



# The Magic of Friendship

## Part I: *HEALTH*

*Two little boys, ages 5 and 6, roamed the meadows and woods near their rural home until the older boy started school. The younger boy found the same meadow, patch of woods and small stream where they had searched for crayfish were sad and empty places until 3:30 each day when his friend got off the school bus and the magic of friendship changed everything.*

*The same kind of magic came to a lonely widow when a couple from “up North” built a house nearby. A year later the neighbor’s husband died. Understanding what her new friend was going through, the once-lonely widow kept going by to help after others stopped coming. Now the two often go to club meetings, craft shows, outdoor dramas, and church activities together.*

The magic of friendship has many positive social, emotional, and physical results. We call it magic because no one knows exactly how it works. Some call it an inspiration for life. Medical professionals tell us that friendship helps the body’s auto-immune system resist disease. Other researchers have noted that people with close relationships who interacted daily with friends eat better, sleep better, are more apt to take their prescribed medicine, are reminded to go for checkups, and generally take good care of their health.

One thing is known for sure—people who have one or more close friends are in better health than those who have only casual

friends or no friends at all.

### **The Importance of Friendship**

Friends are very important. Many people report that they turn first to friends in a crisis. Friends are often nearer than family and can help more quickly in time of trouble.

Those without friends suffer from various degrees of isolation and loneliness. In contrast, older adults with close friends spend most of their social lives in activities with these friends. In one nationwide study, 91 percent of people over 65 with close friends said that they see these friends almost every day. This is only slightly lower than the 94 percent of adolescents who try to see their friends every day.

### **What Makes Good Friendships?**

The best friendships usually form between people who share experiences, interests, and values. Friends relax together and receive emotional support from one another. Friends often describe their relationship with words like “love,” “affection,” “comfortable,” and “warm.” The bonds of friendship are voluntary, enjoyable to both, and each person is free to make the relationship more or less intense.

Certain social factors seem to help determine the type of people who will be friends. Most people have friends who are near their age. Older people may indicate that they don’t want to spend all their time around other older people, but when they are around people approximately their own age there is much more social interaction.

Friends are usually the same sex. Some

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people maintain friendships with the opposite sex, but differing interests and overtones of sexuality make this sort of friendship complicated.

Most friends are of the same marital status. Marriage seems to take people away from many former friends. A married couple is probably going to have other “couple friends” rather than separate or single friends.

### Women’s Friendships

Traditionally, friendships between women have been considered inferior to friendships between men. Researcher Robert Bell argues that the historical picture is wrong. He says women more often see the total person and that women have more friendships, that these friendships are more significant, and that they are more involved with their friends than men are. According to his studies, women average about five good friends, while men average only about three.

### Men’s Friendships

Men tend to participate in more friendship groups than women. They play games—softball, squash, bowling—with other men whom they know only in connection with that game. These relationships are lacking in intimacy. Of the men questioned, only about one-third said they would feel free to reveal anything to at least one best friend.

What holds men back? Possibly a fear of homosexuality, an inability to express feelings, or the idea that friends should be of the same status. As for the working class adult male, he has fewer friends because the working class man has fewer interpersonal involvements of any kind. His friends are largely related to the job, because there is less competition and more comradeship on the job than in middle class society in general.

The basic difference between men’s and women’s friendships, is that women stress intimacy and revealing how they feel, while men tend to be cooler toward each other.

### Older Adults and Friendship

Friendship is probably more important to the older adult than the rest of the population. One of three women and one of every seven men aged 65 or older lives alone. Lack of marital companionship often forces the older adult to reach out to friends for the human contact that they need.

Surprisingly, there is little relationship between higher morale and the frequency with which an older person sees his or her children. Even those who live with children indicate that family does not take the place of friends.

It is generally accepted that men have more difficulty adjusting to widowhood than women. They also are more likely to have fewer or no friends at all. One study found that women aged 60 to 64 had nearly half again as many friends as men the same age. Approximately two-thirds of older adult males reported not having a close friend. Only

16 percent of widows reported having no friends.

Retirement, health problems, and the death of loved ones add up to a real problem of isolation for many adults. While many older adults joyfully make good use of neighbors and friends, other seem to fall victim to extreme loneliness, causing them to miss some of the magic of friendship.

### The Magic Medicine of Friendship

Some research studies have found a link between the strength of a person’s network of friends and his or her physical and social health. Friendship can bring a person:

- Emotional support—the caring, love, and esteem of others.
- Tangible help in times of crisis, as well as on a daily basis.
- Communication and information in the form of opinions and recommendations.
- Something to do. Most older adults do more if they have a friend who also wants to go along.

**Physical results of the magic:** Disease, death rates, and life expectancy are related to the strengths of a person’s social ties. Those with few relationships tend to be at much higher risk for disease or death than those who have strong ties with friends or family. This holds true for men and women from all ethnic groups and at all social and economic levels.

**Emotional results of the magic:** Being able to confide in a close friend helps reduce the strain of daily hassles. Close personal relationships also help people adjust to changes such as death, birth, marriage, and moving to another home. Quality friendship is more important than the number of friendships a person has.

One study of women under stress showed that those without a confidant were 10 times more likely to become depressed. Casual friendships seemed to help very little, but even one intimate relationship helped support the person and relieve some of the depression.

### A Friendship Project

It is an old saying, but still true: “To have a friend, you must be a friend.” If you lack the friendships you desire, you may need to take the initiative to be a friend to someone else. If you feel isolated, think about joining a civic group, a social club, a volunteer organization, or a church. These are great places to meet people, and you may discover people with whom you have a lot in common. Who knows? A wonderful friendship may be just around the corner.

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*This publication was issued in print by the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service as HE-291-1 (May 1993)*

Published by

**North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service**