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Making Time for Friends: A Scientific How-To Guide for Maintaining and Strengthening Friendship in Adulthood

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Keywords

friendship, friendship maintenance, friendship strengthening, social connection, loneliness, positive psychology, well-being, belonging

Disciplines

Psychology | Social Psychology

Making Time for Friends: A Scientific How-To Guide for Maintaining and Strengthening
Friendship in Adulthood

Kristin Elinkowski & Madison Romney

University of Pennsylvania

A Capstone Project Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Applied Positive Psychology

Advisor: Lyle Ungar, Ph.D.

August 1, 2020

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Acknowledgements

Preface

What is a friend? A single soul dwelling in two bodies.

—Aristotle

For many, friendships bring exceptional happiness. The surge of pride when we see our friends succeed, the buoying comfort they provide in times of heartache, and the inspiration we cultivate together through play and adventure. Over the last few years, we have been navigating through life asking similar questions: How often should we reach out to our friends to ensure we don't weaken our connection? How do we maintain friendships when a friend moves far away? What makes a friendship endure and how can we implement those practices in the friendships that we deeply cherish?

When we met in the Master of Applied Positive Psychology Program at the University of Pennsylvania, we quickly became close friends. There, we were armed with theory, research, and interventions for cultivating well-being - providing answers to some of our pressing questions. We learned the importance of social connection for well-being and experienced, first-hand, the power of friends. Now, as positive psychology practitioners, we study what makes life worth living and know that friends most certainly do. However, we continue to seek answers to one of our most asked questions: Once you form a flourishing friendship, how can you make it last?

Through exploring existing literature and conducting our own qualitative research, we are better equipped to answer this question. With insights from positive psychology and real-world friendship experiences, our goal is to elucidate the practices that enable friendships to endure and thrive while bolstering our own friendship throughout the process. Because a pursuit of well-being often includes a pursuit of friendship, this capstone allows us to explore one of the most integral parts of well-being.

Contents

A Look into Positive Psychology

Positive Psychology in two words or less: Other People

—Christopher Peterson

As students of positive psychology, we focus on growing what's good in life compared to fixing what's wrong. Given this, our capstone will discover how to cultivate and strengthen lasting friendship rather than address loneliness, isolation, and disconnection. While positive psychology roots itself in the 'good life', it stemmed from traditional psychology – a field that has made significant strides in understanding and addressing what's painful about the human experience. Twentieth-century psychology had long been a healing science – a disease-based model to human functioning (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). However, what psychologists learned over the last two decades is that this disease model does not move the needle on preventing what's wrong with people as much as was hoped. Instead, the prevention of what makes life painful - mental illness, failed marriages, broken communities - largely sparks from our ability to build human, group, and institutional strengths.

Understandably, it is impossible to accurately capture the origins of positive psychology without looking back at the history of traditional psychology. Before World War II, American psychology maintained three objectives: (1) curing mental illness; (2) making people happier; (3) studying genius and talent (Seligman et al., 2004). Nevertheless, after the war, curing mental illness emerged as the core objective while the other goals fell behind (Seligman et al., 2004). This acute attention to pathology surfaced due to the increasing cases of mental disorders that posed an instant and persistent concern across the country.

In its virtuous yet laser-focused pursuit of constructing a robust scientific field around diagnosing and treating mental illness, psychology overlooked the other side of the human

experience. It unwittingly established proverbial blinders that centered on understanding

suffering while blurring the study of well-being (Sheldon & King, 2001). Given this, psychology

had little to say about the features of life that make it worth living – optimism, hope,

engagement, meaning, and friendship, among others. Metaphorically, it has been said that

psychology entails strategies to bring people from -5 to 0 but does not study nor understand how

to bring people from 0 to +5 (Gable & Haidt, 2005). For example, psychology offers strategies

for how to become less disconnected but doesn't offer interventions for maintaining existing,

strong relationships. Discerning this trend in the latter half of the twentieth-century, Dr. Martin

Seligman grew ever more concerned with this negativity bias that prevented psychology's clear

understanding of the whole human experience (Sheldon & King, 2001).

