

## **OBTAINING YOUR OWN FRIENDS AND TRIBE 2**

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There is an epidemic of loneliness in the United States. It can have an impact on both mental and physical health.

There are many, many people who view themselves as failures, because they feel they have no real friends. Their true problem is rarely a lack of people in their lives. It often stems from a failure to understand the actual nature of friendship, as opposed to how it is often portrayed in current society.

What follows is an attempt to shed a bit of light on the acquisition and maintenance of friendships.

### **The Need for Friendship**

A scripture in Ecclesiastes states that “Two *are* better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him *that is* alone when he falleth; for *he hath* not another to help him up. Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm *alone*? And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken.” This list quickly establishes reasons to avoid being alone.

Pop culture says that I am a rock, I am an island unto myself. But our soul cries out and says, "Surely, I must matter to someone."

To a large extent, where and how we choose to live will be determined by the circumstances, in which we feel our lives to have the most significance. The first place that usually defines who we are, is our families. The second place establishing identity, is usually our occupation. The third place is the primary community, with whom we associate. That can be a church or a bar. It's where we spend time with others who share common interests. Those are loosely defined as our friends.

Each of us have things in our lives that we need, that no one else needs in that combination. So we seek others to fulfill those needs.

### **Attributes of a Strong Friendship**

There is no real way to gauge the depth of any friendship, but certain characteristics help them succeed.

#### Trust

Friendship means we are able to count on one another. We can trust each other. We spend time with each other and stick up for one another. Friends are happy for each other when things go well.

Some feel we should not keep secrets or knowledge from our friends. But for most people, deliberately sharing secrets to try to force some level of intimacy, rarely works out well, especially if that relationship ends.

It can also be easy to feel like someone has sought your friendship, just to be able to use you at their convenience. Then we think, well, they must not really be a friend to me.

### Equality

Friendship should involve an exchange between equals. One friend should not have much more say in what they do together, than the other friend.

Cultivating friendships with others who are different than ourselves, expands our world a little bit. Never being willing to do things that do not initially interest us, with others wanting to spend time with us, will quickly end relationships. If friendship is all about us, it will be obvious we are not their friend. We don't really even need to totally agree on religious and political views, to enjoy a friendship.

Friendship can exist, even when it is not a two-way exchange. Being a friend to someone else is a matter of letting their happiness mean something to us. But what if that level of caring is not reciprocated? We must realize that friendship does not always flow in both directions. It is easy to throw in the towel when we perceive we are merely being used.

Walking away offers protection, but is more effective in creating isolation and loneliness. When we are someone else's friend, whether it is returned or not, there is far less risk involved than when they are our friend. We are secure in the knowledge that we truly matter in someone else's life. We are in more or less control of whether that significance continues.

The stipulations we put on others who seek our friendship, should be equally applicable to us.

I have often heard people claim that their best friend is God. It would be very difficult for true friendship to exist between man and deity. God called Judas His friend, in the garden, while Judas was in the act of betraying Him. Since God is not capable of lying, that meant friendship did exist between them, even if it was only in one direction at that moment in time. Perhaps friendship with God is always really only one directional. It is the strong who build the bridges.

Friendship only needs to exist in one direction at any one time, to still be real friendship.

### Compassion

Compassion means having enough empathy for our friends, to respond in a timely way to their hurts and be with them during times of need. Friends should be safe places where we can question things going on in our lives, and receive empathy, rather than judgment. We hope that our friends will be willing to commiserate with us in our times of trouble.

### Honesty

Honesty is important, because once trust is lost by a truth being revealed, that friendship has been eroded.

We like to present our lives to others in neat, positive packages. But elevator pitches are for selling projects, not for meeting friends. If new acquaintances are only interested in a cliff note version of our life, move on along.

Honesty on our part requires us to understand that everyone wears a mask, even us. We present to one another, the face we have perceived that they wish to see. That way, their relationship with us will hopefully continue. It is somewhat false, but it is born of a desire to remain together. Deliberate deception is rarely intended and neither is offense.

### Independence

Friendships are not like a lifelong commitment. We must remain somewhat independent and allow our friends to have their personal space and lives.

Don't demand that others live up to our expectations, of which they are unaware and to which they never agreed. It is too much to expect someone who has long ago become set in their ways, to change in order to become worthy of our friendship. We must be willing to meet them where they are in their own lives. Friends getting jobs, children, spouses and interests outside the relationship, can really mess up a good friendship, if expectations for it remain the same.

### **Paths to New Children's Friendships**

In elementary school, making friends was as easy as inviting someone to play with us. Disagreements that arose were made were quickly resolved and quickly forgotten. We lost a lot by growing up. We should try to behave in some ways like children.

### **Possible Paths to New Adult Friendships**

It is possible to make friendships so deep that their bonds will exceed that of family relationships. But in order to know if we have a friend, we would first need to be able to define what we feel a friend to be. Is there a difference between a friend and a good friend?

