



Friendfluence: The Surprising Ways Friends Make Us Who We Are

By Carlin Flora

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Discover the unexpected ways friends influence our personalities, choices, emotions, and even physical health in this fun and compelling examination of friendship, based on the latest scientific research and ever-relatable anecdotes.

Why is dinner with friends often more laughter filled and less fraught than a meal with family? Although some say it's because we choose our friends, it's also because we expect less of them than we do of relatives. While we're busy scrutinizing our romantic relationships and family dramas, our friends are quietly but strongly influencing everything from the articles we read to our weight fluctuations, from our sex lives to our overall happiness levels.

Evolutionary psychologists have long theorized that friendship has roots in our early dependence on others for survival. These days, we still cherish friends but tend to undervalue their role in our lives. However, the skills one needs to make good friends are among the very skills that lead to success in life, and scientific research has recently exploded with insights about the meaningful and enduring ways friendships influence us. With people marrying later—and often not at all—and more families having just one child, these relationships may be gaining in importance. The evidence even suggests that at times friends have a greater hand in our development and well-being than do our romantic partners and relatives.

Friends see each other through the process of growing up, shape each other's interests and outlooks, and, painful though it may be, expose each other's rough edges. Childhood and adolescence, in particular, are marked by the need to create distance between oneself and one's parents while forging a unique identity within a group of peers, but friends continue to influence us, in ways big and small, straight through old age.

Perpetually busy parents who turn to friends—for intellectual stimulation, emotional support, and a good dose of merriment—find a perfect outlet to relieve the pressures of raising children. In the office setting, talking to a friend for just a

few minutes can temporarily boost one's memory. While we romanticize the idea of the lone genius, friendship often spurs creativity in the arts and sciences. And in recent studies, having close friends was found to reduce a person's risk of death from breast cancer and coronary disease, while having a spouse was not.

Friendfluence surveys online-only pals, friend breakups, the power of social networks, envy, peer pressure, the dark side of amicable ties, and many other varieties of friendship. Told with warmth, scientific rigor, and a dash of humor, *Friendfluence* not only illuminates and interprets the science but draws on clinical psychology and philosophy to help readers evaluate and navigate their own important friendships.

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Editorial Review

Review

"*Friendfluence* provides a charming and informative examination of the impact of friendship at a time in which family relations and social structures have been scrambled.....awash in arresting insights with practical implications, many of them counter-intuitive.... timely, savvy, and judicious"

--The Huffington Post

"If you've been thinking of starting a book club with your BFFs, here's your first assignment."

--Book Page

"Intriguing...A convincing case for nurturing friendships in many of the same ways we nurture relationships with partners and other family--both online and off"

--Kirkus Reviews

"[Flora's] interdisciplinary discussion draws on scientific research, philosophy, and anecdotes to examine friendship across a lifespan, from playground pals to adolescent and adult relationships....Compelling....Discloses many of friendship's secrets"

--Publishers Weekly

"Contemporary scientists and ancient philosophers agree: friendship is a key to happiness, and *FRIENDFLUENCE* is a fascinating and thought-provoking examination of the new science that explores this crucial element of our lives. *FRIENDFLUENCE* is so persuasive that the minute I put the book down, I made three dates to see friends."

--Gretchen Rubin, *New York Times* bestselling author of *THE HAPPINESS PROJECT*

"Carlin Flora has written a delightful book on the power of friendship. Combining the latest research with engaging stories, *Friendfluence* shines with authenticity and is a must-read for anyone who wants to know more about our ancient human desire to connect."

-- James H. Fowler, co-author of *CONNECTED* and Professor of Medical Genetics and Political Science at the University of California, San Diego

"We tend to think of friends as relationships we simply *have*, when in profound ways, friends both reflect and determine who we actually *are*. Happiness and success begin with self-knowledge, and as Carlin Flora shows us in her compelling and delightful book *Friendfluence*, the key to understanding yourself may well lie in your friendships, past and present. This is a must-read for anyone looking to experience greater well-being... in other words, for everyone."

--Heidi Grant Halvorson, Ph.D., author of *Succeed* and Director of the Motivation Science Center, Columbia Business School.

"A captivating read about an eternally fascinating subject--friendship. Flora's easy-to-read prose blends narrative and scientific research seamlessly. You will finish the book with a better understanding of why good friends are worth keeping."

--Jane Gradwohl Nash, Professor of Psychology and one of the "GIRLS FROM AMES"

"In our changing social world of flexible networks, shifting families and blurred boundaries, many of us

sense that friends and friendships have increased in importance, but we can't say why. In *Friendfluence*, Carlin Flora tells us precisely why in her lively account of both the science and poetry of friendship. Worthy reading for anyone who is not a hermit in the woods--or, perhaps, especially by the friendless."

--Dalton Conley Ph.D., author of THE PECKING ORDER and Professor of Sociology at New York University

"*Friendfluence* offers a penetrating look at our most taken-for-granted relationship. Carlin Flora's observations, backed up by the latest research, will not only prompt you to dissect every key friendship you've had since kindergarten, but inspire you to become a better friend."

