

EMOTIONAL WELLNESS MATTERS

VOLUME XXV, NUMBER 5

Social Support and Friendship

Good Friendships Depend Less on Who They Are Than On How They Make Us Feel

Since 1985 the number of people who say they have no one to talk to has doubled. The lack of social contacts and social support, despite our technological advances over the past decades, is one of the downsides to the huge transformations that have taken place in our society. Despite the advent of e-mail and mobile phones, people today have fewer meaningful social contacts than they had in the past. We have traded our face-to-face contacts for technological forms of communication. We tend to drive alone, work alone, eat alone, and live alone more than we did in past years. Our public presentation may reflect less about who we are on the inside than on our ability to conform to the latest look that we pick up from the all-pervasive media. We go to the gym and work out alone to the beats stored in our devices. We go for coffee and immerse ourselves in our laptops. And we don't talk to strangers, who may, as many believe, pose a danger to us. Yes, we've changed. Friendships are harder to come by. It is more difficult these days to get to know who another person really is – or for them to get to know who we are.

“Ain't It Good to Know That You've Got a Friend.”

... Carole King



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Research studies have shown repeatedly that friendship and social support systems have many psychological benefits. Social support cuts off the dysfunctional cycle of stress, which produces physiological responses such as increased heart rate, breathing, and blood pressure. Just having another person nearby will reduce stress when people perform difficult tasks. And it also takes a load off when you need help in doing some of your tasks of the day – certainly a stress reducer.

Spending time with a good, supportive friend will calm us and uplift our mood. We feel better when we talk things through with a trusted friend. When we hear ourselves talk, we can often get to the root of what is bothering us without the listener’s having to say a word. Social support validates us. We don’t feel so alone when there is a trusted friend nearby to say that the same things have happened to them – or merely says, “I understand.” Social connections help us to feel better about ourselves. Good friends make us feel good, and we feel that we’re part of a larger whole. When we have a supportive social network, we can face life’s everyday problems with the feeling that we have the backing of others who care about us.

Social support also has physical benefits. People who have social connections bounce back more quickly from surgeries and illnesses than those without support. A study of people with heart disease found that people with a good friend to confide in lived substantially longer than those who didn’t have a support network. Research has also found that social support can increase your body’s natural immunity. A well-known study found that women with advanced breast cancer who attended a weekly support group lived twice as long as those who did not. It has also been found that lonely people sleep less soundly, wake more frequently during the night, and had less regenerative deep sleep than those with good social support networks.

The Elements of Friendship

What are the characteristics of a friendship? Who is likely to become our friend? The following variables have been found to be associated with the establishment of a friendship.

 **Physical Proximity** – A person who lives near us, or with whom we have regular contact, may become a friend. In apartment buildings, people who live on the same floor are likelier to become friends than people who live on different floors, and the people

who live near the mailbox or the stairs have the most friends of all. Our friends tend to be coworkers, classmates, and people we see regularly at the gym or in the elevator.

 **Frequency** – The more often we see a person, the more likely this person will become a friend. Thus, a person we see at work or in class everyday has the potential to be a friend.

 **Common Interests** – People who join groups based on a hobby or another interest are likely to make friends with other group members. They know and have an interest in the same information, and this prompts people to enter into conversations and engage in the same activities. For example, hiking clubs, gourmet food sharing groups, and reading groups attract people with a common interest – and friendships emerge from these groups.

 **Common Demographic Characteristics** – We tend to make friends most easily with people of the same general background in terms of age, gender, and socioeconomic status. Our shared backgrounds allow for comfort with the other person and a common general approach toward dealing with the world.

 **Self-Disclosure** – The point at which an interaction moves from acquaintanceship to friendship is when one person starts to talk about his or her own life. Self-disclosure has to be mutual and balanced between the two people in order for a friendship to start. It starts out with the exchange of minimal information and then moves into higher degrees of self-disclosure as the friendship develops. If one person does all the talking and the other person has little to say, the balance between the two people is not achieved and a friendship is less likely to occur.

 **Reciprocity** – A healthy friendship carries with it a sense of equality between the two people. If you disclose personal information, you expect that the other person will reveal personal information at about the same rate that you do. In fact, we tend to “test” the other person to see if they talk about themselves to the same degree that we have. Reciprocity, however, goes further than self-disclosure. If we do a favor for a friend, we expect the same general

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behavior in return. If you drive to the group one night, you expect that your friend will drive another night – or at least repay the favor in another way that has equal value (although openly keeping a ledger of favors can doom a friendship). Friends are people who generally do as much for us as we do for them.



