

## Friendship: The Antidote to an Increasingly Lonely World

*"I get by with a little help from my friends"- The Beatles*

From pre-school, and all the way through adulthood, friendships play a significant role. Whether you have a thousand different friends or one friend, it is those relationships that uniquely shape who we are, and how we relate to others. With the exception of a spouse or significant other, friendships are the only relationships that aren't chosen for us. This alone makes it difficult to downplay their importance, because throughout our lives, we either seek to strengthen or cultivate the special brand of intimacy that friends can provide.

Friendships are often a respite for the many ups and downs of life, including strained communications and difficult dynamics with family. They often help us to feel accepted and valued, which is a key component to our overall health and well-being.

Of course, as life evolves, so does the way we connect with others. Even before this past year, with restrictions on face-to-face contact, we have become increasingly reliant on technology and its convenience as a means of connecting. The internet (including social media platforms) and technology in general can be an amazing tool. But even as it's shrunk the world and brought us closer together, it's threatened to push us further apart. If our personal interactions are substituted with more artificial connections behind a screen, we lose some of the much-needed aspects of communication, including physical touch and seeing/hearing a person's reactions in real time. While platforms like zoom can allow us to "see" our friends, it's not a suitable replacement for the face-to-face variety. If possible, finding a balance between technology and the real thing can help ensure that our connections are the most meaningful.

It's no surprise that those without meaningful friendships often report feeling lonely. According to a [national survey by Cigna](#), up to 61% of Americans report feelings of loneliness more days than not. A small amount of loneliness from time to time is normal and healthy (loneliness can be a motivator to spend more time cultivating friendships). However, according to the [American Psychological Association](#), the risks of pervasive social isolation is high, and can be associated with things like depression, sleep deprivation and cardiovascular disease.



Developing and maintaining strong friendships takes effort, but they're an essential component to a sense of fulfillment, providing a solid foundation to both our emotional and physical health. Aside from keeping loneliness at bay, friendships offer other important benefits:

- **Friendships contribute to our overall happiness-**

An estimated 70% of our happiness comes down to our relationships, and friendships provide us the opportunity to surround ourselves with those that increase our feelings of safety, security and well-being (especially if they're absent from our other relationships).

- **Friendships help us weather life's storms-**

Friends can listen, reassure and support us during difficult moments, providing us much needed strength during adversity.

- **Friendships give our confidence a boost-** The connection that occurs in long-lasting friendships comes from the sense of belonging we experience when we connect on a deeper level. Deeper connections provide us with confidence to engage in other meaningful connections throughout our lives.



As beneficial as friendships are, it's not unusual for them to take a backseat periodically. Between work and family responsibilities, people often find themselves overwhelmed with limited time to invest. But we don't have to sacrifice friendships to stay afloat. The important thing to remember is that friendships don't have to take up the majority of our time for us to benefit. Instead, think about quality over quantity. Shasta Nelson, author of *Friendtimacy: How to Deepen Friendships for Lifelong Health and Happiness*, suggests focusing on three important elements: positivity, consistency, and vulnerability.

- **Positivity-** Are we experiencing more positive emotions than negative in our friendships? If not, we should take steps to recognize why and make changes. Friendships, like all relationships, are not perfect, and do require effort. However, not all friendships are built to last a lifetime. Hold on to friendships where positivity reigns and consider letting go of those that take time without depositing anything positive in your emotional account.
- **Consistency-** How often are we engaging with those we care about? It's true that healthy relationships need consistent nurturing to flourish, however this doesn't have to usurp our other responsibilities. Try scheduling time to talk each week, setting up coffee dates, a walk, or anything that allows continued and reliable time to connect.
- **Vulnerability-** Making ourselves vulnerable with those we want to grow closest to is one of the most important factors in a meaningful connection. Vulnerability fosters security, comfort, trust and acceptance, all hallmarks of healthy connections.

Friendships play an integral role in mental and physical wellbeing. Although our priorities may shift from time to time, investing in friendships will yield far more benefits than we think.

**A few simple ways to combat loneliness if you're currently struggling:**

- **Find a cause you believe in-** Making a connection with others who share your passion can feel very natural, so find an online group of like-minded people. [Joining one of these mission-oriented groups](#) might be a good place to start.
- **Discover a new hobby or find a class-** One of the best places to meet new people is somewhere you'll already have shared interests. Extracurricular activities make it easy for you to find new friends. Choose a hobby you enjoy, then check your local area for clubs, lessons, and meet-ups.
- **Volunteer-** For some, it's hard to find people to spend time with, let alone connect with. One way to expand our network is by volunteering for a cause, either remotely or in your town. Working on an important problem with others can help you decrease loneliness.
- **Reach out to old friends-** Try calling an old friend that you haven't talked to in a while to reconnect. Some people love connecting people with others, so if you have anyone in your world that fits the bill, try reaching out to them as well. People often cultivate friendships with those they meet through other people.
- **Listen-** You don't have to be interesting. Instead, be interested. When connecting with old friends or seeking out new relationships, ask questions and take the time to find out what matters to people. Starting with the basics can make connecting on a deeper level easier.
- **Don't be a stranger-** When cultivating relationships, make it a point to check in every few weeks. The more we nurture budding friendships, the more likely they will continue to grow.

For resources and support, Ulliance can help by offering counseling and emotional help for strained relationships, setting goals for communication skills, or other helpful community resources.



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for you & your family.**

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