--Sally Koslow, author of *Slouching Toward Adulthood: Observations from the Not-So-Empty Nest* and the novel, *With Friends Like These*

"I don't know about you, but I wouldn't be who I am without my dear friends. Now Carlin Flora explains why and how friends matter so much. A fascinating read!"

--MJ Ryan, author of THIS YEAR I WILL: How to Change a Habit, Keep a Resolution or Make a Dream Come True

About the Author

Carlin Flora was on the staff of *Psychology Today* for eight years, most recently as features editor. She is a graduate of the University of Michigan and Columbia University School of Journalism and has written for *Discover*, *Glamour*, *Women's Health*, and *Men's Health*, among others. She has also appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, CNN, Fox News, and 20/20. She lives in Queens, New York.

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introduction

Each friend represents a world in us, a world not possibly born until they arrive.

— anaïs nin

When I was fifteen, my family moved from North Carolina to Michigan. The relocation was difficult for one reason above all: I had to leave behind my friends. For the first few months at my new school I was a puddle of tears as I attempted to connect to other kids but didn't feel I could truly be myself. I read and reread letters from my old friends and felt painfully excluded from their latest escapades. Then one day I saw *them* up in the bleachers during a pep rally: They were a boisterous group of "alternative" girls (this was the '90s) who were nonetheless not *too* alternative, I soon learned: They were adventurous and artsy but still cared about getting good grades. From the first time I sat at their lunch table, my isolation began to subside. I started to feel excited about life again.

I was sentimental to begin with, which is probably why leaving my North Carolina friends was so painful.

But my experience is far from unique: Friendship is a crucial facet of life, and not just for melodramatic teenage girls.

During the eight years I worked at *Psychology Today* maga-

zine as a writer and editor, I noticed a steady increase in scientific findings about friendship. Study after study pointed to its surprising benefits. Who knew that friendship could be so good not only for one's mood but for one's health? Solid friendships can help you shed pounds, sleep better, stop smoking, and even survive a major illness. They can also improve memory and problem-solving abilities, break down prejudices and ethnic rivalries, motivate people to achieve career dreams, and even repair a broken heart. Yet very few of the many social science and self-help books that crossed my desk covered all of these aspects of friendship. Walk through the relationships section of any bookstore and you will be overwhelmed with titles about finding and keeping a romantic partner or parenting a child. An alien perusing this body of literature might assume that lovers and families are the only relationships we humans have.

Of course we also have friends. We might think all of our traits and life decisions can be traced back to our genes or the influence of our parents or partners, but it has become increasingly clear that our peers are stealth sculptors of everything from our basic linguistic habits to our highest aspirations. And while friendships are a staple in most of our lives, very few of us are fully aware of the effect friends have on our personal growth and happiness.

The converse holds true, too: A person without friends will become unhappy or worse. Loneliness sends the body and mind into a downward spiral. A lack of friends can be deadly.

Evolutionary psychologists theorize that friendship has roots in our early dependence on others for survival. Having a friend help you hunt, for instance, made it more likely that you and your family—and your hunting buddy and his

family—would have food cooking over the fire. While most of us no longer rely on friends for house building or meal gathering, we still have a strong need for them. Anthropologists have found compelling evidence of friendship throughout history and across cultures. Universally, we're built to care deeply about select people outside of our kin group. It's hard to construct a personal life history that doesn't include important parts for one's friends.

Now happens to be a prime time for increasing our awareness of how friends affect us. Friends are not just more important than you might think; they actually are becoming more important sociologically. In his 2004 book *Urban Tribes*, journalist Ethan Watters posed the question: "Are friends the new family?"

Watters entertainingly depicted city-dwelling buddies who relied on one another throughout their twenties and even thirties, as they delayed marriage and found their vocational callings—a phenomenon of his class and age-group. While big, stable "tribes" might not characterize most Americans' social circles, people of all ages (and from all areas of the country) are relying on friends to fulfill duties traditionally carried out by blood relatives or spouses.

The median age of first marriage is still rising: In 2010 it was 28.7 for men and 26.5 for women, up from 27.5 and 25.9 in 2006. Americans aren't merely delaying marriage; many are divorced or widowed or are opting out completely. One hundred million or so Americans (that's almost half of all adults) are not married, and a 2006 Pew Research study found that

55 percent of singles are not looking *ever* to get married.

College students and young adults seem to be less inclined to have steady romantic relationships and are instead "hooking up" casually with one another. It stands to reason that without

the psychological support of a serious boyfriend or girlfriend, this group is also relying on friends more than their demographic equivalents have in the past.

Sociologist Eric Klinenberg points out that “more people live alone now than at any other time in history.” In cities such as Atlanta, Denver, Seattle, San Francisco, and Minneapolis, at least 40 percent of all households are made up of a single person. Klinenberg blows apart the stereotype of the lonely, quirky singleton by concluding that these people, whether young or elderly, socialize with friends more than do those who live with partners and families.

