

Stress Bytes Newsletter

VOLUME 7, ISSUE 4

APRIL 2008

"WHEN STRESS BITES, BITE BACK!"

THE NEWSLETTER OF ANNETTE VAILLANCOURT, PH.D.
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Friendship

Why is it so hard to write about friendship as a therapist? I think it is partly because the nature of friendships are changing as society changes. The other thing I hear in both my friendship circle and my clinical practice is a pervasive sense of loneliness, social isolation and lack of meaningful connections between people. True and enduring friendships seem more like a rarity these days, not something we can take for granted. People come to me not knowing how or where to find and form friendships. Plus, when there is a break or misunderstanding in a friendship, people tend to report more distress over that than a fight with a spouse. Maybe we have forgotten how to be friends. Maybe we're too self-focused and self-centered, worried about whether our needs are being met, rather than focusing on what we have to give to a friend.

Friendship is often idealized and romanticized. Great philosophers, authors, and songwriters have pondered the meaning

and joy of friendship for centuries. "The only way to have a friend is to be one," says Ralph Waldo Emerson. Robert Louis Stevenson asserts, "A friend is a gift you give yourself." Songwriter Carol King wrote "You've Got a Friend," describing how friends are there for you, "when you're down and troubled and you need some loving care and nothing, nothing is going right." An unknown author wrote, "A friend is one to whom you can pour out the contents of your heart, chaff and grain alike. Knowing that the gentlest of hands will take and sift it, keep what is worth keeping and with a breath of kindness, blow the rest away."

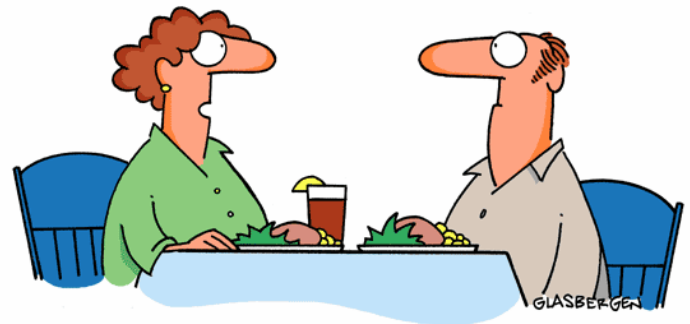
Certainly friendships that nurture and support are to be cherished, but are friendships always about making each other feel good? Are they just "mutual admiration societies?" In some cases friendships are also about challenging each other to grow and develop. The intimacy that goes with good friendships can be enlivening, but the

challenges of friendships can also be stressful. When we have intimacy, as in "into-me-see," we want the best for and from our friends. We want them to reach their full potential, realize their dreams and overcome their limitations. This is poignantly stated by Henry Ward Beecher, who said, "It is one of the severest tests of friendship to tell your friend his faults. So to love a man that you

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"This is the nicest conversation we've had in weeks. Let's not spoil it by talking."

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Friendship —cont'd

cannot bear to see a stain upon him, and to speak painful truth through loving words, that is friendship." Victor Frankl describes what I think of as the innate challenge of a great friendship. He writes, "No one can become fully aware of the very essence of another human being unless he loves him. By the spiritual act of love he is enabled to see the essential traits and features in the beloved person; and even more, he sees that which is potential in him, that which is not yet actualized, but yet ought to be actualized. Furthermore, by his love, the loving person enables the beloved person to actualize these potentialities. By making him aware of what he can be and of what he should become, he helps make these potentialities come true." If you have friends that challenge you to grow and evolve, you are lucky indeed. In Buddhism, such friendships are called "kalyana mittata". In Christianity they are called "spiritual friends."

What do psychologists have to contribute to the understanding and development of friendships? Psychologists study the relationship between social support and the ability to manage stress. In short, friends help you to deal with stress better. Further, the quality of your friendship circle is a rough predictor of the state of your mental health. Friends are like money in the bank or a garden - something you invest in and tend and that you to draw upon in times of need. A well developed friendship circle suggests a well-rounded life and the ability to weather life's challenges better.

