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**How To  
Break Up  
with Your  
Friends**

**Finding Meaning,  
Connection, and  
Boundaries in  
Modern Friendships**

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## CHAPTER 1

# Actually, You *Are* Here to Make Friends

*The best time to make friends is before you need them.*

ETHEL BARRYMORE

**F**riendships have always been essential to human survival and evolution. Of course, without some form of family unit, humans would not have continued as a species, but without social connection outside the family, we couldn't have evolved the sophisticated societies many of us live in now. Family and romantic relationships get most of the attention when it comes to analysis, study, observation, and support. And yet, unless you're in a reality show about you and your seventeen siblings, you almost surely have more friends than you do partners or immediate family. Perhaps the number and variety of our friends make friendship trickier to track.

Our very design makes us crave human contact. Belonging to a group improved humans' chances of survival. Ancient

humans would groom each other (parents still groom their children) and receive an encouraging endorphin hit from that connectivity. Our bodies and brains were telling us, before we could consciously understand, that being with others is supposed to feel good and safe. As we evolved from small, nomadic hunter/gatherer groups to larger agrarian villages and then more permanent industrial societies, our bodies and brains continued to deliver that endorphin high from maintaining human connection. We feel well and happy when we have friends. Robin Dunbar of the University of Oxford is well known for his study of friendships. He posits that as we evolved from our ancient ancestors, we developed language and gossip as a much more scalable way to connect than actual touch. He says, “In the course of our human evolution, as we’ve been trying to evolve bigger and bigger groups to cope with the challenges the world has thrown at us, we needed some additional mechanism to allow us to break through what was essentially a glass ceiling.” Gossip allows humans to “groom” several people simultaneously. It also helps us succeed in life, through collaboration and negotiation.

What’s more, friends and close relationships can make a life worth living. More than just helping us survive, as we’ll see below, friends have the power to help create meaning in our lives. When asked about the meaning of life in *The Meaning of Life: Reflections in Words and Pictures on Why We Are Here* (produced by *Life Magazine*) Pulitzer Prize-winning author Annie Dillard said:

We are here to witness the creation and abet it. We are here to notice each thing so each thing gets noticed. Together we notice not only each mountain shadow and each stone on the beach but, especially, we notice the beautiful faces and complex natures of each other. We are here to bring to consciousness the beauty and

power that are around us and to praise the people who are here with us. We witness our generation and our times. We watch the weather. Otherwise, creation would be playing to an empty house.

## **Friends Make You Healthy**

There are few ways that friends *don't* add to your health.

In a 2016 review of several studies, Yang Claire Yang, a sociologist at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill, found that the higher degree of social integration people had, the lower their risk of negative health outcomes.

A late 1990s study conducted by Sheldon Cohen looked at the effect a large and diverse social circle had on the chances of a person catching a cold. More than two hundred healthy people were given a dose of rhinovirus. The larger and more diverse people's social network was, the less susceptible they were to the common cold, and the less virus they shed.

A large-scale Swedish study found that people with the fewest social connections were at a 50 percent increased risk of dying of cardiovascular disease. And should you get heart disease, friends help you recover. In a study by the *Journal of the American Heart Association*, patients with solid social support had better outcomes as well as fewer symptoms of depression.

To put it another way, your social connectedness has as much or more effect on your health and longevity as smoking cigarettes. Vivek Murthy, Surgeon General in Barack Obama's administration, recently published *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World*. He wants us to look at loneliness in the same way we do hunger or thirst; it's a helpful sign that we need to address a problem. He writes, "The body's response from loneliness can be very helpful in the short term. But when those stress states become chronic, they

begin destroying the body.” And yes, the effects can be as negative as those of obesity or smoking.

## **Friends Make You Live Longer and Better**

Neuroscientist Emily Rogalski leads a super-ager study at Northwestern University in Chicago. A super ager is defined as someone aged eighty years or older whose cognitive function is comparable to a person of middle age. This cohort remains physically and intellectually active. Rogalski finds that they are socially active as well. Strong social connections are believed to protect the brain in later life. Super agers have thicker cortices, are resistant to age-related atrophy, and have a larger left anterior cingulate—the part of the brain important to working memory and attention. “Different neurotransmitters are released when we feel compassion, empathy, love, and friendship,” says Rogalski. Many of the people participating in Rogalski’s study report having warm and trusted friendships.

Dean Ornish, who has studied the habits of people living in blue zones—geographical areas in which people have low levels of chronic disease and live longer than anywhere else in the world—says, “The time we spend with loved ones is the single most important determinant in how long and how well we live.”

This is particularly important for women, considering that we typically live six to eight years longer than men.

