

# **THE GIFT OF FRIENDS**

Friends come in all ages, shapes, colors, etc. We might have old friends, new friends, professional friends, dear friends, family friends, church friends, pool friends, neighborhood friends, animal friends or hobby friends. Friends are life giving. They reduce our stress level. They elevate our mood. They actually help us to sleep longer and deeper. Let's look at different friend categories to help us to see more clearly how to make and keep friends.

## **Old Friends**

Old friends are precious like old family treasures. They take us back to our roots. We may have kept alive our friendships from grade school, high school and college. If not, track down your old friends. Use Facebook. Telephone them. An old friend's voice and laughter soothes us.

## **Pool Friends**

We go to the pool most mornings. Some friendships develop due to frequency of contact. We go at the same time. We see and talk with the same people. We smile, laugh, share stories, discuss current events, and affirm one another. We open up to one another. Life giving! What is your equivalent of our pool friends?

## **New Friends**

Making new friends is not the easiest thing to do. Especially as we get older making new friends may be very challenging. We recently relocated to a retirement community. Lots of opportunities for new friends! We've made a list of their names and contact information. They give us new life, new excitement. Life giving. We have similar demographics so we match up well. We are doing our best to practice the old adage, "Smile and the world smiles back."

## **Dear Friends**

Dear friends move us into greater self-disclosure. We share ourselves more deeply. We reveal who we are in our inmost being. We admit feeling inadequate or stupid or inferior at times. Miraculously, our dear friends reciprocate. They tell us who they are. They share their hopes, joys, and struggles. We don't fear being rejected. We feel safe in their unconditional love and acceptance.

## **Animal Friends**

Our animal friends refresh and renew us. Moments of pure bliss and peace as Sadie, our son's family's Miniature Schnauzer sleeps on my lap. Schedules, pressure, stress all disappear. Our animal friends are endlessly therapeutic.

## **Family Friends**

Hopefully, family friends are also dear friends. Do we spend time with them? Do we call? Do we help each other? Maybe vacation together? We are particularly thin-skinned with family. We can so easily offend and emotionally wound one another. We also may find greater, more satisfying delight with one another than with non-family.

## **Professional Friends**

Professional friends, like all categories of friends, come with varying levels of closeness or intimacy. Our closest, most intimate professional friends meet monthly in our peer support group. We share our struggles disappointments, failures, and triumphs. We are close.

## **Church Friends**

Partly due to frequent geographic relocations (14 in 21 years), we have always stayed rooted in our church friends in each new location. Church people are generally welcoming. We joined committees. We worked projects. We supported one another. We connected. We were not alone.

## **Friendship Facts**

Social Science research reports that social isolation is growing in our country. The number of people who report that they have no one to talk with has doubled in the past thirty years. Even when living in close physical proximity, large numbers of people elect to shut themselves off from any meaningful human contact. A friend told me that he and his wife deliver meals on wheels to thirty houses one day each week and their visits are the only contacts for those thirty recipients. Most unfortunately, when we are unhappy for some reason, we tend to build walls instead of bridges.

While we know from frequently replicated research that friendships reduce our stress level, many people decline social interaction. A needed palliative is for each of us to identify neighbors in need and to initiate contact over and over again. We will surely benefit, probably more than those to whom we extend outreach.

Being a member of a small group (6 to 10) has immeasurable benefit. The small group could be a book club, a dinner group, Jungian, card club or faith sharing. The degree of benefit correlates with the depth of our openness and sharing. Our

friends calm us, exhilarate us, lift our moods, strengthen our psychoneuroimmune systems and enable us to rebound more quickly from surgeries and illnesses. A highly reported study of women with advanced breast cancer who attended weekly support groups lived twice as long as women who did not attend.

## **Final Thoughts**

Ideally, our spouse is our best friend. We can't afford to take a day off from renewing this friendship. It has to be rebuilt every day.

Men and women address friendship in different ways. Men tend to do things together while women enjoy simply being together. Men tend to do hidden or indirect intimacy while women excel in sharing their thoughts and feelings. Integrating these two polar opposites is wise.

In today's world, saturated with non-intimate technology connecting, if we don't initiate face-to-face time with others, we probably will not have many friends. To have a friend, we must be a friend. Also, remember to spend time with those whose eyes light up when they see us; their non-verbal speaks truth. Lastly, remember to saunter and lollygag, as friends require slowing down and just being with one another.

"Friends are like seashells ≈ no two are exactly alike, but each is a precious treasure!" Litha

*Dr. Jim David is a practicing psychotherapist in Silver Spring, MD. Visit his website at [www.askdrdavidnow.com](http://www.askdrdavidnow.com) or email at [jimsue63@gmail.com](mailto:jimsue63@gmail.com).*