In his 1998 presidential address to the American Psychological Association (APA),

Seligman aired his concerns. He proposed that the field of psychology should be just as

concerned with what was right with people as with what was wrong (Seligman et al., 2004).

Given that psychology's stated purpose is to "make the lives of all people more fulfilling and

productive", he counseled that it must spend as much time, energy, and resources on building the

positive side of life as it does fixing the negative (Seligman, 1998). Thus, positive psychology

was born.

Launching the academic community into studies of human strengths, virtues, well-being

and designing interventions to help people become happier and not just less sick, positive

psychology uncovered the positive side of the 0 to +5 spectrum. It became a science that

encompassed positive subjective experience (i.e. well-being), positive individual traits (i.e.

optimism), and positive institutions (i.e. community; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Fully

recognizing the existence of human suffering, public dysfunction, and ineffective organizations,

positive psychology captures the entire spectrum of living (Gable & Haidt, 2005). With the knowledge that growing the positive can also prevent the negative, positive psychology charts a path for all individuals, groups, and organizations towards flourishing.

Cultivating flourishing in individuals, groups, and organizations is positive psychology's primary goal. A flourishing life is marked by well-being, health, balance, life satisfaction, purpose, and thriving. Flourishing moves beyond removing illness and pain and builds upon fleeting pleasure and simple enjoyment. It offers a holistic, full-spectrum picture of a good and happy life (Seligman, 2012). Positive psychology has discovered the many, personalized aspects that unlock flourishing to make life fulfilling and meaningful - offering important implications for where we invest our time.

Martin Seligman (2012) shares that a life of flourishing can be attained by thoughtfully honing five core aspects of the human experience: Positive Emotion (P), Engagement (E), Relationships (R), Meaning (M), and Achievement (A). Using his PERMA model, we find flourishing by honing positive emotion, becoming completely absorbed and engaged in experiences, fostering rich relationships, seeking meaning by serving something bigger than ourselves, and accomplishing goals for their own sake (Seligman, 2012).

When asked to describe positive psychology in two words or fewer, Chris Peterson, one of the field's founders alongside Seligman, elevated the R (relationships) in PERMA. He offered the answer, "other people" (Seligman, 2012). Much of the positive aspects of our lives involve other people. Consider the last time you laughed uncontrollably, felt awe and wonder, sensed purpose and belonging, or achieved a significant goal (Seligman, 2012). Our hunch, in alignment with Peterson and Seligman, is that you weren't alone. Your experience felt worthwhile and important because of the people who surrounded you.

The significance of 'other people' sparked a passion in us as we read, wrote, studied, and reflected on individual and shared happiness in our positive psychology studies. Our work seeks to uncover the influencing aspect of R (relationships) in well-being by asking: How often were those 'other people' surrounding you that contributed to your flourishing your friends? Throughout its twenty-year existence, positive psychology has offered extensive theory, research, and interventions on familial and romantic relationships but has largely understated the positive influencing power of friendship. Friendship lives within R in PERMA but can also unlock benefits across positive emotion, engagement, meaning, and achievement. Just as positive psychology sought to fill the positive gap in psychology's focus, we now seek to fill the friendship gap in positive psychology's focus. Together, we will discuss how friendships can chart us on our personalized path to flourishing and just as importantly, discover how to foster flourishing friendships.

The Case for Friendship

Without friends, nobody would choose to live, even if he had all other goods.

—Aristotle

Of all the means to insure happiness throughout the whole of life, by far the most important is the acquisition of friends.

—Epicurus

In order to grasp the holistic, complex shared human experience, we would be remiss if we only explored what life looked like with flourishing friendships. We recognize that a large population of individuals are suffering on the negative side of the relationship spectrum - feeling disconnected, unhappy, and in pain. To responsibly unpack the mechanisms by which we can

maintain and strengthen existing friendships, it's imperative to prospect, at least for a moment, what the human experience looks like without social connection.