Psychologists also study the gender differences in friendship between men and woman. Research shows that both men and women turn to our friends when we are stressed. However, what we seek from our friends in times of joy and stress differ by gender. Generally, when women form friendships with other women, we are looking for nurturance and emotional intimacy. When we woman point to our best friends, it is more likely to be someone whom we confide in, someone whom we express and explore our feelings with, and someone who knows the good and bad in our character...and who loves us anyway. Yes, we may spend time shopping or dining together, but the point isn't the shared activity as much as it is the chance to talk. Men, on the other hand, often base their friendships with other men on companionship through shared activities and talk about mutual interests. They travel, go running or fishing together. They do business or share chores together in a companionable way. Their conversation is more topical than emotionally intimate.

Psychologists also study the age old question, "can men and women be 'just friends'?" When men and woman are 'just friends' studies report that men rate their friendships with woman as being much higher in overall quality, enjoyment, and nurturance than their friendships with men. Most women report that their friendships with men are less intimate than their relationships with other women. For their most intimate friendships, women still turn to each other. What woman report enjoying about their friendships with men are lighthearted banter and a big brotherly kind of warmth and protectiveness. The best part of having a man for a friend is the insight into what men really think and feel.

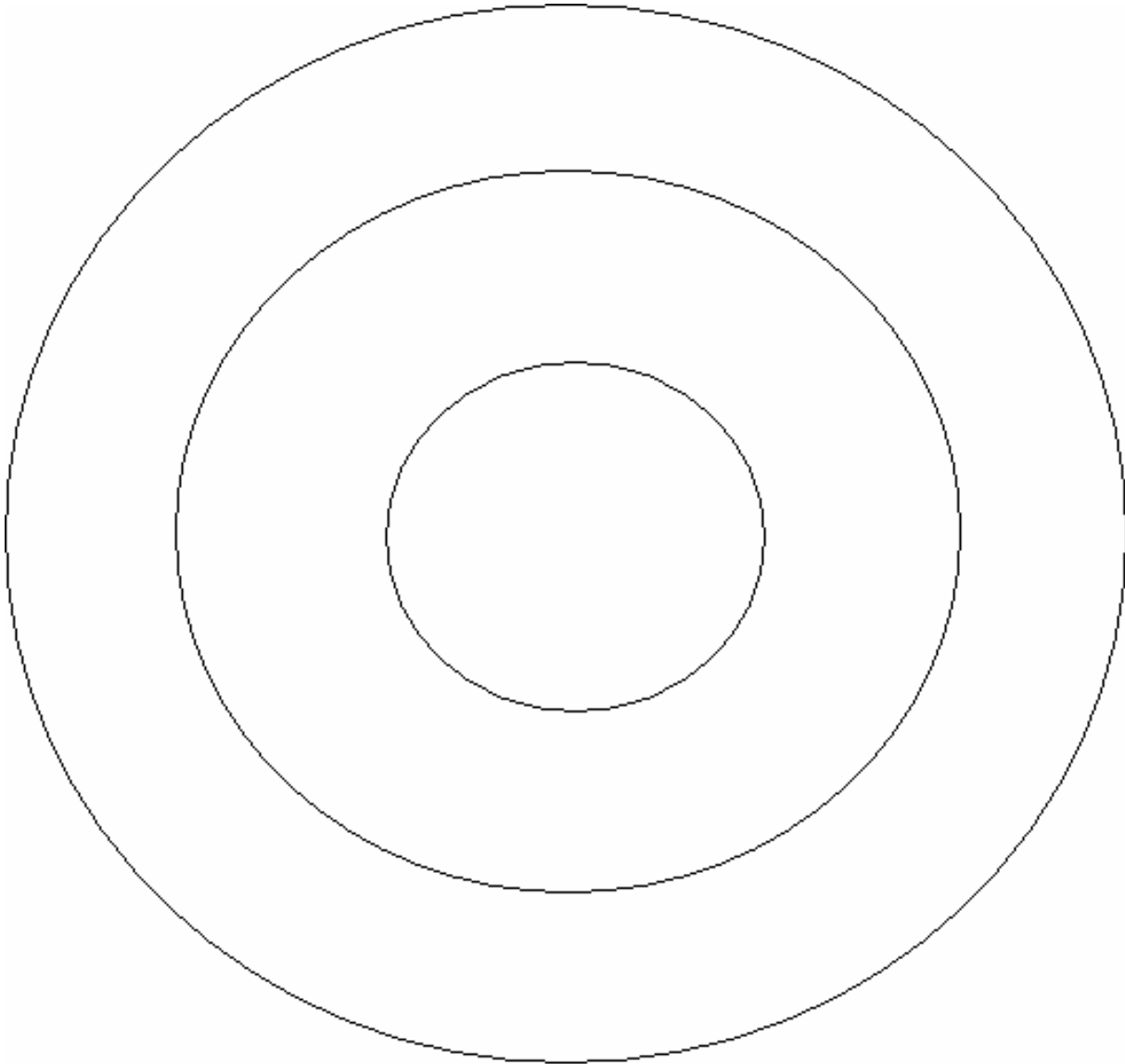
Studies indicate that male-female friendships are less common and less likely as you age, than same-gender friendships. Times are changing however. Men and women are not tied to traditionally stereotypical roles and behaviors anymore. As we become more androgynous, in other words, as men become more nurturing and self-expressive and woman become more independent and assertive, the number of our friendships with the opposite sex double. Also because there are more women in the workforce and participating in formerly male dominated careers and activities, stereotypes and gender boundaries break down. The potential for friendships between men and woman increase because we are intermingling more. Still, it remains more difficult to negotiate friendships between men and woman because of the potential for sexual attraction. Enduring friendships between men and women tend to be the ones where the issue of sexual attraction and the creation of a boundary around that aspect of their friendship is mutually agreed upon early on. Despite the movie, When Harry Met Sally, sex isn't always the agenda, especially if one or both parties are involved in another romantic relationship, are gay, or there is a lack of physical attraction.

