

## **THE POWER OF FRIENDSHIP**

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Last month our family threw a party for my mother's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. We decided to make a book of her life and I was tasked with gathering messages and photographs from her friends to be included in the book.

As I received old photographs of my mom with her friends, along with their messages of love and support I was reminded of the enduring value of good friendships, whether they are life long or newly formed.

Some of the friends at her party had been in her life longer than any of us, her children. They had been part of each others lives through the birth of children, grandchildren, marriages, divorces and deaths. But they had also shared in joy and had tremendous fun.

Like many of us, my mother's family - her children, grandchildren and remaining siblings - are scattered around the country and even the world. The people who form part of her daily life are her friends.

We all need friends. In fact, research has shown that one of the greatest factors in promoting good emotional and physical health, is social support. If you have good family relationships and they are close by, they will provide a lot of that. But maybe you don't have them close, don't have any at all or they do not provide healthy support. Either way you still need friends.

Friendships are different to family relationships. Our expectations are usually different, they are usually less complicated and they add to what we get from family.

So why do we have friends? Of course part of it is to have fun. To have people to go out with, to do things with and to share experiences with. The other part of friendship is support – to be able to give and receive love and care. To feel connected.

Not everyone finds it easy to make friends. It may be that you are shy or simply don't know how. If you have grown up in a critical environment, you may have anxiety that anyone who gets to know you will see you as defective in some way or will find fault with you. You may feel the need to keep distant to feel safer within yourself.

*Let's look at how to make friends:-*

Most friendships start through opportunistic circumstances – you work with someone and get closer over time; you play a sport together; your children are friends and you get to know each other; you are part of some other group like a volunteer organization; you have mutual friends and are thrown together frequently.

In these situations you can get to know someone over time. The difference between a friend and an acquaintance is the depth of the connection. Friendship is more personal and you play a much wider role in each other's lives.

Friendship develops through increasing levels of disclosure about yourself and your life. Don't give it all at once – it scares people off if you tell them your life story and all the details in the first week. Get comfortable with each other slowly. Similarly if you never disclose anything or choose to portray a perfect life (is there such a thing?), you will never allow anyone to get close to you.

In new situations, talk to people. Be friendly. Introduce yourself. Find safe conversation in areas of common interest. Lighten up and learn to laugh.

Be a good listener. Show interest in people and find out about them. Don't dominate the conversation with details of yourself.

Don't initiate a friendship by gossip. This can be tempting if you know you both have a common foe. Rather base your developing friendship on enjoyment of each other's company.

Similarly try not to complain. It tends to put people off if they don't know you. There is a difference between sharing information about difficult things in your life with a close friend and complaining about life to an acquaintance who hardly knows you.

Initiate activities and take the risk of inviting new people to do things with you.

*Let's look now at how to be a good friend:-*

We don't make friends with people we don't trust. We don't stay friends with people we don't trust. So make sure you are a trustworthy friend.

Envy is common in all relationships. Recognize if you are envious of a friend before it gets destructive.

Be able to give and receive. There is no value in being a friend who can only give. Your friends need to feel as if they have something valuable to give you too. Similarly, be aware of being a high maintenance friend – someone who needs a lot – be it time, support, help - and does not reciprocate.

Be reliable. Don't be that friend who cancels or lets others down regularly.

Choose your friends wisely. If you feel someone is not good for you or compatible with your values or lifestyle, rather leave the friendship. Recognize destructive or toxic friendships and evaluate whether they add to your life or cause problems.

Finally, affirm your friends. Acknowledge them, remember significant days and let them know they matter.