Despite the hyper-connectivity cultivated through rapid technological advancements, robust theories on social connection, and extensive research on the benefits of interpersonal relationships - our world is lonely. Loneliness, as defined by Williams and Braun (2019), is the subjective state of feeling alone and dissatisfaction with one's quantity and quality of social relationships. More specifically, it is the distressing feeling that festers when one's social needs and expectations are not met (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). Interestingly, loneliness is not simply prevented or cured through social connection. Individuals may have a booming social life yet still feel subjectively lonely. Congruently, social isolation is an objective variable marked by having few social network ties and infrequent social contact; not necessarily feeling alone, but being alone (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). Feeling lonely can produce objective social isolation when individuals feel so alone that they continue to withdraw from social relationships. On the other hand, objective social isolation - truly being alone - can spark loneliness (Williams & Braun, 2019). Taken together, unaddressed loneliness and social isolation have damaging effects on our behavior, physical health, emotions, and cognition.

In their recent 'Loneliness in the Workplace' Report, Cigna (2020) found that loneliness has reached epidemic levels. As many as 80% of Americans under 18 years-old and 40% of adults over 65 years-old, report 'sometimes being lonely' (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). Even more disheartening, loneliness levels are rising. In 2019, loneliness increased to 61% from 54% in 2018. Moreover, Cigna's (2020) study showed that younger generations are lonelier than older generations: 79% of Gen Zers (ages 7 to 22) and 71% of Millennials (ages 24 to 39) had the highest loneliness scores compared to baby boomers (ages 55 to 75; Cigna, 2020). In addition,

however, other studies show high levels of loneliness among the elderly, demonstrating that

loneliness is a pervasive issue. Across all age groups, research shows that those with fewer

supportive connections and relationships are lonelier (Williams & Braun, 2019).

Studies have shown that loneliness and social isolation independently link to poor health

behaviors and health risk factors (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). Loneliness and social isolation are

associated with smoking, physical inactivity, and lack of sleep (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). These

poor behaviors over time diminish physical health through increases in blood pressure and

cholesterol, activation of physical and psychological stress responses, and suppression of

immune system functioning (Williams & Braun, 2019). Shockingly, a robust meta-analysis

showed that loneliness translates to a reduced lifespan, equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day

(Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). Being alone and feeling alone negatively impact our well-being in

such critical emotional, behavioral, and physical ways that Former U.S. Surgeon General, Vivek

Murthy (2017), has called loneliness a growing health epidemic.

Recent literature shows striking data on the additional emotional and cognitive

implications of loneliness. Loneliness is associated with suicide, increased risk of Alzheimer's

Disease, personality disorders, and depressive symptoms (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010).

Interestingly, the causation between loneliness and depression has proven reciprocal - loneliness

predicts depression and depression predicts loneliness. In experimental studies, loneliness not

only influences depression, it increases stress, fear, and anxiety, and decreases optimism and

self-esteem (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). These data demonstrate that both being connected and

feeling connected are the scaffolding to our view of our self and the world. When our scaffolding

of connection weakens, our emotional, behavioral, and physical self is at risk (Hawkley &

Cacioppo, 2010).

Many psychologists and researchers argue that the primary mechanism for loneliness' damaging effects on an individual is the perception of being unsafe, which pairs with being alone (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). Feeling alone and unsafe spurs a cognitive and behavioral hypervigilance to protect ourselves from potential threats. From an evolutionary perspective, this proved helpful when our hunter-gatherer ancestors found themselves isolated, needing to survive and protect themselves. However, now in our relatively safe and populated world, a heightened attunement to social threats causes us to mis-interpret our surroundings. We start to view our social sphere as threatening, expect negative interactions, and remember more frequently the negative aspects of our relationships (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). To protect ourselves from these threats, our negatively biased thoughts prompt retreating behaviors and propel a downward spiral in which lonely individuals become more isolated and removed.

Recognizing the harrowing trajectory toward loneliness and diminished well-being, what can we do to help? While loneliness in our neighborhoods, schools, workspaces, and even families continues to increase, there is still hope. Research demonstrates that most individuals rate the time spent with friends, partners, children, and co-workers as more inherently rewarding than being alone (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). So much so that Diener and Seligman (2002) found that the only clear differentiator for happiness was spending more time with others (Diener & Seligman, 2002). Given that loneliness is the absence of connection or the subjective feeling that existing connections aren't meaningful, we'll explore how quality connection can address loneliness and enhance well-being. Individuals can sense emotionally and potentially even physically, the importance of spending time with others. There is something about the investment into our relationships and the positive outcomes that they generate, that gives meaning to our existence.