## **The Loneliness Epidemic**

Back when I was running two companies, LEAFtv and my *Pick The Brain* blog, I had little free time. I felt like I was running around all day producing content for LEAF and then would get home to burn the midnight oil with *Pick The Brain*. A big part of my business with LEAF was networking, and so on nights that I wasn’t home, I was often out at a work event. Needless to say, I was exhausted.

Without thinking about it, I would easily cancel plans with friends or be relieved when they canceled with me, feeling that these kinds of meetings were superfluous or more “nice to have” as opposed to necessary. I felt like meeting up with a friend would make me more tired and throw a kink in the following day rather than potentially provide me more energy. What’s more, because I was always using work as an excuse to get out of things, that is what became the primary focus of my conversations with friends. So even when we did manage to hang out, what was making me so tired would inevitably dominate the conversation. When I look back on this time of my life now, I feel like if I hadn’t been so quick to axe those moments with friends, it could have really helped stave off my impending burn-out and my growing sense of loneliness, despite having my days and nights filled to the brim.

Even with all the evidence of how much good friendships do for us, we still see them as a kind of luxury. If you’ve got an intense month ahead of you—a course to complete, a major deadline, a wedding to plan—it’s likely that the first appointment to get deleted from your calendar is that happy hour with your girls. It just doesn’t seem necessary when held up against professional pressure or family obligations. So, we cancel the coffee chats, the weekend hangs, and catch-up calls because it just feels like one more thing to get done. But we’re paying a price for it.

According to a recent study by Cigna, a global health service company, nearly half of Americans feel alone, and two out of five Americans feel that their relationships are not meaningful. These numbers are higher than they were just a year ago. We’re lonely.

Shasta Nelson, author of *The Business of Friendship: Making the Most of Our Relationships Where We Spend Most of Our Time*, says, “At the core of loneliness is that we don’t feel like anyone knows us. You can even have a

lot of close friends, but if none of your friends know what it's like to be you, you can feel lonely in an experience. Loneliness is not feeling seen and supported.”

One of the key factors in feeling connected to friends is vulnerability. In order to call someone a good friend, you have to be willing to show your imperfections as well as accept theirs. In the era of social media, this is particularly important. Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok have a way of encouraging us to edit our lives. You want to upload a great shot from your holiday, when you were feeling rested and relaxed. You share a snap of your kid when her face is clean and her hair is brushed. You write a post about a big win at work. Of course, it's fun to share life's upsides. The effect, however, is that the way we represent ourselves is like an eclipse—we show only the shiny sliver, not the whole, messy truth of our lives. You might have hundreds of friends on social media, but the way we use those platforms is the opposite of intimacy. In my experience, even when moments shared on social media are less than perfect, too often these also feel like curated messages of messiness rather than the real deal. As a result, I feel like the pseudo-shares of intimacy are almost more misleading.

Murthy says that loneliness is deeply consequential. He has studied the far-ranging effects of social isolation. In speaking to people across the United States, Murthy was struck by the pervasiveness of loneliness and by the shame that surrounded it. He says, “I think part of the reason is that saying you're lonely feels like saying you're not likeable, you're not lovable—that somehow you're socially deficient in some way. The reality is that loneliness is a natural signal that our body gives us, similar to hunger, thirst. And that's how important human connection is.” Responding to a feeling of loneliness by seeking connection is a healthy, human process. If we ignore it, we risk chronic stress and all the negative physical and emotional effects that come with it.



The importance of friendship to health is so great that many doctors and scientists are beginning to look at it from a public health lens. Just as a healthy diet and exercise have become more mainstream recommendations from doctors, it's likely that soon doctors will be prescribing socializing to their patients at their checkups.

## **Friendly Neighborhood Stress Busters**

Five years ago, most of the queries I received via *Pick The Brain* were all about time management and productivity: *How can I get more done?* (hence my first book). But in the past couple of years, my inbox and comments have been dominated by questions such as: *How do I reduce anxiety?* *How can I feel less stressed?* In my experience, there has been a major shift toward impending burnout, fear, and stress. As we frantically search for answers, my belief is that at least some of the answers are often right in front of us. *Friends reduce our stress levels.* And diminishing stress is enormously beneficial to your overall health. Stress is associated with negative health outcomes in myriad ways, from your gums to your heart, and can make you more susceptible to everything from the common cold to cancer and diabetes, according to a review essay in the Association for Psychological Science's magazine, *Observer*, in 2007.

