

PHOTOS BY JONNY COCHRANE

'HELP, I'M A SOCIAL MISFIT'

Do you feel like an outsider in your own social life? Writer Antonia Hoyle (above), 36, explains what it's like to have plenty of friends, yet not feel part of the 'gang'



IT WAS A FIVE-YEAR REUNION of friends I used to work with, and it had all the hallmarks of a great night: the swanky bar, the chilled champagne and the smiles that grew wider as the evening progressed. But I wasn't there. I hadn't been invited, and only knew it had happened when I saw the photos on Facebook the next day. The inevitable pain of rejection was accompanied by a resigned sense of inevitability. It wasn't just the fact that I had been forgotten – again – that bothered me, but the knowledge that even if I had been there, I would have felt left out.

It's not that I'm a loner. My iPhone is filled with people who would describe me as their friend. Yet ask any of them if I would be their first port of call

for company and you'd be met with a deafening silence. Why? Because I am a perennial outsider in my own social life. Just take the recent Ice Bucket Challenge that filled everyone's newsfeeds. Despite having 384 Facebook friends, not one nominated me. Which, I have realised, makes me a functioning social misfit (FSM) – loitering on the periphery of friendship circles, but never properly fitting in.

I'm not the only one. In an age of social media, in which we are swamped with contacts clamouring for our attention, it's difficult to know where we belong. When we're not online, we're consumed by careers, leaving precious little time to devote to our mates. The more life experience we pick up, the more diverse our friendships become, and the more distant we grow from those who know us best. Hardly surprising, then, that the FSM is on the rise.

'We live in a very mobile society, and with the pressures of time and responsibility felt by many women, maintaining friendships can sometimes feel like a self-indulgent luxury,' explains psychologist Irene S Levine, who ▶

specialises in the field of friendship. 'As a result, an increasing number of women are feeling like they are missing out on meaningful friendships.'

For as long as I can remember I've felt left out. As a teenager I would sit self-consciously in the school common room as my mates made friendship bracelets for each other, wondering when I would be given one. At university I learned to fake confidence with alcohol, downing vodka shots to shed my inhibitions. Drunk in a nightclub, surrounded by music so loud conversation wasn't necessary, I felt popular. Fortified by wine in the pub, I'd often seem the centre of attention. But the next day on campus I'd shrink back into myself, convinced that anything I had to say would sound trivial compared to my new friends.

The relationships I formed rarely progressed beyond the superficial. They still don't. And deep down I realise I'm partly responsible for my own feelings of 'otherness'. Getting to know someone means exposing your deepest self and taking the risk that they might not like what they see. That kind of vulnerability – on the mass level that friendships require, rather than within the confines of a romantic relationship or through my writing (for which I have developed a thicker skin) – scares me. I can happily blabber away about how *The X Factor* trumps *Strictly*, but ask me when I first fell in love or who I'll be voting for at the next election and I'll freeze.

I find it hard to let people in, so it's perhaps not surprising they then hold me at arm's length. I've never had a BFF. I've never been a bridesmaid, despite having been to more weddings than I can remember. I can be in the middle of a crowded room filled with friends and feel invisible standing on the sidelines, struggling to think of a remotely engaging thing to say. I often sidle home early, knowing that, perversely, I will feel less lonely when I am *actually* alone.

Before I wrote this, I asked around to find out if anyone else ever felt that they didn't belong – and was shocked to discover that some of the most seemingly popular women I know do.

'That "left out" feeling started at school and has stayed with me, making me feel anxious,' says one, a successful editor. 'I've always believed I'm not cool enough – and that people know it.' Another acquaintance with 5,000 Twitter followers



Antonia (left) feels she's never at the top of anyone's list when invitations are sent out

told me she is frequently stuck for words. 'I sit in the pub not knowing what to say and worry I'll look stupid.'

My closest friends live hundreds of miles away and I'm lucky to see them twice a year. After giving birth four years ago, I stopped being invited out by my childless friends, but felt too overwhelmed by motherhood to form strong new mum friendships either. I'd sit awkwardly in baby massage classes wondering when I would feel like a paid up member of the parenthood club. Honestly? I still don't.

It's hard to say how much my outsider status is real, and how much is in my own head. But it is self-perpetuating – the more left out I feel, the more left out I get. My worst fears are realised when Facebook tells me an event went ahead without my knowledge, or a friend 'checked in' at a bar round the corner from my house without letting me know she was there. I wouldn't dream of saying anything to them for fear of sounding like a jealous stalker. Instead, I internalise my emotions until a knot of neurosis forms in my stomach.

Perhaps this need to belong is unique to women. My husband Chris thinks I'm more paranoid than social pariah – especially when I'm harping on about the get-together that I was left out of. 'These people are allowed to be friends and meet without you. It doesn't mean they don't like you,' he sighs.

Being a FSM isn't all bad. There is a certain pleasure in observing from the sidelines – in knowing the onus is never going to be on you to mastermind a social event or type the funniest status update. My social life is lower maintenance, which is handy when I have a career and two children demanding my energy.

But I could do without the anxiety and paranoia, and the feeling that, no matter how many friends I make, I will never be anyone's first choice. So next time there's a charity challenge, it would be great if someone could nominate me... ■

HOW TO STOP FRIENDSHIP PARANOIA



Psychologist Anna Hamer says:

*** Don't jump to conclusions** and assume your friends' behaviour is related to you. We tend to assume we are the reason a friend doesn't say hello, for example. But the reality is this doesn't mean they don't like you – it's much more likely they are simply preoccupied.

*** Emphasise the positives.** Remind yourself every day of everything you have to offer as a friend. You don't have to be entertaining to contribute to a friendship group. Just like an actor needs an audience, your more outgoing friends still need somebody to listen to them.

*** Try and reveal one thing** about yourself to new friends each time you meet to build up trust. It doesn't have to be information that makes you vulnerable. Offer an opinion or a belief until you feel comfortable enough to confide in deeper emotions. Take small steps.

*** Don't assume the grass is always greener.** You don't know the facts about everyone else's life. People always present their best side – especially on social media. Even the most seemingly popular of friends may be miserable underneath.