Compared to loneliness and social isolation, social connectedness breathes life and purpose into our human experience. Empirical data supports the idea that maintaining and strengthening reliable, positive relationships is critical to happiness and health (Sheldon, Kashdan, & Steger, 2010). Moreover, it is unimaginable to explore the human experience without a careful understanding of human connection (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). While the study of social relationships is young, much of the existing research outlines the behaviors that undermine strong connections or the negative outcomes of deficient relationships. However, with the growth of positive psychology, researchers have begun to pivot to examine the positive side of social connection.

The social group itself has evolutionary protective factors as we learn from Julian Jaynes (1976, 2000) – a genetic adaptation to protect us from potential predators. Research across 308,849 individuals, followed for an average of 7.5 years, showed that individuals with social relationships are 50% more likely to survive compared to those with insufficient or poor social relationships (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). When our hunter-gatherer ancestors were in a group, not only did social support allow them to more effectively protect themselves, their perception of safety prompted pro-social behaviors that strengthened their relationships. These strengthened relationships then became the mechanism to unlock psychological and physical health benefits such as self-esteem, social support, stronger immune system functioning, and increased lifespan. The act of reaching out to our 'tribe' kickstarts an upward spiral of well-being that leads to vitality and longevity, even in our day. It creates the scaffolding of our 'self' - building emotional, behavioral, and physical structures of a flourishing life (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010).

While having many social relationships can be pleasurable and fun, it is the quality of our social relationships - the strength of our tribe - that most contribute to our health and well-being.

Strong social relationships link to lower incidence of chronic illness, lower mortality, and higher levels of happiness (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). They improve our ability to cope with stress and anxiety, fight off infectious diseases, diminish our chances of mental decline, cancer, and heart attack, and therefore, are a strong predictor of a happy and long life (Cohen, 2004). The increases in psychological and physical health are rooted in connecting with others and are likely due to the collective benefits of everyday interactions. Social relationships provide us with a sense of meaning and purpose in our life and are a major source of self-esteem (Leary et al., 1995; Rowe & Kahn, 1997). When individuals choose to invest in a relationship with us, it shows that we have value and worth which then increases our confidence (Craig & Kuykendall, 2019). The relational experiences we have with family, neighbors, classmates, and co-workers enable us to demonstrate and receive responsiveness, care, and acceptance - contributing to our scaffolding of connection (Clark et al., 2018).

Once our scaffolding of connection strengthens, our emotional, behavioral, and physical self begins to cultivate a life of flourishing (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). Interestingly, the benefits of connection that enrich health and well-being are largely fostered through one of the aforementioned social relationships: friendship networks (Chopik, 2017). In 2007, researchers Christakis and Fowler, studied the spread of obesity through a large network over a 32-year period. Through their work, they discovered that friends had the largest influence over obesity. For example, if your friend became obese, the likelihood that you would also become obese was 57%. Whereas, the effects of siblings (40%) and spouses (37%) were noteworthy, yet significantly lower (Christakis, & Fowler, 2007). In addition to obesity, they found that loneliness and depression, as well as happiness and well-being, spread more strongly through friendship networks (Rosenquist et al., 2011; Smith & Christakis, 2008).

Reiterating the importance of relationship quality, when friendships are positive and flourishing, well-being can be enhanced. However, when friendships are negative and waning, they can exacerbate existing health concerns or create new ones. In one study, data showed that when friendships were the source of tension in one's life, individuals report more chronic illness; but when friendships offer support, individuals report being happier (Chopik, 2017). While seemingly intuitive that friends would have an influence on our health and well-being, they surprisingly might play a larger role than familial or spousal relationships in adulthood (Christakis, & Fowler, 2007).

Giles et al. (2005) suggest that friendships play a larger role in predicting health and well-being in adulthood due to their selective nature. Individuals likely maintain and strengthen the friendships that contribute to their subjective well-being and withdraw from those that don't. However, removing oneself from poor familial relationships may be significantly harder, infeasible, or understandably, undesirable. Additionally, Larson et al. (1986) offer that friends frequently engage in leisure activities that involve spontaneity. Family relationships, while positive and enjoyable, tend to include more serious or monotonous interactions (Larson et al., 1986). This selective, spontaneous, and positive nature of friendships establish the opportunity for them to influence our health and happiness well into adulthood.

