

## **The Importance of Friends**

This artwork explores my most authentic visual interpretation of what it feels like to have a real friend. The two-headed girl sharing the heart at the center of the piece is representative of the persona created by two friends who share empathy and are emotionally invested in one another. Placed around the two girls is an odd assortment of objects (an iPod, a half moon, flowers, a cup of noodles, and a little character with pigtails). Each object reminds me of certain people who have come and gone throughout my life, many of whom I have exhausted myself over trying to build friendships with and, in the end, caused headache.

I have gone through periods in my life in which I feel disconnected from having a social life—periods in which I have not felt seen or understood as an individual. During these times, I have become aware of how dependent, emotionally and physically, one's well-being is determined by genuine (or lack thereof) social connections with those around them. Without friends, one can never reach their full embodiment as an individual and, as a result, risk falling victim to emotional isolation, depression, and poor health conditions.

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# The Importance of Friends

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*Friend: A person whom one knows and with whom one has a bond of mutual affection, typically exclusive of sexual or family relations.*

The backbone of one's well-being is greatly dependent upon their relationships with others. Without authentic, strong friendships one becomes vulnerable to falling a victim of emotional isolation and depression along with severe physical health conditions that stem from these. In this paper the following questions will be discussed and answers: What is the impact, emotionally and physically, of feeling alone? Why do people befriend those they do? And, what are the physiological effects of feeling close to someone?

### **Personal Reflection**

Ever since I was young I remember being quiet. I've always enjoyed talking to people; I've never disliked people, but I've always found that I tend to stop talking when others are. I don't throw myself into conversation. At the age of seventeen nothing has changed, other than I am now aware of the preconceptions people make about those who are quiet within social settings. When one seems distant within conversation or not involved, people automatically think they must be bored, shy, "too cool," or just plain uncomfortable. Since then, I tend to avoid conversation where I don't think I'll have anything to contribute, because if I sit there listening, people start looking at me and ask if I am okay. It's a bit comical how many times a day a concerned looking person asks me how I'm doing when I'm perfectly fine. Overall, I've just decided that I feel a lot less awkward and free to talk when I am one-on-one with someone or within a small group. Being social exhausts me. I love people and I think they are endlessly interesting, but I find them to be completely draining. I need breaks to be - physically alone.

I hate saying I'm an introvert: Someone who "avoids large groups of people and gets energy from being alone." As compared to an extrovert, "someone who finds energy in interactions with others." Humans are defined as being social creatures; there's this part of me that doesn't like to admit to enjoying being alone, somehow it feels wrong. I have an image of what an introvert is, and I don't like to think of myself as one. Susan Cain, author of *Quiet*, a book about "The power of introverts in a world that can't stop talking" claims that two thirds of the world are introverts. "There's zero correlation between being the best talker and having the best ideas," she states. "Spend your free time the way you like, not the way you think you're supposed to." Over time, I've come to understand that it brings me peace of mind to just be by myself. Although it still makes uncomfortable labeling myself as an introvert, I've come to terms with the fact that there's a big part of me that gets worn out in social settings and re charges when I'm alone.

Some people cannot stand being alone, it only makes them bored or sad. Being alone for me does neither of these things. Up until my freshman year of high school, I never thought much about being alone. During middle school, I had a healthy social life and daily schedule, but when ninth grade hit, I shared twelve hour days around people who didn't actually see or understand

who I was as an individual. I felt completely invisible and was swamped by homework I couldn't care less about. This kind of environment, paired with me not taking the time to get to know people, provided the perfect setup for feeling really, really, isolated. It was during this time that I became acutely aware how important it is to have authentic friends. This state of subjective loneliness led to my obsession over trying to avoid all "fake" or shallow relationships where I feel uncomfortable or I can't be myself.

