

Healthy Happenings:

Welcome to the first volume of Healthy Happenings! The articles in this EZINE will focus on how to identify, form and nurture healthy relationships in all areas of your life. Various types of relationships will be discussed, such as friendships, family, romantic partnerships, co-worker and community relationships. I hope that the articles will provide new insights into your relationships and provide new avenues for meaningful and healthy connections with others.

VOLUME I. HEALTHY FRIENDSHIPS: WHAT DO WE VALUE IN OUR FRIENDSHIPS?



People thrive and develop in connection with their social environment. Children, as young as pre-school age, can tell you who their friends are, elementary age children begin to claim certain peers as a “best friend”, teens define their identity by who their friends are and are not, and adults seek out friends for supportive ties.

Most of us can remember a time during childhood when someone was unkind to us, bullied us, or hurt our feelings. We can also remember random and simple acts of kindness from others

during our childhood years. Perhaps someone asked you to play with them when you were new in town-or maybe someone asked you to sit next to them in the cafeteria when you had no one to eat with. Teachers focused on teaching the “Golden Rule” and instructed us on sharing, listening and taking turns. Depending on where you went to school, you may have been taught about tolerance of those who were different-perhaps to be kind to children with a disability, or to be accepting of people from different cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds.

We have had “informal training” on friendships since our earliest experiences of social interaction, so we should be experts on choosing and maintaining healthy friendships in our adult lives, right? Not always. Somewhere along the way-when we graduated from “playground politics” adults may have accumulated busy schedules, a list of priorities, competition for economic success, family responsibilities and a thirst for a purpose in life. We no longer have a teacher or parent coaching us on sharing, respect, or the golden rule. The hope is that by the time we reach adulthood, we are able to incorporate these childhood lessons into our personal lives-including our friendships.

Human Behavior specialists claim that young adults in their mid twenties (post traditional college age) are at risk for loneliness and depression (Berk, 2006). One may ask how a young adult living in a culture that places worth on youth and beauty could be depressed. Research indicates that some people have a hard time initiating friendships in a less structured environment. College students still follow an academic calendar, have organized classes, vacations, social activities, etc. and when that chapter ends-it can be difficult for them to know how to initiate and regulate friendships.

Adults are consistently learning how to manage family relationships, parenting skills, work responsibilities, etc. Adults can feel isolated when they think others cannot relate to their lifestyle. For example, a new mother may isolate herself if she is the first in her social circle to have a child, feeling that she may not be viewed as “fun” anymore. An adult who is recently divorced or separated may view his/her identity as having more “couples friends” than single friends and feel disconnected. A recent college graduate may feel intimidated by her first group of older co-workers and fear that she will be viewed as an incompetent employee. On a positive note, adults also become more grounded about their value systems, what is truly important, what our political values are, what kind of social problems we are concerned with, etc. We begin to seek out friends who share similar values and who can relate to where we are in our lives. Adult friendships can be a strong form of “kinship” that enhances our quality of life.

I am reminded of a personal experience with adult friends-my 20th high school class reunion. I was not sure what to expect. I was approaching forty, had survived a disconcerting divorce and felt pretty confident about my career. I was a little anxious, not about the normal things like what my outfit looked like or that I had gained a few pounds - but I was not sure how the group dynamic would play out and what my role in it would be. As a therapist, it is in my nature to assess the strengths of people and to help others feel at ease, yet I had not seen some of my peers in 20 years. I wondered... Should I focus on talking to everyone in the room, just talk to the people I liked, or those that share my political and social interests, perhaps I need to mend fences with anyone I may have hurt? I had no idea where to start. To my surprise, something special happened on the first night of the reunion that is difficult to quantify. I am not sure if it was our age, the fact the reunion was held in a bar the first night, or if we were just a really laid back class (from Kent, Ohio no doubt), but the energy in the room was inviting. It seemed that people were embracing the moment, and not worrying about pretentious issues such as physical appearance or social status, instead there was more of a motivation to care about others. Women seemed comfortable in their own skin - joking about physical changes and some of the men joked about losing their hair. There were times that people showed empathy toward others about challenges with their children, divorce and their hopes and dreams. Others celebrated engagements, pregnancies, and personal success stories. The reunion was more enjoyable than I would have imagined.

When you think about your personal relationships, friends and social situations, what kind of people and social situations are meaningful for you? Upon reflection of my 20th high school reunion, I pondered what it was about that first evening that nurtured a warm environment among old friends-and what made the experience significant to me. I believe it was a mix of ingredients...I was confident in my own skin-as were the other attendees, the group embraced an attitude of acceptance and tolerance, and the participants appeared motivated as a group to make the experience a joyous occasion. The event was positive for me because tolerance of others, positive communication and joyfulness were all displayed that evening-and these are human qualities that I value.



Perhaps you can reflect on the following points to assess values about your friendships...

- Who can you be most comfortable with in your social circle? Who can you truly be genuine with? (Meaning, not performing, asking for help, showing vulnerability, etc.)
- Who do you feel the most joy around and why? Are you most happy around friends of the family, childhood friends, people who share your beliefs and values?
- Do you have an open or closed view about new friendships? Do you only invite people into your social circle who have the same educational, economic, or social status as you? Are you open to learning from other people who may be different?
- If you had to construct the ideal friend, what would he/she be like? Would the friend be a good listener, make you laugh, share common interests, show unconditional support when you needed it, or perhaps have a non-judgmental attitude?
- Are you growing and evolving in your friendship circle, or are you in a friendship time warp-only maintaining friendships with people from high school or college?
- Do you feel balanced in your friendships? Do you have democratic relationships-a fair give and take with your friends? Are you demanding too much of others without giving back?

After answering some of these questions, it may be wise to assess the following: Are you aware of what you value in friendships? Do your current friendships bring you more joy or discomfort? Do you have friendships with whom you can be genuine and “let you hair down”? Do you need to add more diversity to your friendship circle-and if so, think about what might be holding you back from doing so. The wonderful thing about being an adult is that we have the power in our lives to make choices about the friendships we form and maintain!