Overall, social connection is an important predictor of happiness, longevity, and health. It addresses social isolation by increasing the number of social ties and social contact. Because it can be a source of meaning, self-esteem, and belonging, it has the potential to address loneliness. Being connected and feeling connected then prompt a reinforcing upward spiral of prosocial behaviors that cultivate flourishing in existing relationships and foster new connections. This stable social scaffolding, a significant portion of which we would call friendship, is the

foundation of our view of 'the good life'. As research shows, friendship, more than familial

relationships, have a greater influence on our health and well-being in adulthood (Giles et al.,

2005). Thus, understanding how to maintain and strengthen friendships is important for each of

us to foster a flourishing human experience.

A Review of Friendship Literature

Ask any English professor for a list of works that deal with love, sex, or marriage, and

you will hear a dozen rattled off without pause. But ask the same question about

friendship and, after the first couple of items, you are likely to hear a loud silence. (Welty

& Sharp, 1991).

So, how did friendship evolve and why? As we look throughout the animal kingdom,

other mammals, specifically primates, dolphins, and elephants have demonstrated close,

enduring relationships, suggesting that the evolutionary origins of human friendship began with

the social bonds formed among non-human primates (Seyfarth & Cheney, 2012). Mammalian

friendships, as explained by DeScioli and Kurzban (2009), facilitate cooperation, provide access

to mates, and provide defense against aggression. There also exists an enhanced exchange in

information in both close dyads and larger coalitions (DeScioli & Kurzban, 2009). These

friendship bonds in animals have been shown to be adaptive and have gender specific

differences. For male animals, they increase the individuals' reproductive success. For female

animals, these relationships reduce stress and increase infant survival and longevity (Seyfarth &

Cheney, 2012).

These findings may help explain the evolution of friendship in humans. While it may

seem instinctive, friendship in humans is difficult to address empirically. While the obvious

explanation is that humans are social creatures, what is the evolutionary function of friendship

for our species (DeScioli et al., 2011)? Humans are unusual in that they form long-term, dyadic

relationships with non-relatives; but the evolved function of these relationships remains unclear

(Silk et al., 2003). The traditional theory is that friendship is a trade relationship in which

individuals exchange goods and services to reap gains in materials or resources (Trivers, 1971).

Substantial evidence suggests, however, that friends cooperate without closely monitoring

contributions (Silk et al., 2003). Friendship, it appears, is sought after for more than solely

reciprocal benefits and increases in trade.

Many surveys suggest that social support, in the form of friendships and marriage, is one

of the biggest environmental contributors to well-being (Myers, 2000). Haidt et al. (2008) calls

this the *Dyadic Hypothesis*, which states that people need relationships to flourish. The

hypothesis is specifically about dyads - one individual tied directly to another. This well

supported hypothesis in the scientific study of well-being suggests that people don't necessarily

need large groups to flourish, but that they do need friends, lovers, and other individuals who are

responsive to their needs (Haidt et al., 2008).

One potential evolutionary reason for the desire to be in dyadic relationships is *The

Alliance Hypothesis* (DeScioli & Kurzban, 2009). This hypothesis states that human friendship is

less like a trade agreement and more like alliance politics, where individuals can increase their

power by creating and maintaining a network of allies. These alliances are solidified long before

the onset of an argument or quarrel, securing an individuals' place and security within a group.

While these reciprocal motivations may explain *Exchange Relationships* – relationships where

individuals give benefits and expect a form of repayment, they don't explain *Communal

Relationships* - relationships in which individuals give support or benefits without expecting a

specific response in return. DeScioli and Kurzban (2009) argue that friendship is in fact,

communal and more than just an exchange. Individuals will often support a friend even when

they know for certain that there will be no repayment. For example, offering a weeks-worth of

home-cooked meals when a friend's family member passes, taking notes in class for a friend

when they're sick, or hosting a celebratory surprise gathering. While we may expect our friends

to offer support when we're in a similar position, we don't expect immediate recompense for our

genuine love and care.

