

friends – who needs them?

by Ed Dickerson

Caroline. Twenty-three, bright, attractive. Her job in Information Technology pays well, and affords her a nice car and a comfortable, spacious flat. She has everything she needs, except friends. If it weren't for George, her cat, she would have no one to confide in. Like millions of others, she's lonely. She wants friends, but doesn't know how to build friendships.



Five steps to building friendships

We need others to care about us, to question us, to keep us on our toes, to help us grow. Yet more and more of us live in quiet desperation, lacking human warmth. Every day, more bewildered people ask, 'How can I make friends?' Here are five proven steps to building healthy friendships.

1. Develop your own uniqueness.

Romantic love focuses on another person. Friendship, by contrast, focuses on shared interests. In time, growing friendships may blossom into admiration and respect for the person, but they start with a common enthusiasm. Rather than waiting, frustrated, for friends to materialise, spend time developing your own potential for friendship.

God made each of us unique, unrepeatable and incomparable. As we explore and develop this uniqueness, we become more interesting to others. In addition, the more we understand about ourselves, the more we have to share in a friendship. As we bring more and more of ourselves to the surface, others will be increasingly drawn to that reality.

Interested in antiques? Join a club, go to an antiques fair, find a dealer. Like to sing? Join a barbershop chorus, community choir or some other vocal group. Enjoy reading a good book? Many libraries have reading discussion groups. People who like to do the things you also enjoy are excellent candidates for friendship.

Many people, desperate for friends, want to bypass this step, but friendships work best when they're balanced. Each friend must bring some-thing to the common

table, must contribute to the relationship. Those who bring only neediness for friendship tend to attract others like themselves. Hardly the basis for a rewarding relationship.

Each of us has much to offer others. We need only take the time to discover it. Exploring this uniqueness makes us more contented, and less dependent on others for happiness. Paradoxically, this makes us better friendship candidates. The less we crave friendship, the more likely we are to find it.

2. Diversify your investments. We invest time and emotional energy in friendships. Wise financial managers advise investors to diversify their portfolios to limit risk. Caroline learned this the painful way. More than once, she has become deeply involved with one or two people, only to have them disappoint her in the end. With all her energy invested in just a couple of individuals, and without other friendships to cushion her disappointment, these broken relationships bring her nearly to despair.

As you get more experienced building relationships, your successes will increasingly outnumber the failures. Making many small investments allows you to acquire that experience at low emotional cost. On the other hand, starting one or two relationships, and investing deeply right away, makes you vulnerable to catastrophic loss. Better to have many good friends at first, rather than one or two deep ones. Deep relationships, perhaps

even love, will grow naturally with time. Diversifying your friendships helps you grow safely.

3. Look both ways. Watch to see that the relationship remains balanced, reciprocal. When you get together, does your friend continually talk about himself or herself, not letting you have equal time? At the opinions and judgements level, does the other party make dogmatic statements you disagree with only at the peril of suffering a long harangue? Does he or she unload feelings of disappointment and anger, but never have time to hear your feelings? Have you revealed your failings, but never heard your friend do likewise? This may happen to any relationship once in a while, but if it continues over time, beware.

Healthy relationships must be balanced. Any time you discover that a relationship has become seriously one-sided, you need to back up to a level that restores balance. If the relationship cannot be balanced, then you have two choices. Either end the relationship, or reduce your investment to a level where you can tolerate the emotional loss.

For any relationship to be healthy, each party must be willing to sacrifice the relationship to keep it healthy. When continuing the relationship becomes more important than keeping it balanced, it grows increasingly parasitic, manipulative, and destructive.

There's nothing amiss with having numerous relationships at level two or three (see sidebar). You may know someone who chatters on pleasantly about things you care about. It does no harm to enjoy that person's company so long as you don't risk more than that particular friendship can sustain. I've had golfing companions who had nothing more than level three to contribute to the relationship. We don't confide our deep concerns to each other, but that doesn't prevent us from sharing a pleasant time together. After a period of soul-searching, such companions can bring welcome relief. No matter how much we love to dive deep, everyone

The seven levels of friendship

Surface

Weather, time of day, general information. The kind of thing you might say to someone in a queue at the grocer's or the airport.

Facts and reports

More specific information, including personal, but not private information such as name, marital status, occupation, time of next bus, etc.

Opinions and judgements

What you think about a whole range of things from current events, sports, your favourite TV show – to religion, politics and morality.

Feelings

Your personal emotional status and reaction to various situations.

Vulnerability

Admitting your faults to another.

Intimacy

They can tell you about faults you do not see in yourself.

Complete

No need for boundaries or limitations. Total openness, total trust. NOTE: Rarely achieved, never sustained.

(source: Dr William H. Underwood)

