

“Solid friendships make us happier and healthier, and in our late-marrying, highly mobile society they're more important than ever as pillars of support. But like any human entanglement, they can cause pain and confusion. For every Sam-and-Frodo tale of loyalty and sacrifice, there's a Brutus or Judas who breaks a heart” (Carlin Flora). The power of our relationships is often underestimated. The question we must ask is how our social relationships affect our emotions and personality. Relationships we form in our lifetime not only shape us, but also give us the support we need to live happy and fulfilling lives. It is proven that our encounters with each other, positive and negative, provide one of the most influential impacts to our being. Humans, when connected, have the ability to do something even greater than what could ever be done alone. When we come together as family, friends, or lovers, we become more than the sum of our parts. Humans are the most successful of all the animals of our planet because we are the most social. Each one of us is unavoidably bound to others, and these bonds define life.

We all experience friendship in our lifetime. The process of connecting with others, as we have been doing since the day we were born, is so elementary we often go about without giving it so much as a second thought. In reality, our friendships shape us; we are defined by them and they make us who we are. The documentary, *The Emotional Life*, explores why we feel certain ways, as well as why we develop certain personality traits. The importance of friends, families, and lovers is emphasized throughout as the main causes of these temperaments. *The Emotional Life* states, “We can only be friends with a peer if you can gain something from someone else.” People make connections from the very first years of their lives to the very last ones. These connections bring with them education, love, and of course, fun. An example of this begins with the connection we have with our parents in our early years. There was recently a study held testing the effects of being housed in an orphanage the first few years of a child's life. These children, scientists found, lacked individual affection. It was concluded that this lack of attention led to emotional problems as the child grew older. When a parent reads a child's symbols, such as a crying outburst, and comes to his/her aid, the child learns to trust. However, in the orphanages the babies were often left to cry. A failure to bond leads to major consequences, such as a lack of oxytocin, a brain chemical responsible for helping with the formation of attachments and close relationships. The study proves that you can care for every physical need of a child (for example, food and diaper changes), but if you deprive them of love the development into adulthood will be riddled with emotional flaws. Children are not the only ones affected in a parent/child relationship. The adult side of the bond has its pros and cons as well. Studies show that when a parent sees their baby smile, the brain is activated in the same way it does when thinking about food or sex. This repose implies our relationships can create just as much pleasure as physical items/experiences. Strong relationships can give us great rewards.

Beyond parental love, *The Emotional Life* mentions social support as a huge factor in becoming a resilient individual. We have the power to overcome great adversity but it is almost impossible to do alone. An example of groups of peers providing support is “Alcoholics Anonymous.” As an AA member puts it, “It's about togetherness, it's about realizing we don't need to go through all of life's highs and lows by ourselves.” In fact, people who sponsor those in recovery are more likely to stay sober themselves. A man losing his job is optimistic when he refers to his family as the reason he keeps moving forward: “My wife and my son are everything for me...my family is the most important thing in my life, it was in the beginning, it was for this process, it is going forward...so if anything through this process that's my real strength and that's what I draw upon.” These examples show that humans have the ability to bounce back from the worst of circumstances when given the support of others.

The consequence of choosing not to seek the support of others is loneliness, perhaps the most obvious side effect of lack of connections; in fact, the feeling of loneliness is a lot more scientific than one might believe. Like hunger or pain, loneliness is a signal that something is absent. The point? Our species survives because we work together. Humans have the biggest brains in the animal kingdom simply because they allow us to interact with others. If it is necessary to rely on others in order to prosper in life, what are the dynamics of this process? Cooperation is a good start; when people work together they are capable achieving far beyond what man could do alone. What determines whom we are most likely to cooperate with? It boils down to two ideas—convenience (how often you are able to see the person) and how similar you are to each other.

We need each other for just about everything. According to *This Emotional Life*, it is not surprising that nature designed us to be happiest when we are connected to others. In some cases, happiness depends on clusters of people we don't know, and have no way of knowing. Using data from the Framingham Heart Study, James Fowler of the University of California at San Diego and Nicholas Christakis of Harvard Medical School analyzed the happiness and social networks of 4,739 people from 1983 to 2003. The study implies that if your friend is happy, it will increase the probability you will be happy by 15%; if a friend of your friend is happy, your probability increases by 10% and so on. Here are some compelling statistics: people who don't have children are less satisfied with their relationship than people with children; however, they are more likely to stay together for a longer period of time. On average, married people are wealthier, healthier, and happier than others. Our reliance on each other for happiness goes far deeper than if our friends, themselves, are happy. As one woman observes, "Happiness comes from the experiences we have with people we love." Our most important relationships are our families, friends, and lovers. When these relationships are strong we are happy; when they are lost, we are devastated. Famous actor Chevy Chase contributes, "I'm just happy I have my wife and my children and my many dogs and cats." Robert F Kennedy Jr. chimes in, "Human companionship is the greatest joy. If I look at all times in my life when I was most happy, where I'm enjoying myself the most, is when I'm with my friends or family.... and laughing a lot." To conclude, the secret to happiness isn't very secret. We are connected to each other, we belong to each other, and we are made for each other. Life is a journey through time; happiness is what happens when we make that journey together.

These observations are also true for me personally. My relationships with my peers have affected me in the smallest and largest of ways. When I was a freshman, I had a huge crush on a sophomore boy. My day was only considered "good" if our interactions were favorable; on the contrary, if things did not go well with this boy my day would be proclaimed a "bad" one. As dramatic as that situation sounds, my happiness was clearly determined by one person. The bigger picture involves my personality. All of my life I have been shy and bit awkward. People scare me; I am sometimes irrationally afraid of their judgment. I tell myself not to care, but I have found one of my biggest challenges is just that. Lack of confidence is what I see as the root of the problem. However, I have noticed that around my friends I am an entirely different person.

Our peers affect us both emotionally and mentally; they are the key to happiness and can define our personalities. Influence and relationships with others can affect our being in ways that are almost unnoticeable, or on the contrary, change the way we act entirely. In a life where it is impossible to avoid these bonds we find they are the most essential to our being.

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