What's interesting is that a survey of 1,450 people on Match.com think what the scientists say here is all bunk. What do you think?

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WHO'S IN YOUR CIRCLE?

INSTRUCTIONS: Making new friends or bringing more people into your inner friendship circle starts by identifying the people already in your life and selecting those to bring closer into your inner circle. In the diagram below, write the names of your closest friends and confidants in the inner circle or bulls eye. In the next circle going towards the outside, list the names of friends that you sometimes share activities with or talk to. In the outer circle, list the names of all your acquaintances, co-workers or people you've recently met. Examining the chart's outer circles, select one or more people you wish to become friends with or bring into your inner circle and make a plan to contact them to talk or spend time together sharing an enjoyable activity. To make friends you need to reach out to others and invest the time.



NEW: PARTICIPATE IN AN ONLINE DISCUSSION OF THIS AND OTHER NEWSLETTERS AT DR. VAILLANCOURT'S BLOG AT [HTTP://WWW.STRESSBYTES.BLOGSPOT.COM/](http://www.stressbytes.blogspot.com/)

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LICENSED CLINICAL PROFESSIONAL COUNSELOR

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"WE SECURE OUR FRIENDS
NOT BY ACCEPTING FAVORS
BUT BY DOING THEM."
THUCYDIDES

"YOU CAN MAKE MORE
FRIENDS IN TWO MONTHS
BY BECOMING INTERESTED
IN OTHER PEOPLE THAN
YOU CAN IN TWO YEARS BY
TRYING TO GET OTHER
PEOPLE INTERESTED IN
YOU. " - DALE CARNEGIE

"IN THE END, WE WILL
REMEMBER NOT THE WORDS
OF OUR ENEMIES, BUT THE
SILENCE OF OUR FRIENDS."
MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

"IT'S THE FRIENDS YOU
CAN CALL UP AT FOUR A.M.
THAT MATTER. "
MARLENE DIETRICH