Understanding that we need these communal dyads to flourish, Kohut (1971, 1977)

explains the developmental process of these connections. Originally his theory suggested that the

self was composed of two needs: grandiosity and idealization. Through follow-up clinical

observations, however, he proposed a third undeniable self-need: the need for belongingness.

Belongingness, from a developmental perspective, consists of companionship with caregivers,

affiliation with peers, and broader worldly connectedness. Companionship originates in early

infancy and extends throughout adult life. The young child immediately forms a bond with a

nurturing parent or caregiver, which is the foundation of self-esteem (Lee & Robbins, 1995).

This close dyadic contact provides the child with a pervading sense of security required to form

stable, positive future relationships. However, if the child experiences chronic or traumatic

relationship experiences early in life, they may become extremely fragile, maintain low self-

esteem, have difficulty forming close relationships, and prefer isolation to avoid rejection (Lee &

Robbins, 1995). Given this, healthy relationships with parents or caregivers that are marked by

empathy, care, and security early in infancy and childhood are the foundation for developing

friendships later in life.

Following childhood, during the transition to adolescence, the need for affiliation arises.

Affiliation plays an important role as the child matures and begins to establish peer relationships

with those who have similar qualities in appearance, opinions, and values. These experiences with peers continue to foster and strengthen the child's self-esteem, allowing the child to extend their sense of belongingness well beyond the initial companion (parent) relationship (Lee & Robbins, 1995). Those who do not develop this part of the self, foster a perceived sensitivity to criticisms and misunderstandings from peers, diminishing their self-esteem. With less confidence, they may struggle to form strong bonds which leads them to maintain superficial or deviant roles in an attempt to belong (Lee & Robbins, 1995). Given this, the added layer of self-esteem cultivated through affiliative relationships in youth, continues to build the scaffolding of our self to prepare us for flourishing friendship in adulthood.

Ultimately, when a maturing child feels connected, having successfully maintained companionship and affiliation without major threats to self-esteem, they can feel comfortable and confident within a larger social context. This broader sense of connectedness enables them to feel 'human among humans' even beyond their companionship with family and affiliation with peers or organizations (Lee & Robbins, 1995). From a developmental perspective, armed with enhanced self-esteem, support, and a rooted sense of belongingness, individuals have a stable social scaffolding to strengthen existing and foster new friendships.

With a broadened understanding of the evolutionary perspective of friendship and the innate human need for belongingness, the definition of friendship, while understudied, has budded in the field of psychology. One of the earliest definitions comes from Aristotle who argued that there are three types of friendship (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1994). The first type is a *friendship of utility* that forms for being useful, beneficial, or profitable. Friends do not love each other for themselves but for the desire of something which they gain from each other. Friends who find each other useful may see opportunities for career progression or financial gain. While

this could be profitable in the short-term, Aristotle says that this type of friendship is self-oriented and can quickly lead to arguments that cause this type of friendship to end (Pawelski & Pawelski, 2018). Once the motive or utility of the friendship is gone, friendship based on utility often dissolves.

The second type of friendship, *friendship of pleasure*, is based on finding the other person pleasant, enjoyable, or fun to be around (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1994). As with friendships of utility, friendships of pleasure are self-oriented with each friend concerned with the pleasure they can gain from the other (Pawelski & Pawelski, 2018). Nevertheless, friendship of pleasure is a higher type of friendship because utility friends don't necessarily enjoy each other's company. Friends of pleasure may enjoy certain activities together – sporting events, fun nights out on the town, and comedy shows, among many other activities. Nevertheless, this type of friendship is also fickle and often dissolves when what the dyad found to be pleasant, changes. When one party is no longer pleasant or useful to the other, they cease to care for each other or desire to be together. While both types of friendships – utility and pleasure - are instrumental, we enter them based on what we can get out of them. When we stop getting what we want - profit or pleasure - we see no value in the friendship and it ends (Pawelski & Pawelski, 2018).

