

Quarantine Made Me Realize Just How Important Mom Friends Are

I could have easily spiraled into having breakdowns on a regular basis during stay-at-home orders if it weren't for a perfectly timed phone call from a friend. With her support, I am learning how to make it through stressful times.

By **Sheryl Berk**

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PHOTO: EMMA DARVICK

Today I cried—not for any particularly good reason, just because I burned a batch of Duncan Hines brownies. It was my last box, the one I'd been saving for a special occasion (does Saturday, the start of another stay-at-home weekend count?), and as I hurried to stuff another load of laundry into the dryer, I smelled the smoke coming from my oven. By the time I pulled out the tin foil pan, the brownies were charred beyond recognition. I sat down, right there in the middle of the kitchen floor, and sobbed.

To be honest, it was the first time I had allowed myself to yield to the emotions bubbling beneath the surface these past few months as the world came to a screeching halt due to the coronavirus. I never cried when my daughter's high school prom or graduation was canceled; I didn't weep when all of our family vacation plans for the summer evaporated. I never shed a tear when I couldn't celebrate with my 83-year-old mom on Mother's Day for fear of making her ill. Nothing got to me—it was as if I had somehow hit the pause button on my heart, keeping it on hold from any harm. I would weather this global health crisis stoically; I wouldn't crumble or cave or show a single sign of weakness. After all, I'm a mom—wasn't it my job to be strong?

Then, seemingly sparked by a minor baking disaster, I lost it. It was horrible and a relief at the same time, a tsunami of grief and gratitude all at once. "I'm OK," I told myself, hugging my shoulders. "This all sucks, but I'm healthy and so is my family. I'm lucky to have a home outside the city to quarantine and some savings in the bank." I mentally checked off an entire list of things I was lucky to have. Then I stood up, wiped my damp cheeks with the back of my sleeve, and went for a long walk with the dog. While she cheerfully scampered through the grass, I realized I had forgotten to refill the poop bags in the holder dangling from her leash. "Damn it!" I yelled to the sky. Once again, the tears streamed down my face till I tasted their saltiness on my lips.

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My phone rang suddenly and I reached in my pocket to answer it. "I'm having a bleh day," my best friend Holly said on the other end. "I just needed to hear your voice."

Holly has this sixth sense of when I need her the most. We've been in each others' lives forever, 25-plus years since our first job as bright-eyed, eager editorial assistants on children's and women's magazines. We were in each other's wedding parties, saw our kids born, and our parents (her mom, my dad) die. There is nothing I wouldn't tell her, but strangely I can't verbalize what I'm feeling at this moment. Till she repeats it: "Nothing's really wrong, I'm just feeling bleh, you know?"

Yes, that's the word that sums it up. A feeling of uncertainty and discomfort—like a splinter jammed beneath your skin that stubbornly won't come out. If it were pre-virus times, Holly would have hopped on a train from Darien, Connecticut and met

me in New York City for tea in one of our favorite haunts. We would have hashed out our feelings, picked them apart while sipping English Breakfast tea and stuffing our faces with way too many tiny cucumber and smoked salmon sandwiches. She would have listened carefully, nodded compassionately, and told me things would get better soon.

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Now, neither of us knows that for sure. All we know is that in this moment, things feel off-base and uneasy. Every little thing—in her case a spat with a sibling and an unkempt lawn—triggers an uncontrollable urge to scream at the top of one's lungs: "I hate this! All of it! I want my old life back!"

I would have probably been back on my kitchen floor having a minor meltdown had Holly not called me to share her mood. "I miss my mom," I pour my heart out over the phone. "I miss my apartment, dinners out, and Broadway matinees. I miss everything I ever complained about before." I am angry, actually furious, at what the universe has dealt us with this pandemic, but more so mad at myself for taking for granted all I had before it.

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"Most of all," I tell my friend. "I miss our teas." They have become our therapy sessions: deep, soul-bearing, and essential to our sanity.

Holly has a suggestion: virtual tea and sympathy every Saturday at 3 p.m. We will both make a pot and pour it into our favorite china cups then toast each other over a Zoom call. The first session has a few technical glitches, mainly thanks to my spotty

WiFi on Long Island, New York. Then we see each other and hear each other's kids in the background trying to interrupt and the laughs flow. She has three teenagers—two boys in college and a daughter who is a junior in high school. My 17-year-old is poised to start college in the fall—should college in NYC actually open.

"I don't know what we will do all summer long," I confess. By "we" I mean my child who was planning a magazine internship in NYC and a long visit to Los Angeles to hang with friends. Neither is happening; everything is completely up in the air. Holly is optimistic: "things could change a great deal in just a few weeks," she insists. I watch her squeeze a lemon into her cup and it makes me smile. I find it amusing that Holly likes her tea with loads of lemon but her personal outlook is never sour.

We continue on with our tea, logging in 40 minutes before the Zoom session cuts us off and she has to send me a second link to continue. Our home ambiance may lack posh upholstered tea room chairs and sparkling tableware (I'm curled up on my unmade bed sipping from a Syracuse University mug) but we make up for it by recounting shared victories, albeit small ones. She is teaching her daughter to drive and I am teaching mine to make her bed. She's also baked apple pie from scratch and I've mastered a matzo ball soup.

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"Bleh" is what my friend and I will call those times; they deserve no grander title. And acknowledging that I'm not the only one feeling them grants me peace and propels me forward. So I burned the brownies. So I broke a nail washing dishes (OK, maybe two). So what? We've got this and we've got each other's backs. Should a bleh day rear its head once again, I know it's only a temporary situation, a not so gentle reminder that things are changing at lightening speed while we all stand still and wait for the dust settle.

Holly and I make a plan to meet back in NYC for our birthday, August 16—that is one tradition that will never change. Even if we have to get a cup of tea in a styrofoam cup and take a walk through Central Park keeping our social distance, we will still be together. We both mark the day and time on our calendars, something to look forward to in the not so distant future.

For now, we make another Zoom date for next weekend and the one after that, knowing that if we plan it, they will come, leaving bleh far, far behind us.

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