Intimacy – Once self-disclosure and reciprocity have been established in a friendship, the final variable is the ability of the two people to establish an appropriate level of intimacy between them. Intimacy involves emotional expression and ideally includes unconditional support of the other person. That is, we accept the other person without placing value judgments on him or her. A friendship with intimacy also includes trust and loyalty. An intimate friendship is one in which we feel that we can be ourselves. We'll be valued and accepted just for being who we are. It makes us feel alive and warm. In other words, a good friendship depends less on who the other person is than on how they make us feel.

One important component of friendship is that money cannot buy friends. You can pick up the tab for other people, but that does not ensure that you will now have friends. True friendship depends on much deeper features than the superficial act of buying things for people. In fact, it has been found that we value a friendship more if we give to another person rather than receiving from them. Perhaps by doing something for someone else, we enhance their value in our own eyes in order to justify why we have given to them. Giving makes us like the other person more – and allowing them to give to us makes them like us more. The American statesman, Benjamin Franklin, used this idea in dealing with people. When someone was antagonistic toward him, he would ask them for a favor, such as to borrow a book. This led the other person to change their perception of him in a more positive direction. Giving, in any case, is more effective as a life strategy than receiving.



Giving is more effective than receiving.

The best friendships are those where the two people support each other's social identity. We value the place we have in society, whether it's a job or an important marker of our status – such as being a parent or a good student or a team member. Our true friends are those who support the social identity we have established for ourselves. We tend to withdraw from people who fail to support what we are or what

we do in the world. We may believe that we like our friends because of who they are as people, but the research indicates that we like them because they support who we are.

Another feature of a good friendship is that things tend to stay positive. Although self-disclosure is an important component of a friendship, when people constantly talk about their problems or use the friendship as a place only to vent their life frustrations, the friendship is put under strain. When one person stays negative within a friendship, the other person might start avoiding the interaction. The intimacy of friendship has to be enjoyable. The more we feel good about the other person, the more likely we are to invest the time to keep the friendship alive and thriving. A good friendship is exciting – and it's fun.



How are Men and Women Different in Their Friendships?



It has been well established that intimacy is a crucial component of a good friendship. However, men and women express their intimacy in different ways.

Women tend to express intimacy on an emotional level. They share information about themselves, talk more about feelings, and try to understand their relationships, their careers, their health, or their state of mind. They are more interested in sharing and disclosing feelings rather than in problem-solving. The emphasis is on “processing feelings” – talking and listening, and, as they do this, validating the other person.

Men, on the other hand, share their affection for their friends using what has been called “covert intimacy.” Rather than focusing on processing feelings, men share intimacy by helping each other or problem-solving. The emphasis is on “doing” rather than “being.” They talk more about topics outside of the personal realm – like cars, computer games, politics, or finance. Their expression of affection often takes the form of razzing each other, which is understood by men to be a form of bonding.

HOW TO MAKE FRIENDS

If you're not in school or working for a large company with a built-in social structure and constant opportunities to meet new people, making friends can be a challenge. Still, there are several strategies that are useful for meeting people and making friends.

Join a Gym – No, you're not likely to meet someone working out on an elliptical trainer or stairmaster, but gyms also offer yoga, martial arts classes, or aerobics – and it is in these settings that you can talk to other people with whom you share a common interest.

Get a Pet (especially a dog) – Not only will you derive physical and emotional benefits from having a pet, people feel free to talk to you when you're walking your pet. They are a built-in topic for conversation. Go to a local dog park or take your pooch for a walk in the neighborhood at the same time every day.

Volunteer – Get involved with a charitable group. This not only helps to relieve stress since you're doing something to help the world, but you'll meet other people with altruistic motives and similar interests.

Get Involved with a Hobby – Explore a pastime that you have an interest in, like biking, reading, music, or

the environment. And then join a group of people who have the same interest. Not only will the hobby add interest to your life, but you'll make contact with other people with whom you have something in common.

Take a Look at People You Already Know – Friends are people with whom you share proximity and frequency of contacts. You probably already come into contact with certain people frequently, but you've never bothered to start a conversation. Give it a try, and you might be pleasantly surprised at what you've been missing.

Track Down Old Friends – Get in touch with old friends again. See how they're doing. You may be able to revive these friendships and treat yourself to some continuity in your life.

Ask Questions – If you don't know what to say when you meet someone new, ask them questions about themselves (without appearing to be nosy or intrusive). People love the attention they receive from others, and conversations tend to flow easily when the other person feels validated.

Ask for a Favor – If you are trying to make friends, ask someone to do you a favor. They are more likely to feel friendly toward you after they have done you the favor.

Smile! – This may sound simple, but it's a way of giving off approachable cues. People are much more willing to talk to someone who reveals positive body language. The first step to a friendship is often a pleasant "hello."

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