

PUBLICATION

Why Friendship is Good for Your Health

October 19, 2021

By Carissa Doré, LMHC, CCTP, RYT

Imagine you're seven years old. As you walk outside on the playground, the smell of freshly mowed grass fills your nostrils. From the metal slide and the monkey bars, the sun gleams. Other children are laughing and squealing. Your mind is occupied with gymnastic moves as you run for the monkey bars. There are other girls playing at the bars. As you listen, you hear one girl describe how her teacher taught her gymnastics. "Can you do a backflip without holding on to the bars?", you ask. In that moment, a friendship begins.

Wasn't it easy then? It all started with a simple question, "Can I play?" As an adult, it's easy to overcomplicate things. At the time, you weren't concerned that you didn't know how to start a conversation, you had no time, or that she had too many friends. You were just enjoying yourself. Ah, life was so simple then.

Now that you are older, you have probably faced moments in your life where you've wanted to make a new friend but didn't think you had the time, skills, or confidence to make it happen. You may have asked yourself, "How am I supposed to balance friendships with work and family? I already have enough on my plate. Is friendship that important?"

In a 2017 study published in the journal *Personal Relationships*, William Chopik explains that having friends makes you feel less lonely, gives you a greater sense of belonging, and ultimately makes you happier. The effect of having friends is now well documented. Another friendship researcher, R.I. Dunbar, explains having friends can help you avoid mental and physical illness, recover faster whenever you fall ill or undergo surgery, and make you feel happier and more content with your life. According to him, having good friends reduces your risk of dying more than anything else, except stopping smoking! One reason for the benefit is when you engage in bonding activities with your friends (like hugs, laughter, singing, dinner), you "...up-regulate the endorphin system..."

Now, it stands to reason that since you spend about one-third of our life at work, you'd make friends there. However, when it comes to the workplace, friendships can be complicated. There is a dark side to workplace friendships, according to Julia Pillemer and Nancy P. Rothbard of the University of Pennsylvania. They argue workplace goals and those of friends are often at odds. Self-disclosure and vulnerability can backfire, which can then lead to interpersonal distance. You want to achieve and move up the ladder, but you may worry about stepping on someone's toes. There may also be issues of favoritism and cliques.

But there is an even darker side lurking at the workplace. Remember the up-regulated endorphin system that happens when you are bonding? In many corporate work environments, there is a down-regulation of endorphins, according to Simon Sinek in his book, "Leaders Eat Last".

In most job roles, you are encouraged to meet deadlines or meet a quota of some kind. The person who does the best gets a bonus. Competition is not a bad thing. However, unrealistic goals and excessive pressure create a situation in which everyone looks out for themselves. Now, you may ask, what does that have to do with my endorphin system and friendship? Well, everything.

In the beginning, when you think about getting a bonus, you feel an adrenaline and endorphin rush. You're excited. Then, with every success, you get a hit of dopamine. Initially, everything feels great, but then things start to get tougher. Maybe you're experiencing pressure from home, which makes things difficult at work. As a result, your cortisol levels increase and never seem to go down. You find you are in a constant state of "go get it." After a while, the high cortisol and adrenaline start to interfere with your serotonin levels. You lose your sense of happiness. You become more detached from others, and as a result, your oxytocin drops. After a while, you may even start showing signs of anxiety and depression. This cycle is a lose-lose situation for your health and your friendships.

So, how do you foster connection and manage workplace tension? First, let's look at different types of friendships. I have categorized friendships as coffee, taco, and spaghetti friends. With coffee friends, you feel comfortable making small talk. You're open to meeting them for coffee. Then, there are the taco friends. They know some messier parts of your life. However, there are things you don't share with them. The last type is the spaghetti friend. These friends have seen you at your worst. They're the ones you can call when the bottom has fallen out of life. They "get you" and have your back.

Misunderstanding these friends causes trouble for us. Sometimes you share things with a coffee friend that should only be shared with a taco friend. If a coffee friend doesn't handle what you told them well, you "wall up". Instead, you should have just reconnected as coffee friends. Since it can sometimes be inappropriate to divulge intimate details about one's life or opinions, coffee friendships are more likely to form at work. You still need taco and spaghetti friends, even if they are not at the office.

Lastly, sometimes you have friends who become life-long companions, and other times they are just temporary. There is comfort, wisdom, and direction to be found in friends, regardless of the type or longevity of the friendship. Forging successful friendships at work requires managing the tensions inherent in the workplace, write Julianna Pillemer and Nancy P. Rothbard. In my view, forging successful friendships at any level requires managing tensions, plus a lot of effort and trial and error. In the end, we all need friends. Is it worth the effort and risk to make a friend? Yes. It's good for your health.