According to Aristotle, the third type, a *friendship of virtue*, is the optimal type of friendship (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1994). In a friendship of virtue, two people are friends because they want what is best for each other. They have similar values and character and want to help each other grow into the best versions of themselves. This type of friendship is not self-oriented or instrumental. Each person is focused on the other and loves them for their authentic selves - not for what they can get out of the relationship. What's great about virtuous friends is that they often encompass the other two types of friendship - pleasure and utility. Friends that

value one another, often have fun together and benefit from knowing each other (Pawelski &

Pawelski, 2018). While optimal, Aristotle explains that these friendships are infrequent and rare,

because they require time and familiarity. While the desire for friendship may arise quickly,

virtuous friendship takes time to develop (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1994).

Adding to Aristotle's definition of friendship, another psychologist, Robin Dunbar (1998)

offers a layered framework for different types of close relationships in our day. According to

Dunbar's (1998) theory, our tightest layer or circle includes 1–5 loved ones that encompasses

romantic partners and family and may also include non-familial best friends (Mollenhurst et al.,

2014). The next group is three times larger (10–15 individuals) and likely includes several good

friends (La Gaipa, 1977). The size of the next two successive layers includes 40–50 friends and

120–150 meaningful contacts (Dunbar, 1998, 2010; Miritello et al., 2013). Dunbar (2010) uses

the term friend or friendship broadly for members of all four layers, including family members,

spouses, friends, casual friends, friends of friends, as well as coworkers, classmates, and

neighbors.

Leveraging Dunbar's (1998) framework, why is it that so many people feel lonely - that

their layers of social connection are lacking? As mentioned across many studies, one constraint

may be our brain capacity (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1994; Hays, 1985; Wiseman, 1986). The

Social Brain Hypothesis predicts that there is a limit to the number of individuals with whom a

person can maintain a "coherent face-to-face relationship" (Dunbar, 2010, p. 24). That is, there is

a limit on the number of friends a person can have. This limit (approximately 150 people) is a

result of cognitive and temporal constraints. Our cognitive ability to recognize another person as

a unique individual, recall information and prior interactions, and comprehend that person's

association with others, limits the number of friendships we can maintain (Dunbar, 1998, 2010).

In other words, we can only meaningfully recognize, remember, and interact with 150 people, let alone provide them all with the support, care, and concern that is required to maintain our tightest layers of relationships.

Consistent with Aristotle's claim, an added constraint to friendship is that formation, maintenance, and strengthening takes time and our time is finite. Time spent with one person can be interpreted as an investment toward the relationship's continuance or as an opportunity cost for developing other potential relationships (Hall, 2019). Longitudinal studies of friendship development concur that the initial friendship formation can happen rather quickly, usually within 3–9 weeks after an initial interaction (Hays, 1984, 1985). However, it may require another three to four months to develop a close relationship (Saramäki et al., 2014; Van Duijn et al., 2003). Approximately four months after meeting potential friends, few new friendships develop (Saramäki et al., 2014) either because the individuals involved have elected not to pursue a closer relationship (Bahns et al., 2017) or they do not have enough time to dedicate to new friends (Van Duijn et al., 2003). While we may all aspire to develop virtuous friendships, we must be aware of the barrier we all face - specifically, the time it takes to develop friendships.

Reiterating this sentiment, Hall (2019) further explains that in addition to investing time with our friends, the quality of our interactions is a critical moderator of friendship development. Time spent together - doing a physical activity, watching TV, or gaming - positively predicts closeness, while time spent working or sitting in a classroom together negatively predicts closeness (Hall, 2019). Consistent with this research, the most common turning point for closer relationships to develop is participating in a joint activity (Becker et al., 2009). When two people both elect to spend time together, it is one of the most important factors in friendship development. Because our time is limited, investing time in friendship demonstrates our

commitment to and investment in our friends and contributes to our happiness. While close virtuous friendships take more time to develop and maintain than casual friendships (Saramäki et al., 2014), they tend to be more fulfilling and meaningful to our human experience (Hall et al., 2011).

