

*** Find new ways to have fun** Go for meals or days out together as well as talking about your illness. It's important to learn to relax and enjoy yourself again.

Orla, Debbie and Becky, who all knew the crippling effects of brain injury. Angela held my hand and promised I'd get better.

I went to the group at least once a week. We didn't just receive counselling and cognitive support – we went bowling, had curry nights, and there was a gardening and craft group.

Three years on, I still tire easily but I've learnt to love life again. The girls and I go out together every few weeks, and I'm now training to be a counsellor with Headway. I have a whole new sense of purpose.

*** Visit headway.org.uk, 0808 800 2244**

'My best friends were there for me in my darkest hour'

Claire Leman, 39, lives in Farnham, Surrey, with her fiancé Rob Porter, 28, and her three children, Billy, 15, Bradley, 14, and Alice, 13, from her marriage to her late husband Bill. Bill and I met in our local pub when I was 18. We got married four years later, set up a carpentry business and started a family.

Four of Bill's best friends' partners went on to become my closest friends. There's Tammy, the compassionate one, and Julie, the sensitive one. And there's Sarah, who's known for her practical

personality, and Babs, who's matter-of-fact. We formed an unbreakable bond.

Then, in late 2006, Bill started to forget people's names and simple words. We hoped it was nothing but, early in 2007, doctors discovered that he was suffering from a Stage Four tumour – an aggressive and incurable kind of cancer. He would be lucky to live another year.

Bill only cried once – he was more worried about me than himself. He made me promise that I'd find someone else. I found the idea inconceivable.

He died in December 2007 in the care of Macmillan nurses. I told him I loved him as he slipped away.

I remember taking the children to see him in the chapel of rest, so they could leave letters and pictures in his coffin, but everything else was a big, black hole. Without the support of my four friends, I could have locked myself away forever.

They invited me for dinner and they did the school run. If I was too upset, they'd put some

music on and we'd reminisce over the good times.

Other friends felt awkward, but with Tammy, Julie, Sarah and Babs it was easy. We talked about Bill as if he were still with us.

Then, 18 months after Bill died, I realised I had feelings for Rob, my sons' football coach. Rob was incredibly patient with me and the children. I knew it was what Bill had wanted for me, but I was terrified my friends would think it was happening too soon. But they didn't judge, they were just happy for me.

Rob proposed in May, and we're getting married next March. Tammy and Julie will be my bridesmaids.

My friends were there for me in my darkest hour. Without them, I'd never have found happiness again.



Julie, Claire (centre) and Tammy

MAKE IT WORK FOR YOU – AFTER BEREAVEMENT

Ellen Davis, from bereavement charity Cruse (crusebereavementcare.org.uk), says:

*** Spend time talking** Sharing your grief – and listening – can make a big difference.

*** Ask for practical help** Friends can do the school run or the shopping for you.

For cancer support, call Macmillan free on 0808 808 00 00 or go to macmillan.org.uk