A friend, indeed: friendship as a source of solace and support

Most people are aware that proper nutrition, exercise, and relaxation techniques can reduce stress, but did you know that friendship is just as important? Statistics show that people who enjoy healthy relationships suffer fewer incidences of cancer, stroke, heart disease, and circulatory disorders. They also live longer. It is believed that social support, such as that found through friendship, helps to reduce the negative impact of the physiological damage that can occur as a result of long-term stress.

The good news is that there are skills and strategies you can use that will improve the quality of your relationships, just as proper exercise and balanced nutrition improve the quality of your physical health.

You Feel The Way You Look

All of us are aware that the way we feel shows on our face and in our body language. When we are happy, we smile and walk tall. When we are sad, we frown and drag ourselves through the day. The signals we send through our body language - whether we realize it or not - are strong determinants of the types of connections we make in our lives. The first step in reaching out to make a friend is to project a confident, happy attitude.

Your Support Network

The people you are close to make up what scientists call your ‘social support network.’ Different people in your network satisfy different needs. Usually their contributions fall into one of four categories:

- Advice or information
- Material help
- Emotional support
- Companionship

Building and maintaining a social support network requires that you understand your own values - what's important in your life. Members of a positive support group should share, or at least not contradict, those values.

When a member of your group does something you consider wrong, ask yourself: "*Is what my friend did truly wrong - a violation of both his or her values and mine - or just different from the way I would have handled it?*"

Friends don't have to hold beliefs identical to yours; people often "agree to disagree" or compromise. But a positive, nurturing group of friends will usually have implicit norms that promote and support all three of the following:

- Caring
- Communication
- Stress management

In more formal settings, such as self-help groups convened around a specific issue, group norms are explicit, and will govern the behaviour of the members. A caring group shows concern for someone when he or she is upset. A group with strong communication norms will let its members know how much they are appreciated. And a group with good stress management norms sets priorities, focuses their efforts, and handles stress in a relaxed and constructive way. If you are considering joining a formal group, you might consider asking about their 'group norms' to determine if it's in line with your own values.

Building a Support Network

Perhaps you're new in town or have just started a new job and do not have a support network. How do you "reach out?" Here are some suggestions:

- Give the gift of time and attention. Everyone appreciates a friendly ear.
- Plan special meals. Invite neighbours or co-workers who live alone.
- Get a pet. Walking a pet is a great way to get out into the neighbourhood and meet people.
- Join a club or activity group that interests you.
- Become a volunteer for an organization in need.

The family is the original support group, yet often we fail to communicate effectively with our loved ones. Here are a few tips:

- Be there. Spend time with your family.
- Make time. Set aside a special period each day to relax and talk.
- Show interest. Listen and give support to what your kids and spouse tell you.
- Reserve judgment. As long as they're not hurting themselves, perhaps you don't have to approve of your kids' music, fashions or hairstyles.
- Do things together. Share common interests, both working and playing.
- Show respect. All family members are individuals with their own views and tastes.

Be a Good Friend

Being a good friend is important both within the family circle and outside the home. If you treat someone well, you're more likely to be treated well in return. Here are eight simple guidelines a good friend should observe:

- Keep your word, even about things that seem unimportant. What is trivial to you may mean a lot to someone else.
- Allow others to shine. When it's someone else's turn in the spotlight, stand up and cheer, but don't butt in.
- Listen when your friends speak. Really listen. Try to give them what they need, whether it is advice, help or comfort (and listen to what they say, when the role is reversed and you have requested their help).
- Be honest, but show tact. Offer criticism only when you are asked.
- Let others have the last word. Maybe you can top their story, but save it for another time.
- Limit gripes and gossip to five minutes or less per session. And always try to end on an upbeat note.
- Don't make jokes at the expense of others - even if they aren't part of your group.
- Don't keep score about who owes whom the most favours. A good friend enjoys helping just for the sake of being helpful.

Giving Feedback

Giving a friend feedback can sometimes be the hardest thing to do. Often people will choose not to say what's on their mind for fear of hurting or angering their friend. Being able to give feedback is a skill that can be learned and practiced. This skill will improve your relationships.

Let your friend know how their actions are making you feel rather than criticizing their actions. For example, "*Fred, when you arrive late for our lunch dates, I feel very frustrated, and I imagine you do not respect the fact that I am busy and have a tight schedule.*"

Although this information may be difficult to receive, it is much less difficult than being criticized for being an irresponsible or disrespectful person and so on…and so on.

Being personally attacked closes off communication. Hopefully, by taking ownership of how we are feeling, communication will remain open and some problem solving can be done. As the above example points to Fred's lateness problem, perhaps a difference could be made, simply by changing the meeting time.

Even if our friend does not act on the information, at least we can feel better, having got these feelings out in the open.

Like anything else, establishing healthy relationships requires work. It also calls for decided action. Even with the best of intentions, it's sometimes tempting just to let things run their course. The key to successful relationships lies in taking charge.