So, for the increasing number of people who are not living in traditional family structures, friends are often primary ties, providing close emotional support and “instrumental” help as well. It’s not necessarily an either/or proposition, where friends must replace family, however. Singles are often close to their parents, nieces and nephews, and siblings, after all. But friends, in part because they are free of the heavy weight of obligation, can be even more beneficial and life-enhancing than relatives, particularly if they live near us. It’s not just single people for whom friends matter—a lot. Friends are also important for parents and those who are married or living with a romantic partner. Time with friends is actually our most pleasant time: We are most likely to experience positive feelings and least likely to experience negative ones when we are with friends compared to when we are with a spouse, child, coworker, relative, or anyone else. We’re not surprised when we hear people grumbling about how they have to attend a family holiday party, yet it would puzzle us to hear the same people complain about having to go to a celebration full of their friends.

Why do we prefer spending time with our friends over our families? Some say it is because we pick our friends (God’s consolation prize) while we don’t pick our families. Insofar as we choose our spouses and decide to have children, we do have some say over our families. More likely, our time with our pals is more enjoyable because of our expectations. When we’re with friends, we bring sympathy and understanding and leave out some of the grievances we carry into interactions with family members. We tend to demand less from friends than we do from relatives or our romantic partners, and each friend provides us distinct benefits. For instance, one might be our confidante, another might make us laugh, while a third is our go-to person for political discussion. We don’t insist that they be everything to us; thus we are less disappointed when a friend falls short in a certain way than we are when a parent or spouse does the same.

When working parents devote every scrap of free time to their children, their friendships are the first thing to slide. We know from research (and our own intuition quickly confirms this) that expecting one’s spouse to be everything is a recipe for disaster. Leaning on friends for intellectual stimulation, emotional support, and even just fun activities relieves the pressure of the overheated nuclear family. Busy moms and dads would do well to stop considering friends to be a nonessential luxury.

Kids themselves might also be more friend centered than they were, say, fifty years ago. Back then only children made up

10 percent of American kids under the age of eighteen. The latest census reveals that the ratio of “onlies” has doubled. There are about fourteen million of them, and they are likely seeking out pals more because in-house playmates aren’t available.

In some ways we put friendship up on a pedestal. Think of all the popular movies and TV shows (such as, um, *Friends*) about tight clans whose members see one another through life’s awkward moments and dramatic trials alike. But if we understood how beneficial real friends are, I think we’d be less passive and more careful about how we treat them, even if other people, such as our partners or kids, officially occupy the primary places in our hearts.

Friendfluence, then, is the powerful and often unappreciated role that friends—past and present—play in determining our sense of self and the direction of our lives. In the pages ahead, you’ll learn how friends affect us during different developmental phases. As children, we’re attached to our parents but preoccupied with our pals. Preschoolers who have trouble making friends tend to go on to have bad relationships with younger siblings, for instance. As middle schoolers, kids who don’t care what friends think of them do worse academically and socially in high school—and beyond. It’s not just that good friends are nice to have; the skills one needs to make good friends are the very abilities one generally needs to be successful in life.

(“Tiger Moms” should rethink sleepover bans if they want their children to thrive in the social jungle, for which there is no adequate cramming course.)

When we are teenagers, friends co-create our fledging identities. Drug use, smoking, and early sexual activity are highly influenced by peer behaviors as well as parental behaviors. The often overlooked flip side, though, is the positive influence of peer pressure. Teens who befriend academic achievers, for example, will often work to get their own grades soaring.

Adult friendships subtly steer our beliefs, our values, and even our physical and emotional health.

Although resolutions

to enact new diet and exercise plans and vows to change our character are all too easy to break, if we befriend people whose philosophies and habits we admire, we naturally start adopting aspects of their personalities and lifestyles through a positive desire to be with and to be like our friends. The health-friendship connection is particularly compelling: One study of nurses with breast cancer found that women without close friends faced mortality rates that were four times as high as those nurses with at least ten friends.

The book will explore the “dark” side of friendship, too, to help you understand some of the uglier feelings that come along with amiable affection. Since friends have a hold over us, their power can damage and destroy just as it can heal and help. I’ll also tease out the conflicting findings about online friendship to clarify how the latest modes of electronic socializing alter our flesh-and-blood bonds.

Friendship has always been, and will always be, a cherished aspect of human life. But now, just as friendship is rising amid the rescrambling of social structures, we’re finally getting a handle on the complex ways that this relationship affects us. Learning how we can get the most out of our friendships is an important endeavor for anyone concerned about well-being, and unraveling the thick narrative strands contained within just one friendship is a fascinating exercise in its own right. The closest of friendships contain the mysterious spark of attraction and connection as well as drama, tension, envy, sacrifice, and love. For some, it’s the highest form of love there is.

Users Review

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