

# True Friends

DO YOUR FRIENDSHIPS SEEM STUCK IN SUPERFICIAL RUTS? IF YOU CRAVE DEEPER, RICHER CONNECTIONS, IT MAY BE TIME TO TAKE A FEW RELATIONSHIP RISKS.

By JODI HELMER

When Marla Paul and her family moved from Dallas back to her hometown of Chicago in the early '90s, she knew she wanted to build meaningful friendships. Despite still having several acquaintances in the Windy City, and meeting plenty of new folks after she moved, she found it difficult at first to develop those casual friendships beyond the surface level.

"I was doing all the things I thought I was supposed to — inviting people to lunch, volunteering as a room mom, taking a yoga class — but I just wasn't making meaningful connections with people," says Paul, a freelance journalist. She wrote about her discouragement in newspaper and magazine articles and eventually penned a regular column on friendship for the *Chicago Tribune*. The feedback Paul received amazed her. Realizing that many women faced challenges in their friendships, she wrote *The Friendship Crisis: Finding, Making, and Keeping Friends When You're Not a Kid Anymore* (Rodale Press, 2004).

Meaningful relationships not only make our lives richer, they also bestow surprising health benefits. According to research from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's Network on Mind-Body Interactions, people who reported strong social networks had more robust immune systems and were better able to weather illness than people with less extensive social circles. In 1998, researchers at the Duke University Medical Center found that heart-surgery patients with support systems were three times as likely to survive as those without anyone to talk to.

Forging deep connections requires a certain amount of emotional investment, authenticity and risk. Maintaining them demands energy and may occasionally push our boundaries. Most real friendships eventually take some work, and they almost never come with guarantees. The good news: Investing time and emotional effort in deepening your friendships will almost certainly pay off in insight and personal growth. And it may very well help you get clearer about the quality of friendships you wish to have in your life.

## OPEN THE LINES OF COMMUNICATION

Superficial chatter is going to take you only so far. Sure, recapping last night's televised game guarantees you some gab time. But experts agree that moving beyond small talk is essential to meaningful relationships.

"If you want to be closer to someone, be willing to talk about things that are important and personal to you instead of talking about the same safe things you usually talk about," says Jan Hoistad, PhD, licensed psychologist, relationship coach and author of *Big Picture Partnering: 16 Weeks to a Rock-Solid Relationship* (Twofold Publications, 2004). "One aspect of intimacy is allowing ourselves to be vulnerable."

To deepen a connection, Paul suggests sharing something about yourself or seeking advice on a challenge. "The more genuine we are in conversations," she says, "the more our friends will reciprocate." Most experts point out, though, that gaining intimacy through "wound bonding" is not an ideal way to establish a new relationship. Neither is constant sarcasm, teasing or joking. And connections that revolve exclusively around "poor me" gripe sessions or mean-spirited gossip fests are unlikely to net you the positive experiences that make real friendships

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worthwhile. If you're interested in truly knowing and being known, focus on revealing your real self and the things that matter to you — and encourage your friends to do the same.

## BE WILLING TO TAKE RISKS

Moving a casual friendship to a deeper level can be as scary as striking up a conversation with a stranger. In both cases, you risk rejection. "We keep our relationships at the surface level because it's safe," says Susan Campbell, PhD, relationship coach and author of *Saying*



## FRIENDSHIP 101

**DEVELOPING** meaningful relationships requires focused attention and a willingness to be both present and authentic. Conversations provide an excellent opportunity to build your friendship skills in all these areas. Try these three tips to enrich your conversations, and your friendships.

**Share your feelings.** When we talk with friends, we tend to be good at sharing the details of life — what happened at work, a report on our last date — but we often fail to connect those facts to the emotions we felt in the moment. "Adding a feeling to the facts helps us deepen intimacy and feel more connected," says Susan Campbell, PhD, relationship coach and author of *Saying What's Real: 7 Keys to Authentic Communication and Relationship Success* (New World Library, 2005). "It lets the other person know that you care enough about them to share from a deeper part of yourself."

**Take turns.** In any conversation, it's important for each person to have a chance to talk. The problem is that we have forgotten how to share the spotlight, says Jan Hoistad, PhD, licensed psychologist, relationship coach and author of *Big Picture Partnering: 16 Weeks to a Rock-Solid Relationship* (Twofold Publications, 2004).

"People often talk at one another — sending emails or leaving voicemails — without really stopping to hear what the other person is saying," she says. "We have to put our own needs and wants aside to really listen."

**Ask questions.** One of the surest ways to deepen your conversation is to ask questions and to encourage your friends to delve deeper into the topics you are discussing, Hoistad advises. "Ask open-ended questions such as, 'How do you feel about that?' to encourage your friends to go deeper into the conversation," she says. "Show your friends that you are willing to be vulnerable with them."

*What's Real: 7 Keys to Authentic Communication and Relationship Success* (New World Library, 2005). "We may be afraid that if we speak the truth and admit that we want more closeness, we'll scare the other person away."

But in friendships with real potential, taking an emotional risk can be a powerful catalyst. According to Campbell, a willingness to take even a small risk can help establish closeness and demonstrate a deeper level of personal commitment.

For starters, Campbell suggests letting a friend know that you value the friendship and consider it an important part of your life. "Being the first one in a friendship to take a risk gives your friend permission to follow suit and to take similar risks that will further strengthen the friendship," she says.

If you've been in a relatively shallow "holding pattern" with a friend for many years, and he or she doesn't appear interested in breaking out of the rut, it may be a sign that you need to expand your circle of friends to include others who share your interest in forging more meaningful connections. A bonus: You may wind up enjoying your "holding pattern" friendship more when you're relying on it less.

## BE GENEROUS WITH APPRECIATION

One of the most effective ways to deepen your relationships is to let your friends know how much they mean to you. "Letting someone know that you're really glad to be with them creates a bond," Campbell explains.

Your gestures of appreciation could be as simple as calling a friend to thank her for seeing you through a rough week, as generous as bringing a pot of soup to a sick pal or as heartfelt as a note telling someone how his friendship has made a difference in your life.

In Chicago, Paul successfully deepened her relationships over the course of a few years. She stuck with her conscientious efforts to be a good friend, making a point to reach out at special moments such as birthdays. Paul's bigger commitment was in letting her friends know that they could count on her and that she was there for the long haul.

"Building friendships takes time and emotional energy," she acknowledges. But those friendships form the foundation for a rich and rewarding life — exactly the kind of life we feel most inspired to share.

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## RESOURCES

### BOOKS

*Living a Connected Life: Creating and Maintaining Relationships That Last* by Kathleen A. Brehony, PhD (Owl Books, 2003)

*Friendships: The Power of Friendship and How It Shapes Our Lives* by Jan Yager (Hannacroix Creek Books, 1999)

*The Lost Art of Listening: How Learning to Listen Can Improve Relationships* by Michael Nichols (The Guilford Press, 1996)