

Sense and Psychotherapy

Dear Reader,

How do we choose our partners? How can they cause so much grief and such incredible highs? What do we expect of our friendships? In what ways are we affected by our interactions with our siblings, our parents, our relatives, our children?

Relationships are fascinating. Much of my working day (and a lot of my free time!) is spent listening to people talk about their various relationships. Love and intimacy are frequent topics, and we often seem to spend even more time following the course of other people's lives than we do examining our own. We also tend to spend a lot of emotional and psychic energy on friendships. I love to watch the drama of shifting alliances on a playground, realizing that the same scenarios play out in increasingly sophisticated forms throughout our lives.

Humans are social animals and we thrive physically and intellectually, as well as emotionally and spiritually when we are in contact with others. I've witnessed a great deal of pain and anger growing out of relationships, but I'm always struck by the amount of joy and happiness they can often bring.

Wishing you fulfilling relationships,

Just the facts...

- A marriage lasting at least thirteen years is more likely to end in death than divorce.
- Studies show work friendships tend to dissolve within two years after one person leaves for another job.

Stages of a Relationship

As a therapist, one of the most common questions I'm confronted with is what's 'normal' in a relationship. This is a tough question to answer. Every relationship is unique. There's no ideal model, and no neat, linear progression. Yet, for most romantic relationships, there does seem to be a typical set of patterns. For my clients I've found it helpful to describe relationships in terms of typical stages, identifying challenges posed and rewards offered at each stage. When people can stand outside their experience for a moment and think about what stage their relationship falls into, they're more able to identify its positives, as well as the work they need to do to enhance those positives and nurture the relationship as it evolves.

Here's a typical set of stages I sometimes describe for people:

'You're kinda interesting, maybe I'd like to get to know you better' "Love at first sight" is a wonderful notion, but most relationships begin much more prosaically. The first challenge is exploring for mutual interests and inclinations. This exploration itself is exciting, even fascinating.

'You're so wonderful, I want to be with you all the time' Falling in love is an exhilarating experience. Unfortunately, (or maybe fortunately) the initial intoxication rarely lasts forever. Couples that can understand they are two separate individuals, and that differences are normal, have a better chance of successfully moving on to the next stage.

'What do you mean you can't meet all my needs?!' In the midst of the inevitable disillusionment, it's easy to cast blame. Couples that manage to see through the disappointments can rediscover the person who originally caught their interest, and find them even more enjoyable.

'You're not perfect, but you're still the best thing going' After coming securely back to Earth, it's easy and safe to slip into complacency. It's difficult and frightening to push forward into new territory, searching for deeper understanding and fulfillment, but the rewards can be wonderful.

'Individual growth is good for us as a couple' As the relationship deepens, couples in successful relationships are confronted with a wonderful paradox: individual growth enhances the relationship, and the relationship enhances individual growth. Couples mature enough to accept and encourage this growth can develop an even deeper level of intimacy.

Sometimes, I wish every relationship evolved to maturity, but that's neither realistic nor desirable. Not every relationship is destined to succeed. Yet many that could succeed, and evolve into rewarding, fulfilling unions, run off track. One of the most difficult, and rewarding, challenges I face as a therapist is to help people recognize for themselves when to keep trying and when to... move on. Half the battle for couples is figuring out what the issues are. And yet, ironically, that challenge is also the reward. Relationships do change. They do evolve. And as they do, we grow in ways that we can barely imagine.

The Importance of Friendships

I recently heard a piece on the radio describing a study of factors influencing longevity and health. One of the most important, yet little understood, factors appeared to be the presence or absence of friends. Seniors who were the healthiest and had the most positive attitude toward life were those who had a network of friends they confided in and shared activities with. Not surprisingly, the most depressed elderly generally felt the most isolated, and usually had the fewest social contacts.

As important as intimate relationships are, friendships seem to play at least as critical a role in our personal happiness and well-being throughout our lives. It's possible that one of the reasons women live longer than men is that women tend to establish and maintain not only more, but also more intimate, friendships than men do over the course of their lifetimes. As someone once commented, when a woman becomes a widow, she still has her friends to share her grief with, but when a man becomes a widower, he loses not only the love of his life, but often his one true friend and only real confidante.

Children often seem to make and maintain friendships with ease. Part of that is probably their natural openness, and part is probably opportunities presented by school. It can become increasingly difficult as we enter adulthood to find the time and the energy to maintain satisfying friendships,

let alone create new ones. I've seen a pattern amongst my clients in their 20's and 30's who describe a sense of loss and loneliness, even when they are involved in satisfying intimate relationships. They miss old friends and can't seem to make new ones, which may account for much of the nostalgia for high school and college days.

Although many of us are able to establish relationships with co-workers, oftentimes people report a lack of depth and connection in these relationships. While we may spend a great deal of time with co-workers, intimacy is incidental to the "business at hand", and often ends at the close of the business day.

I wish there were an easy cure for finding or rediscovering friends. The answer I offer people is simple to explain, but difficult to accomplish. Friendships take time and work, and as we grow older we have less of the former and more of the latter. Making friends involves making contact when it may be easier to stand back. It requires the courage to risk rejection, confidence in your own self-worth, and a willingness to overlook differences and search for commonality. Although the risk may seem high, the potential benefits of making and nurturing friendships are great. As we experience both the joys and tribulations of life, having a real friend to turn to along the way makes the journey much richer and more fulfilling.

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My friends have made the story of my life. In a thousand ways they have turned my limitations into beautiful privileges, and enabled me to walk serene and happy in the shadow cast by my deprivation.