



“Excellence in leadership development”

3805 N. High St., Suite 310 Columbus, Ohio 43214
Phone: 614-784-8530 Fax: 614-784-8531
www.integratedleader.com

Friends: Terrific or Toxic?

By M.J. Clark

Aristotle is quoted as saying, “The antidote for 50 enemies is one friend.” That statement couldn’t be truer today, and yet we often get so busy in our lives that friends fall to the bottom of our list. It takes a good deal of time and effort to maintain friendships, but the benefits to our self-esteem, stress level and overall happiness can far outweigh the effort.

You might say, “I have plenty of friends. I go to dinner parties and see friends at my church and attend social gathering of professional associations.” But are these people truly friends? Are they the people you turn to when you need sound, honest advice? Do they challenge you when you wimp out? Are they the people who accept you, warts and all? Do they encourage you when you hit a bump in the road? Do they make you laugh? Can you sit with them comfortably in silence? Are they the people you call when you have something exciting you can’t wait to share with someone?

When we get older, we tend to have more acquaintances and fewer true friends. And that’s okay. Remember all the “friends” you had as a teenager? As an adult, we tend to choose friends in a more discerning way, based on our experience. Finding one or two people with whom you really click can do a great deal for your overall mental health.

Friends are great for helping build our self-esteem. I have two close friends, Pam and Julie, whom I meet with regularly for dinner and social fun. Over a glass of wine one night, Pam and Julie and I decided that we wanted to support one another in reaching our goals. So we shared some of our professional and personal goals, and we decided that each time we met for dinner, which was about once a month, we would check in with each other on how we were doing on the dreams we expressed a desire to achieve.

Julie wanted to learn pottery, Pam wanted to write a book, and I wanted to teach at a college. It has been a few years since we made this decision to help one another succeed. Julie now owns a pottery wheel and has sold pottery in local shops; Pam has written a draft of *Red Moon Princess*, the book that had been floating around in her head for years; and I have just finished my fourth quarter of teaching at Ohio University. Yes, it takes time to get there. But if we hadn’t made that initial decision to help one another, I think we would still be talking about these dreams at dinner instead of talking about our accomplishments.

As you can imagine, we all three experienced a self-esteem boost from moving forward in the direction of our goals. We continue to support and encourage one another in this way, and I can’t begin to explain the happiness it has brought to all of us.

Good friends can also help alleviate stress. Are you aware that toddlers laugh 400 times a day, and adults laugh only 15 times a day? We enter the world with the ability to smile, laugh, play, and enjoy the simple things in life. Then we grow up, and our lives become much more serious. But can you think about a time when perhaps you were at a comedy club or watching a funny movie with a friend and you both just laughed so hard you could barely contain yourself? It feels so good to really laugh hard. And then, later, you can think about a certain joke or scene that makes you and your friend laugh all over again.

Experts say a good laugh relaxes tense muscles, speeds more oxygen into your system and lowers your blood pressure. Researchers Dr. Lee Berk and Dr. Stanley Tan at Loma Linda University School of Medicine have found that laughter stimulates the immune system, off-setting the immunosuppressive effects of stress. Having friends to laugh with is very therapeutic.

On the other hand, some people we call friends can really be toxic to our well-being. And these toxic friends can truly inhibit your growth as a person.

Have you ever had a friend who likes to play the “devil’s advocate?” This is a friend who would fall into the toxic category. Yes, we want our friends to be honest and real with us. Yes, we want our friends to challenge us when we need it. But we do not need “friends” who always point out the negatives to every idea we have or clarify for us all the roadblocks that might possibly prevent us from achieving a goal. These are dream squashers, not friends.

Sometimes we meet people who appear to be friends of ours but are fiercely competitive and do not truly want us to succeed. People who lack self-confidence and are pessimistic about their own future may not support you on your path to realizing your dreams, and they may suck every ounce of energy from you to fill their need to feel comfortable with themselves. Although these people deserve our compassion, spending time with them regularly is not at all healthy for us.

My colleague Char mentioned to me that in the book *Shine* by Larry A. Thompson, he talks about surrounding yourself with positive, supportive people who believe in you. These are the people who will help you shine. These are your personal cheerleaders.

Pam and Julie are my cheerleaders, and we all need cheerleaders in our lives. Even when the football team is losing, cheerleaders continue to cheer loudly, with all the enthusiasm and optimism they can muster, rallying those around them to join in to support the team. Even when it appears to be hopeless, cheerleaders continue to jump and cheer until the bitter end. These are your terrific friends. These are the ones who love you for who you are and stand by you through the tough times, when you need their support most.

I challenge you to make arrangements to share some time, and perhaps a laugh, with a terrific friend you haven’t seen in a while during this upcoming holiday season.