

## Levels of Friendship

It is important to have a clear understanding of the levels of friendship, which involve specific freedoms and responsibilities, depending on the closeness of the relationship. Levels of friendship could be categorized as (1) strangers, (2) acquaintances, (3) casual friends, (4) close friends (5) best/intimate friends and (6) self-intimacy.

### Strangers

These are people you begin to share information with on a superficial level. This might be someone you greet in your regular places such as work, the gym, or market. A stranger might be someone who “makes” eye contact with you, or someone who has been introduced to you for the first time by another person. You would begin to speak to a stranger in general terms that reveals very little, if any personal information. Topics might be the weather, current events, or what town or city they live in. If you both respond positively to the “initial” conversation, you might consider participating in some activities that stranger might do. If things go well, you would advance to the next circle: casual acquaintances.

Things strangers might do: Attend activities and events together such as volunteer work; agree to meet up at the gym or movie; meet at a coffee shop to get to know each other better; meet to engage in a sport like running, kayaking, or skateboarding. They might meet at the mall to do some shopping together. It can be any activity that can take place in a public setting that will allow you to get to know the person better.

### Acquaintance

You still do not know each other well enough to share personal information. If it feels comfortable or “right”, you might ease into sharing some feelings and thoughts but only “positive” ones about non-controversial topics. You’re there to have fun, share a task or coffee together and you should keep conversation light and friendly. This stage is all about getting to know one another better, but not divulging a lot of personal information or intimate details

Things casual acquaintances might do: Attend some of the activities you would if they person were a stranger. At this point it is OK to take some risks to see if you both have things in common such as likes and dislikes, all while using caution, as you still do not know the person very well. You want to make sure they are genuine, and that you have enough in common to consider making this acquaintance a casual friend

Learn and remember their name and greet them by name during your next encounter. Be prepared to ask general questions that will provide “public” information. For example, you might ask a person, “Where do you work?” or “Where did you find that handbag?” Your questions will demonstrate your acceptance and sincere interest.

Questions can be like arrows: Take a question out of your bag and guide it to its destination. Carefully assess the person’s reaction and response to the question to

determine if you are at the right level. If you miss the target, that is, if your question causes a change in demeanor or tone in the other person, a shift in body position, loss of eye contact, deflection to a different subject or it does not help you get to know the person better, take another question out of your bag and try again. When you are prepared to ask good questions, you are free to concentrate on what the other person says and then use additional questions to maintain the conversation. Be a good listener as your new acquaintance responds to your questions.

Regard each introduction to a new acquaintance as a gift honoring that they may have been placed in your path for a specific reason and this may be a new journey.

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### Casual Friendship

A casual friendship can develop quickly, even during your initial contact with an individual but is a stage that should be allowed to ferment and grow for an extended time. As you discover common interests, activities, and concerns, you may be given freedom to ask more personal questions. For example, you could ask questions about goals, wishes, or opinions.

As your casual friendship develops, it is important to discover your friend's strengths and praise them for positive character traits that you observe. A good friendship will build character in both your lives so also be careful that they bring out your best self. Many people are not 'bad' people but bring out things you do not like in yourself. Be honest about yourself and acknowledge your own weaknesses when appropriate. There is a level of formality at this stage and your deep intimate self should remain cautiously tucked away. This is a learning stage and people, including you, can maintain a façade for quite some time. Be a trustworthy friend and a great time to practice your listening, manners, class, and boundaries. Learn about their hopes and goals in life; show interest and sincere concern if they share problems with you.

You feel secure enough when you are in the other person's company to be more spontaneous, laugh, giggle, tease, and share stories and life experiences with each other. It's OK to discuss negative things as long as you spend more time talking about positive ones and leave on an upbeat, emotionally supportive role. If all goes well (give it a couple of months or even a year or more, if needed), you would advance to the next circle: deep friendship.

Things casual friends might do: Spend regular face-to-face time (~ once every two weeks). Be willing to share personal information and gain personal information about

the other person. Be willing to support each other's needs while really getting to know their likes, dislikes, philosophies, and character traits.

Scientifically, this stage is one where you think you really like this person, excited to see them and seem to be charmed by everything about them. They have faults but it doesn't matter and the good outweighs the bad at this point. Their quirks can be cute and interesting. In this early stage, brain mapping will show a decrease in activity in the prefrontal cortex, which is the part of the brain that has to do with negative judgment of people. It is shown that if this stage can last from 6 months to over 2 years and if it can remain for 3 years or more, the better chance this person has of becoming a long-term close or intimate friend.

It is here where we can mention that there are two other important "friend" categories: romantic friends and romantic lovers. Romantic friends are casual friends as above but... you both need to be willing and able to give and receive physical gestures (e.g., hold hands, hug, or kiss). Romantic lovers can also be casual friends: Ensure that you have discussed sex with your romantic friend and that this is a choice both of you want to make. A romantic friend or lover may or may not ever advance into a close friend.

### Close Friendship

A casual friendship involves oneness of the mind, will, and emotions. It is also the stage where a friendship will be tested by things like differences of opinion or miscommunication.

Close friendships take time and will need continual commitment and work. You might think that the way to get one special friend in your life is to focus on a particular friendship first. But the best way to foster close friendship is to have a variety of friends in your life. You'll meet different people and do a wider range of activities, and this may change who you think your best friend should be. With a bigger social circle, you'll also have more people around for different moments in your life. This will put less pressure on a new friendship because you'll have plenty of others around when you want to chat, hang out, etc.

What does a close friendship look like? A close friend is someone who mutually gives you encouragement before you need it (because they actually listen and know you), is fun to be with (because they know what makes you happy), makes time for your friendship (not just when they want something), are honest (yet gentle because they care about you), and are always respectful with healthy boundaries.

It is important to understand your own desire for a close friend. Before you can connect with the right friend for you, you'll need to determine what it is you expect from a close friend. Do you want them to be emotionally supportive? Available to do things with you at a moment's notice? Figuring out what you're looking for in a close friendship will help you spot those qualities once you see them in another person allowing a mutual friendship to form.

At the deepest levels, these relationships could be called best friends and are based on a commitment to generously invest in one another's lives with the goal of helping each other grow and mature. Honesty, humility, and discretion are requirements of an intimate friendship. These friends are true comforts to one another through trials and sorrows; true encouragers who know the extent of personal trials, have freedom to correct one another and point out each other's blind spots. At this level, you don't simply point out character deficiencies in each other; you discern their causes and suggest solutions to display your commitment.

The deepest level of relationship is self-intimacy. This innermost circle consists of you and only you! It's healthy to keep some thoughts, ideas, hopes, wishes, dreams, and feelings totally and completely to yourself. On the other hand, relying too much on yourself can prevent others from getting close to you. And remember: Healthy friendships move gradually through these phases. It is not healthy to jump from phase to the next without experiencing each one. There are many studies and theories on friendship and relationships you can find with an internet search.