

Healthy Friendships

English poet John Donne wrote in one of his essays in the 17th century, “*No man is an island*”. Ever since, times have evolved, we have found AI (artificial intelligence) replacements for almost everything under the sun. But when it comes to healthy and meaningful relationships, AI clearly cannot suffice! British psychologist Professor Robin Dunbar writes, “*Friendship is the single most important thing affecting our psychological health and well-being.*” Which is why, even amidst our fast-paced lives, we need to create a safe space for relationships where friendships can be both cultivated and nurtured. Research studies by Berndt, 2004 and Hartup and Stevens, 1997 have shown that while early childhood friendships offer companionship and fun, adolescent friendships offer trust, intimacy, attachment and emotional support.

Some of the benefits of healthy friendships are:

- Boosts self-esteem and happiness
- Reduces feeling of loneliness
- Increases interpersonal skills
- Better coping
- Improves mood
- Promotes a sense of belonging
- Gives meaning and purpose to life
- Acts as a stress-buster or buffer
- Promotes greater well-being
- Acts as a support system

The famous Dutch psychologist and writer- Henri Nouwen has written some of the most soulful reflections on friendship that I have ever stumbled across, as a young teenager navigating the many crossroads of life, as I pondered over the sweet stinging reality of love and friendship. The lines read- *“Every time we make the decision to love someone, we open ourselves to great suffering, because those we most love cause us not only great joy but also great pain. The greatest pain comes from leaving. When the child leaves home, when the husband or wife leaves for a long period of time or for good, when the beloved friend departs to another country or dies...the pain of the leaving can tear us apart. Still, if we want to avoid the suffering of leaving, we will never experience the joy of loving. And love is stronger than death, hope is stronger than despair. We have to trust that the risk of loving is always worth taking.”*

As a counselling psychologist, I meet scores of young people daily with a similar dilemma as they survive heartbreaks and deaths, separations and betrayals, misunderstandings and silences. One would be surprised to see youngsters who were once willing to wear their heart on their sleeve, years later- cold and distrusting. *“Is this the price we pay for friendship?”* one would ask. It is true. It takes courage to be vulnerable. *“Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability and authenticity.”* says Dr. Brene Brown- American research professor, University of Houston and world renowned speaker popularly known for her 2010 TEDx talk on “The Power of Vulnerability”. To be vulnerable is a choice. And just as choices can be good or bad, healthy or unhealthy, who we choose to be vulnerable with is a decision with consequences. Because trust, which is the very essence of friendship, is a two way street. As much it is about one’s ability to trust, so much it is also about the other person’s ability to be trustworthy. It is, in fact, sad to see how casually some people

can play at friendship. Which is why, it is always advised to watch out for red flags quite early on, both in love and friendship. A true friend is a precious treasure. Genuine love and friendship is perhaps the most beautiful experience one could ever fathom, which is why I strongly believe that it is time to encourage young people to cultivate authentic and meaningful friendships and move from a culture of narcissism to a culture of inclusivity and shared humanity which thrives on building each other up, instead of tearing each other down.

Hallmark of a good friend:

- Good listener
- Integrity
- Supportive
- Good communication
- Mutually reciprocal give and take
- Respects boundaries
- Trustworthy
- Dependable
- Loyal
- Empathetic
- Non-judgemental
- Feels good
- Mutual respect
- Kind and forgiving
- Ability to resolve conflicts
- Caring and nurturing

While cultivating new friendships can be relatively easier, it is the maintaining of friendships which can prove to be even more challenging, especially in situations where one may have to go out of their way for the friend. This is where friendships often feel stretched. Yet, there is something truly special about friendships that have been tried and tested through trying situations. It is during these times, one truly understands- who is a keeper and who is not. In fact, research by Turner and Brown, 2010 has shown that social support instils resilience by buffering reactions to life stress. And friendships that manage to survive the many tests of life, eventually tend to last longer than would otherwise, as these friendships share a deeper level of trust and intimacy generating a greater sense of mutual care and commitment.

Carey Lohrenz once rightly said, *“Most people don’t want to be part of the process, they just want to be part of the outcome. But in the process is where you figure out who’s worth being part of the outcome.”* And this quote truly captures the heart of true friendship. We seek friends who will show up not only when we’re high and successful, but also journey with us through the grind and hustle to turn it into a reality. Studies by Hartup and Stevens, 1997 have proven that reciprocal friendships can supply cognitive and affective resources, foster a sense of well-being, socialize both parties, facilitate mastery of age-related tasks and provide developmental advantages that can extend into old age.

To sum it up, true friendship is such an essential part of human existence which when present often goes unnoticed or taken for granted. And then, one fine day when it is no longer there you realise it’s worth. Life is short and tomorrow is not promised. So, let’s celebrate our family, friends and well-wishers while they are still around. Show up and be available when they need us. Embrace the good memories and forgive where possible. Draw healthy boundaries when and where required, lend a

helping hand in need. And last of all, remember that “*no man is an island.*” We need each other.

-Anu John

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