Here's how it works. In moments of stress, your body releases hormones—adrenaline, cortisol, and norepinephrine—that boost your heart rate, increase respiration, and increase the availability of glucose in the blood, all to enable the fight-or-flight response. In a moment of sudden danger, you'll be able to sprint away or flip a car off of your child. But this response requires a lot of energy from your body. To compensate, other physical processes, such as digestion, reproduction, physical growth, and some aspects of immunity slow or shut down. When stressful events are infrequent or pass quickly, the body resumes its equilibrium. Chronic exposure to those

stress hormones affects normal function in your body and can result in sleep problems, heart disease, headaches, weight gain, memory and concentration impairment, depression, and anxiety. Traumatic events in early childhood can lead to some people becoming more sensitive and easily triggered by stress. It's as if each of us has a stress set point, unless of course we actively try to change it.

In some respects, the evolutionary journey to the modern world might be the very reason we experience so much stress. Stanford neuroendocrinologist Robert Sapolsky has studied stress in baboon troops and found that safety and increased leisure time in primates—including humans—transforms the useful fight-or-flight mechanism into pointless suffering and illness. Most of us are lucky enough to live our day-to-day lives without the threat of physical danger. We have evolved from avoiding saber-toothed tigers, but our stress response remains the same. The modern-day tiger is a mean boss, a whiny child, or an argumentative partner. And you don't just experience stress when your boss snaps at you; you get to relive that unpleasant encounter—and the stress—as many times as you choose to ruminate on it.

When you're feeling either intense or chronic stress, you might not feel fit for company. But times of challenge are when friends can help the most. A 1990 study of female college students asked them to complete a challenging math test. When they took the test on their own, their heart rates went up. When they were allowed to take the test with a friend? You know the result, right? The presence of a friend calms us down. Lindzi Scharf, an entertainment reporter, wrote movingly in the *Los Angeles Times* about needing to lean on friends after learning her newborn daughter, Evan, had a rare and incurable disease. "We spent time with family and friends, who may not have understood what we were going through but stood by us so we felt a little less alone. My husband and I carved out self-care as best we

could. In my husband's case it was CrossFit; I turned to writing and having coffee with girlfriends."

I reached out to Scharf to ask her more about her experience. Her daughter's health needs are significant, and it must be hard not to be swamped by them. She's quick to give friends the latest on Evan. "I want people in my life to really know what's going on, but I also think it's important to have other conversations. Literally, I always say, 'Please tell me about anything else. I don't want to talk about mitochondrial disorder anymore!'"

## **Friends and Habits**

The Framingham Heart Study has been following the residents of the city of Framingham, Massachusetts, since 1948, looking at hypertension and cardiovascular health. Much of what is known about heart disease and the effects of diet and exercise is based on it. The finding that hadn't been predicted was the way health, for better or worse, could be contagious. The researchers have found that one person in a community becoming obese raised the chances of their friends becoming obese by 57 percent. But the reverse is also true. If your friends eat a healthy diet and regularly exercise, you are more likely to follow suit.

Suzanne Higgs, a professor in psychobiology of appetite at the University of Birmingham, found that the presence of friends actually diminished people's ability to recognize their bodies' own cues, such as feeling full. We tend to eat like the people we eat with. This impulse to do as others do can be manipulated for good. In another study, Higgs placed posters in a cafeteria showing which side dishes were most popular. When a vegetable dish was listed at the top, more of that dish was ordered. Particularly when you're new to a situation, you'll be looking for cues about how to behave. Even when the posters were removed, the behavior remained. A new norm had been established.

You can bolster your goals by making conscious decisions about what kind of people you spend time with. I know it sounds a little ruthless, but that marathon training is going to feel so much more torturous if all your pals are partying like rock stars every night.

## **Friends Help You Grow**

Every friendship is its own jigsaw puzzle. The way you fit together with one friend might look radically different from the way you fit with another. There's that pal who's up for anything and makes any social event the best night ever. A different friend is the one you call when you suspect you've screwed up royally because you know she'll give it to you straight. There's your cheerleader, whom you absolutely need to see before you head into a nerve-racking presentation. And it's possible that you are all three of those types of people for other friends. Our personalities are relational—friends bring out different aspects of our characters. When we have close and caring relationships with people, it gives us an opportunity to see the world through their eyes, thus growing our empathy and compassion. Having a diverse group of friends allows you to grow in a way that having a small and homogeneous social group cannot.

I Zoomed with an old colleague I've been friendly with over the years, Elise Loehnen, author and podcast host, about how she continues to be shaped by her relationship with her best friend, Sarah. She says, "I met my friend Sarah at boarding school. I was new, and she sought me out. It's not that she's not capable of having hard days, but she's a really bright light. Now we both live on the west-side of L.A. That offers a lot of relief to me and a place to be myself without judgment. She pulls me toward positivity. Even in high school—not that we didn't kvetch and moan—but she'd always say, 'But isn't it kind of fun?'"