

Friends for Health - Forging Friendships for a Healthier 'You'!

By Elisabetta Franzoso

Friends add a wonderful dimension to our lives: they help us celebrate the good times and make it through tough times! Several hundreds of studies attest to the health benefits of friendship. People with plentiful social support have stronger immune systems and are less likely to suffer from depression, anxiety and other types of mental illness; they have been associated with lower levels of stress, increased longevity, and greater levels of happiness, success in family and at work.

Having friends can also mean differences in an individual's physical and biochemical reaction to environment stressors while mitigating the physiological consequences of unhealthy stress and anxiety and depression.

Psychology Today (1999) quotes research that proves that individuals in general and women in particular, underutilize the 'friendship factor' as a powerful healing force for physical and mental illness. According to the article, a group of chronically depressed women experienced substantial improvement in mental health when they were prescribed personal 'befrienders' who visited, went on outings with and became confidants of the participants over a 12 month period. The most successful group of women in the study experienced a deep sense of renewal in their personal and social lives that enabled them to move forward in more healthy ways through their journey of life.

There is also solid scientific evidence that friendship can extend life. Because friendships are grounded in communication, they provide a strong sense of personal support. Individuals who feel supported by their closed friends tend to live longer, stay healthier, are more confident and have a more positive outlook when faced with adversities.

People with strong social networks are generally shown to:

- ✓ Have stronger, more resilient immune systems.
- ✓ Improve their mental health.
- ✓ Boost their chances of surviving life-threatening illness.
- ✓ Live longer and more successfully than people without social support.

Research shows that healthy and supportive relationships can not only reduce stress but also energize you, improve your overall health and provide an inner sense of total well-being.

Poor communication skills, disagreements and misunderstandings can be a source of anger, bitterness and distance; while effective communication skills can become a springboard to stronger relationships and happier future. Here are some key communication tips that can help you to build relationships with people that are truly supportive and sustaining:

Stay in Focus: Sometimes it's tempting to bring up past seemingly related conflicts when dealing with current ones. Unfortunately, this often clouds the issue and makes finding mutual understanding and a solution to the current issue less likely, and makes the whole discussion more taxing and even confusing. Try not to bring up past hurts or other topics. Stay focused on the present, your feelings, understanding one another and finding a solution.

Listen Carefully to Your Friends: People often think they are listening, but they are actually thinking about what they are going to say next when the other person stops talking. Truly effective communication goes both ways. When dealing with friends, it's important to give as well as to receive support. While it might be difficult, try listening to what your friends are saying. Here are some basic habits to remember when you listen:



- ✓ Don't interrupt.
- ✓ Don't get defensive.
- ✓ Hear them and reflect on what they are saying so they know you have heard.
- ✓ Then you'll understand them better and they'll be more willing to listen to you.

Apply Assertiveness and Honesty: People often think of assertiveness as 'standing up for yourself' and 'not letting people push you around' – basically the alternative to passivity. While this is mostly true, assertiveness is also the alternative to aggressiveness, a way of handling people where you get your needs met at the expense of others' needs. Developing the skill of assertiveness can really help you strengthen your relationships, making them mutually supportive, lasting and opening and maintaining the lines of real and honest communication.

Listen to your 'inside' (Inner Self or intuition) Some people give off positive energy that makes us feel good, and others give off negative energy that drains us. If we pay deep attention to the signals that our 'insides' sends us and act on those signals, we'll have a healthier social circle for sure.

Here are some questions to ask to ourselves:

- Do I feel this friend is truly understanding, accepting and supporting me?
- Am I really able to understand, accept and support this friend?
- Do I feel energized, enriched or negative and drained about myself when I am with this friend?
- Do I leave my friend feeling energized or mildly depressed?
- Do I include this friend in my life for positive qualities and gifts he/she has, or just to have more people in my life and cover up my loneliness?

The answers to these questions may help you begin to develop the connection with your own 'insides' (Your innerself/ intuition), which will help you strengthen your relationships, help you with the next step...

Letting Go Keep in mind: Not everyone is an appropriate match. If there is someone in your life who makes you feel negative instead of uplifting you or doesn't share any of your interests or values, it is perfectly acceptable to let that relationship let fade altogether, or not develop it in the first place.

People change and grow over time. That does not mean there is something wrong with either of you. We change, we grow and it is perfectly acceptable to let go. If you like to keep them in your life out of loyalty, it is alright.

Only you will know if the relationship is worth keeping. It is important to have several people you can count on for support. Keep these tips in mind and you will create a world of positive outcome for your life, work and of course, health! **ehb**

*Elisabetta Franzoso is the author of **Stella's Mum Gets Her Groove Back – A True Story** and the Managing Director of **InsideOutYou Coaching & Training***

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