Definitions of friendship by others, include those like in the Oxford dictionary. There, a friend is a person whom one knows and with whom one has a bond of mutual affection, typically exclusive of sexual or family relations. Webster defined a friend as a person who has a strong liking for and trust in another, or a person who is not an enemy. Isn't that interesting? Are there really only those two extremes?

One recipe for obtaining friends is to first be one. That means, sometimes we must be the one to take the risk of rejection. We might need to do something for someone else, with no expectation of reward or reciprocation. Moreover, sometimes we might need to intentionally look for opportunities to do such.

Some studies suggest that it is very difficult to maintain more than five close relationships in one life, at any given time. We can have more, but they will not be nearly as intense. We can usually go broad or go deep, but not both. Other studies claim that most men only develop one real friend in their lifetime, while women cultivate two friendships. Statistics like these tend to again raise the question of whether we have all been fed false expectations, regarding friendships.

Friendships are not made, as though they were some product. They grow over time. No wonder then that children coming from high schools and colleges feel like they have no friends. Such relationships have not yet had enough time to grow. Deep relationships are a function of time spent together.

It takes a lot of effort to stay connected. People move, life happens, differences become more pronounced than the commonalities and suddenly, we find ourselves alone again. Sometimes existing friendships can be enhanced by investing more time into them, especially if it has been a while since you have spent time together.

Friendships come and go in seasons of life, unless a lot of work is put into maintaining them. Circumstances and proximity create opportunities to connect or reconnect. Without those, relationships require tending and periodic renewal, or they wither.

### **Recipes for Friendship**

Several ingredients need to be present for a friendship to develop organically. There should be frequent unplanned interactions, shared vulnerabilities or problems, and a sharing of helpful information. Time together in college and an office environment produce plenty of the frequent unplanned interactions, but little shared vulnerability. We certainly don't share our vulnerabilities on social media platforms.

In one article, a friend was defined as somebody out there who wants to grab a burrito on the spur of the moment. Or grab a bite and talk about our bad day. In other words, a real friend should be willing to drop whatever plans they already had for that night, hire a sitter for their children, and just abandon their spouse for a while. We have needs and a true friend should respond at once. That would certainly be a good friend to us, but the reverse would not be true.

How are we to manage always being there for others on a daily basis, while allowing our friends to be independent and have their own lives? Is some level of sacrifice of life and self, really necessary for us to be a friend to others? And in doing so, satisfy our ultimate goal in our search for significance? People care less about you, than whether you care about them.

A significant life is composed of levels of service. Like an onion, we are composed of layers that make up a complex whole. All of these various roles that define us are based upon the identity that we assume with those, to whom we give of ourselves. Like our friends.

Stop shutting out the world by staring at a phone. Instead of killing time that way when we are inconvenienced by life, we could try opening a conversation with the people around us.

Connect with friends of friends. If both of us are comfortable around our common friend, we likely have a lot in common. Have we met any acquaintances of our friends, that we also admire? Find ways to spend time with them and get to know them better.

Use the internet to our advantage. Websites and social media have made it easy to connect to people with shared interests. Find others who share our goals or hobbies, or join a friend-finding app. But don't give away personal information to anyone online and only meet new contacts in safe public places. Such connections might eventually evolve from conversations to companionship.

There is no defined way to "make" someone our friend. Friendship is not something with a box to check and mark off of a to-do list. How can we possibly hope to "make" someone become our friend? The very phrase sets us up for failure. But realize that people will always be interested in talking about themselves. If we are willing to listen, that makes us a good conversationalist, and we might also learn new things. Trying to force interactions with other people, simply will not produce any connections.

At the end of it all, a friend to us may just be someone we believe in our mind, to be a friend. We made the decision to befriend them. That makes the friendship real, in at least one direction.

### **The Risks Inherent in Friendships**

I once heard a question it is good to occasionally ask ourselves. Will the people we love pass through our life, never knowing how much they meant to us? Is that an acceptable price tag to pay for appeasing a fear of rejection? That is the fear that that says, "What if I open up and become vulnerable enough to let them know they matter to me, and their response is "So what?" That would mean we gave of ourself and that sacrifice contained no value to the recipient. Better not to take that chance. But few friendships will occur without someone first taking that risk.

Is it possible that the rising number of pets being brought into households, is partly to avoid the difficulty and pain of seeking friendships? So long as we meet their needs, some pets do seem to reciprocate with unconditional love. And many of these are unequal relationships, in which we are in nearly complete control.

### **The Difference Between Friendship and Love**

We must understand that there is a difference in commitment between an encounter and a friendship. Do we expect far more from our friendships than the connections they really form? In a me-first society, where self-centeredness is rampant and love is scarce, is our view of friendship getting warped? As more and more of our marriages fail, are we seeking that same level of significance from friendships? Do we seek love from our friends and then, failing to find it, we label friendship as false or impossible to obtain?

Perhaps it would be better to just be a friend to whomever we find in need, then see what develops from allowing ourselves to be vulnerable.