

Most people experience their first out-of-family interaction at nursery school. That's where you learn the first of many friendship dos and don'ts. Luckily we have our parents to sweat the small stuff, like who's picking up whom and when. But adult relationships can be more complicated. Here experts advise on six real-life scenarios and how to manoeuvre your way through them without ruining a good friendship.

CAUGHT IN THE ACT

When Shelsley saw Reeves — a close friend's boyfriend — leaving Viwe's house on a Sunday afternoon, she knew it was more than an innocent house call. 'Viwe had a reputation for being promiscuous,' she says. So that evening Shelsley made the call to inform her friend about her encounter.

Would you tell a friend if you thought their partner was unfaithful?

'The best approach is usually to have a casual chat to your friend about relationships. Then gently lead the conversation to issues around infidelity. Try to elicit your friend's thoughts on such matters,' advises Joburg-based psychologist Dr Janne Dannerup. 'This way you'll be able to assess how your friend would respond to your honesty.' In other words, are they receptive to the information or will they reject the thought outright?

Shelsley's glad she came clean because when confronted, Reeves confessed to his betrayal. 'I believe you owe it to your friend to tell them if their partner is cheating, because who else will?'

But Janne warns that it may sometimes prove a little more difficult. 'Your friend may already be aware that something is amiss and may prefer to deal with it in their own time.'

If a friend voices concerns about the integrity of their partner, you can encourage them to follow their hunch by seeking further information or, if appropriate, offering the knowledge you have in a considerate and tentative manner. 'So while you shouldn't turn a blind eye, it's crucial that you tread lightly. Choose the right time to talk to them, and remain sensitive to your friend's feelings,' Janne adds.

YOU KNOW ME, YOU OWE ME

Rob was the first of his friends to start working. So when Rufaro, who was still completing his studies, came to borrow R1 000, he didn't think anything of it. 'I gave him the money in November 2009,' he sighs.

When you're in a financial ditch, can you ask friends for money or is that asking for trouble?

'Generally, it's not a good idea to borrow from friends, but occasionally it cannot be avoided,' says Janne. Friends should iron out possible complications beforehand. 'If you need to borrow from or lend money to a friend, ensure that there are clear arrangements about when, where and how the money will be repaid. Make sure that you and your friend can deliver on the agreement.'

Unfortunately Rob never got a cent back. Rufaro hasn't started working, so Rob feels guilty about pestering his friend for the money.

Joburg life coach Kate Emmerson says that friendships can be tainted by money. 'If a friend lends you some money "on the never-never", and the next time they see you, you've bought a wonderful new dress, even though the agreement was open-ended, it could cause ripples in your friendship.' She recommends that one accompanies any repayment with a gesture of thanks like flowers, Champagne or dinner.

SUPER-SIZED McFRIEND

Chuma had a friend who slowly kept gaining weight. 'But she carried it well. She was beautiful and seemed to ooze confidence,' she says.

Should you tell a friend if they've gained weight, especially if they may have esteem issues about it?

'Your opinion on this isn't actually important, so don't offer it. Instead try to be a sounding board for your friend's deliberations about their dilemma,' suggests Janne. 'You really just need to bounce their words back to them, for example, you could say "You aren't happy with your weight/fitness?".' This allows them to feel supported in their need to find viable solutions, without being burdened by your judgement.

Chuma agrees that some struggles are simply personal. 'I had to be considerate, seeing that I was her skinny sidekick. So I told her she was beautiful as often as I could. After all, that's what good friends do.'

Janne, however, warns against false affirmations. A really good friend will see past your flattery and be disappointed by the white lies. But people don't like hearing the same complaints week in and out. Kate suggests you assure them that when they're ready to do something constructive about it, you'll be the first to listen. Join them at the gym and help them make better food choices when you eat out together.

THE EX-FACTOR

'I met this guy and after a couple of dates we went away for a weekend to Hermanus. We had a great time exploring the small town. On Monday I emailed my girls to tell them all about it — only to find my closest friend had dated the dude back in varsity,' says Pumza.

Can you date a friend's ex?

'The general code is to never date a friend's ex, as it ensures that your friendship will remain secure,' says Janne. But if you absolutely must, she advises you ask yourself the following: 'How serious was their relationship?' and 'Is your friend in a solid relationship with someone new?'

'I felt terrible! We've since agreed never to date each other's exes. Should one of our relationships collapse, none of us is allowed to keep in contact with a friend's ex — not even on Facebook,' says Pumza.

If Pumza's rules seem a little harsh, Janne recommends that you examine your feelings to see if they remain strong over a long period of time. 'If you're sure that it isn't a casual attraction, it might be worth your while to risk upsetting your friend,' she says. Janne suggests you ask yourself whether or not you're ready to enter a committed long-term relationship. If you answer 'no', you'd be better off preserving your friendship. 'If, after careful consideration, you still wish to date your friend's ex, discuss it with him or her before engaging the ex, so that the two of you are on the same page.'