It's important to note that during the school day I was never alone. I had "friends" in every friends group in our grade, I had people to be with. All of my relationships were pretty surface level, the vast majority of all my conversations I had were small talk. On the weekend I sometimes would hang out with people from school, I got talked at a lot. I heard a lot about people's problems and what was going on in their lives. I began to realize that the people I spent my time with knew little to nothing about me and I knew everything about them. This kind of imbalance was due to the fact that, I knew if I were to "emotionally expose" myself, I would get talked about behind my back. I didn't want to become part of their weekly cycle of drama, so I kept how I felt to myself. This kind of isolation was my own doing, I could have reached out to them but it didn't feel worth the effort. I know they couldn't be real so why would I be real them. As a result I spent a lot of time being pummeled by conversation that meant nothing to me, being with people where I felt like a complete alien, and yet I kept sitting down with them at lunch because the alternative was being physically alone, which was something that I was trying to avoid at all costs. I felt emotionally already there, the last thing I needed was to actually be there. These are what I would call "fake friends." They didn't know me. I doubt they even really knew each other. They all fed off each other's nervousness and drama, never hitting what they actually wanted to say or how they felt.

In contrast, I've had one very close friend since first grade. We live within walking distance from each other, and were in the same class for ten years. We've had our ups and downs, but we've always gotten over them. When we were younger, we were practically the same person. We grew up in the same town and went to the same school. We did everything together and had the same friends. As a result, our minds worked exactly the same. We could look at each other and know what the other was thinking. Now that we're older and time has passed we've become our own individual selves, formed our own opinions, outlooks and ambitions in life but still share this relationship of closeness that we did since when we were younger. Besides her and a few other people, there are not many I believe I am close to.

## **Introduction**

To go through life detached from friendship is to live in a shallow husk of reality. Building relationships in which you feel seen and understood is what I believe to be at the core of "living life to its fullest." Having spent months throughout my school life feeling completely cut off by those I spend my time with, I have become familiar with the exhausting, depressive nature of feeling alone. It is in these times that I have come to realize even if I consider myself to be an independent, solitary person--everyone needs real friends: people who understand you, see

you as your authentic self, and support you unconditionally. In order to lead happy lives, human beings must build genuine strong friendships with those around them. Isolation from this fundamental human connection results in emotional as well as physical damage. Through collective research I will address: the natural human drive to be socially connected; the emotional and physical impact of feeling alone; why we befriend those we do; and the mental effects of being close to someone.

### **Humans Natural Drive to be Socially Connected**

Not having friends, being isolated from the world, has been shown to be horribly detrimental to one's mental as well as physical health. This is naturally understood by all human beings; our happiness is built around the desire to make emotional connections with others. Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle writes: "Man is by nature a social animal; an individual who is unsocial naturally and not accidentally is either beneath our notice or more than human. Society is something that precedes the individual. Anyone who either cannot lead the common life or is so self-sufficient as not to need to, and therefore does not partake of society, is either a beast or a god." As depicted in this passage, Aristotle explores the notion that...Nobody wants to be alone. The desire to be understood, validated, seen and supported for our true selves drives the push to either run from or climb out of our loneliness.

### **The Effects of Loneliness**

From a young age everyone becomes familiar with the empty feeling of being alone. The draining effect of this sensation is most commonly experienced to be transient. It comes and goes but one can usually pull themselves up and regain an awareness of being a part of their social community. Loneliness that persists, however, lingers and does not leave one's conscience can cause emotional torment and can lead to severe health consequences. It's a widely accepted idea that depression stems from the feeling of being alone. If untreated, the emotional impact of extreme cases of depression are associated with increasing disability, weight loss, disturbed sleep, and suicidal thoughts or actual suicide. The feeling of hopelessness and helplessness that come as a product of feeling alone are also known to perpetuate isolation. Dr. Nancy Donovan, a psychiatrist who specializes in geriatrics and neurology, when speaking about loneliness, said she believes there to be two different kinds of being alone: Subjective Loneliness and Objective Loneliness. Subjective loneliness refers to the emotional state of being alone, even if one is not physically alone; and Objective loneliness refers to the state of physically being alone, causing social isolation. Evidence from a study conducted in 2006 led by Donovan supports the theory that the feeling of being alone leads to depression. In looking at two population-based groups of middle-aged to older adults, she concluded that higher levels of loneliness were associated with more depressive symptoms, and that this association stayed stable throughout one's lifetime. The physical health of those who are emotionally suffering from extreme cases of feeling alone are often affected by this. Studies, including one published by Brigham Young University, suggest that loneliness, can be as threatening to health as cigarettes,

alcohol, and obesity. This analysis was led by Dr. Julianne Holt-Lunstad, a Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience, and involved over 300,00 participants. They found that those who carried low scores of having social connections carried a similar risk of smoking 15 cigarettes a day and those with stronger relationships were found to have a 50% increase chance of survival. A second larger experiment was conducted at Brigham Young with 3.4 million participants focusing on subjective loneliness and physical social isolation and found that both can lead to a 30% chance of premature death. Within the bio-behavioral Sciences division at UCLA, Professor Steve Cole, conducted a study that also looked into loneliness and, more specifically, how genes are expressed differently in those who feel lonely. His work revealed that closeted gay men with HIV died at a significantly faster rate than gay men with HIV who were open about their sexuality. The increased rate of death was found to be caused by inflammation within the body. It was concluded from this study that people who characterized themselves as lonely have a much high rate of inflammation, which is alarming considering that too much inflammation can lead to illness as serious as cancer. "The question became, is there something about threat-sensitivity that might make our bodies work differently?" Dr. Cole says. "And that concept turned out to be a very productive key to the biology of how loneliness turns into disease." Overall, within the health and medical world, it is now a common belief based off studies, like these done at Brigham University and UCLA, that the feeling of being alone has to the power to take control of one's emotional and physical health.

Opening up to and speaking with people evokes a certain level of anxiety, within each individual. Fear of being judged, not accepted or even hurt, keeps us from reaching out to those we think could possibly fit us as friends. Extreme cases of social anxiety lead down the path of loneliness, and as said before, no one wants to feel alone. So time and time again, we try and push ourselves past the nervousness of being vulnerable and try to connect with others as much as possible. A four-part study was conducted in 2011 by Wilfrid Laurier University that looked into what makes a person approachable enough to be emotionally exposed, furthering our understanding of why befriend those we do. Within the setting of their undergraduate program, students were noted where they sat in relation to those who had similar physical characteristics: sex, race, hair color and length, and wearing glasses. The findings of this study are as follows:

- Study one showed that those who wore glasses sat with others who wore glasses. People also grouped together based on their sex.
- Study two showed that all the different traits, like glasses, sex, hair color, hair length and ethnicity determined seating arrangements of the students.
- Study three showed that people who were similar to the peer in terms of eye color, hair color, hair length, body proportions, glasses, sex, etc., tended to sit closer to her than those who were dissimilar.
- Study four showed that wearing glasses and physical similarity with those in the pictures could predict the self-reports of seating distance of the participants. This replicated the results from the first three studies.

This proved the common belief that people who look alike are attracted to one another. This tendency is possibly because when you see someone who looks similar to yourself, you feel more comfortable talking to them, potentially leading to lasting friendships and relationships.

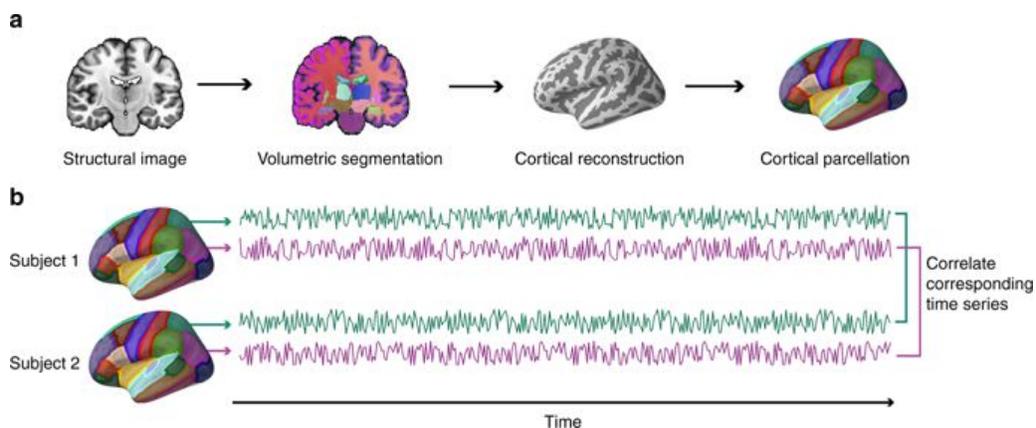
In *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 2010 issue, a study was covered in which the same conclusion was drawn. Subjects were shown a picture of a stranger morphed with a picture of themselves and another picture of a stranger morphed with another stranger. When the subject was then asked to rate the “attractiveness” of each, the vast majority picked the amalgamation (combination) of a stranger and themselves. Pushing past appearance, Nicholas A. Christakis, a Physician and Social Scientist at Yale University, found that “Your friends don’t just resemble you superficially, they resemble you genetically.” Our friends are as similar to us genetically as you’d expect fourth cousins to be. This means that the number of genetic markers shared by two friends is what would be expected if they shared the same great-great-grandparents: “The resemblance is slight, just about 1 percent of the genetic markers, but that has huge implications for evolutionary theory,” states James Fowler, a Professor of Medical Genetics and Political Science at the University of California. While there is now no single “friendship” gene driving people together, the results of the studies conducted have shown genetic factors to be like a “subtle breeze in the background, strong enough to be measured statistically in a big data set even if people in their day-to-day lives aren’t consciously aware of it.” This challenges the common belief that “opposites attract.” In terms of a platonic or romantic relationship, this notion that one does best with those who either complete or compliment their own personality is widely accepted to be true. Within the world of sociology, however, it’s become quite apparent that this is false. Angela Bahns, a professor of psychology at Wellesley University, based off her past research around similarity and diversity in friendship networks, claims people who think alike are drawn together but keep their distance from those who do not practice their beliefs. An example of this would be, if three strangers were to meet for the first time and two of them play sports but one of them doesn’t; the two people sharing the similarity are much more likely to become comfortable faster. This suggests that in the process of speaking to those for the first time, strangers would do better to play to their similarities rather than showing off their characteristics that make them unique and different. Professor Angela Bahns at Wellesley College goes as far to say, “Selecting similar others as relationship partners is so widespread on so many dimensions that it could be described as a psychological default.” These findings align with the concept of “homophily”: with similarity brings connection.

What are the effects of being around those who are so similar to you? If humans naturally gravitate to those who not only look like them but share similar beliefs, then how does this affect one’s own response to, perception and interpretation of the world? The first author of a study at Dartmouth University, Carolyn Parkinson, looked into this question. To find out, Parkinson and her team drew out social connections between 297 students at Dartmouth University by asking them who their friends were and constructed a social network of their gained understanding of the community. Taking 47 of those students out of the whole, they observed their neural

response using fMRI while they watched a chosen variety of videos like a scene from the documentary Food Inc, or footage of a sloth. The videos were chosen to include a wide range of subjects, so different parts of the brain would be activated from person to person based off pre-existing knowledge they had about the content being shown. What they found was that close friends' brains activated in similar areas.

*The image above depicts the cognitive behavior of two friends brains (subject 1 and 2) as they are subject to watching the same footage.*

So similar were their responses that researchers were able to predict who were friends (and who weren't.) "Friends responded more similarly than people who are friends of friends, who in turn are more similar than friends of friends of friends," said senior author Thalia Wheatley. It is



clear that people naturally gravitate to those who are not only similar in appearance, but share aligned beliefs. The minds of

already bonded friends, as a result of shared genetics and after time spent with one another, begin to mirror each others' mental behavior. In conclusion, we befriend those who we see ourselves in.

## Conclusion

All that I found within my research I have found evidence of within my own life. I have watched people go through depression, heard them talk about the feeling of being alone and seen how that begins to eat away at their emotional as well as physical well-being. I was not aware of how severe the health consequences are that stem from feeling lonely, but I am not surprised. What I learned from looking into the effects of being close to someone and having strong friendships I have experienced as an individual. During the times in my life that I've felt connected to people who accept and understand me, I not only felt happier but healthier; life in general seemed a lot better. I feel that I have always been subconsciously aware of the studies conducted on the correlation between the behavior of friends' brains. With people I've known for a while, and have spent a substantial amount of time with, I've felt that their certain behavioral quirks and attitudes or ideas about things begin to rub off on me. While this seems believable, I never would have gone as far to say my friends share a small part of the same genetic code. What I found about people being attracted to those who are similar in appearance I've noticed

throughout my life as well with the countless amount of people I've watched cycle in and out of friend groups at school. People who look alike tend to stick together. The debunking of the theory that "opposites attract" I found to be particularly confusing in that many of the resources I came across had conflicting claims and lacked convincing scientific evidence. It became clear through the nature of this information that the theory is a generalization and somewhat of a myth. Overall, the research I collected provided me with a clear awareness for my past experience I've had with lacking real friends and a newfound appreciation for the friendships I have as of now.

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