In further research, Hall (2019) offers specificity in terms of the amount of time required across friendship layers. He argues "casual friendships" emerge after about 30 hours of time spent together, followed by "friendships" that develop after approximately 50 hours. "Good friendships" then take even longer and begin to form after 140 hours of time spent together. Reiterating Aristotle's claim that virtuous friendships are infrequent and rare because they require time and familiarity, Hall (2019) shows that close, intimate friendships or "best friendships" do not emerge until about 300 hours of time spent together. While spending this extensive quality time with each other, best friends tend to talk more often and in greater depth and affection than do casual friends (Hall et al., 2011; Hays, 1985). This demonstrates the importance of everyday, frequent conversation - specifically catching up, checking in, joking around, and purposeful discussion (Hall, 2019). All in all, investing time with friends opens the opportunity for shared activity and meaningful conversation - paving the way to virtuous friendship.

Despite the well-documented benefits and important insights on friendship formation and maintenance, many people don't prioritize spending time with friends. Having enough free time is a frequently mentioned challenge to making friends (Hays, 1985; Wiseman, 1986); yet, Americans only spend an average of 38 minutes per day socializing compared to 2.8 hours of TV watching and 1 hour of playing games or using a computer (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). While individuals may say they don't have time for friendships, it's rather that they spend their time on other activities. Given this, we hope to build a case for why investing time in friendships

is vital to well-being. In addition, we seek to offer empirically-validated guidance for how to maximize time spent with friends once it's prioritized.

Key Research Focus

Wishing to be friends is quick work, but friendship is a slow ripening fruit.

—Aristotle

To discover real-world methods for maintaining a strong friendship, we interviewed 15 fellow classmates from the Master of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) program at the University of Pennsylvania who self-identified as having a close, platonic friend. By examining the sentiments, behaviors, and habits of these exemplar friends, we hoped to uncover tactical tools for strengthening and maintaining close friendships over time.

Methodology

We selected our sample of friends based on an exemplar methodology. Exemplar methodology claims that studying positive outliers in a specific domain, rather than average performers, yields descriptive insights that may not be uncovered otherwise (Bronk, 2012). Exemplar methodology, for our study, illuminates what individuals and dyads do in practice to preserve, reinforce, and enhance friendship. It further grows our understanding of core friendship tenets across what individuals believe make a good friendship and how these beliefs inform their behaviors. Exemplar methodology is a growing methodology in positive psychology and desires to uncover what can be duplicated for optimal human functioning. Through studying exceptional friends - those successful at maintaining a close, platonic friendship - we aim to explore the strategies that others can leverage to bolster their own existing friendships. In recruiting subjects for this study, we established a nomination criteria through a survey question to identify every-day friendship exemplars.

Nomination Criteria

To identify exemplar friends, we used the nomination criteria of answering "strongly agree" to the survey question: "At this point in my life, I have a very close platonic friend who is not a family member" (Appendix A). In our case, we did not define an exemplar friend as having a certain number of close friendships. Research shows that the quality of friends compared to the quantity, is more strongly correlated to subjective well-being (Van der Horst & Coffé, 2012). With a focus on quality friendships, we believed that at least one close friend was sufficient to capture insights for friendship maintenance and strengthening.

Additionally, given the subjectivity of friendship duration in relation to one's age or previous length of friendships, we determined not to be prescriptive regarding length of the friendship as an indicator of exemplar status. The focus was individuals' strong alignment, as indicated by 'strongly agree' to having a 'close platonic friend'. We assumed agreeing with having a close friend would mirror, at least in part, Aristotle's theory of virtuous friendships (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1994), Dunbar's (1998) tightest layer of loved ones, and Hall's (2019) research of time required to develop friendships - however, we were eager to gather additional information through qualitative interviews.

Recruitment of subjects began with posting our survey link on Canvas, a course management system for online learning. Our fellow MAPP classmates were encouraged to take the survey and share it with their family and friends. Importantly, the survey included a link to the University of Pennsylvania's formal consent form and all participants confirmed their consent prior to participating in the survey (see Appendix A for full survey). In addition to the nomination criteria question, the survey asked: (1) What makes your closest friendship special?

(2) What do you do to keep your closest friendship strong? Answers to these questions provided

additional color to the survey responses and informed follow-up interview conversations.

With over 140 survey participants, we selected 15 MAPP classmates to interview who

qualified as exemplars, based on their indication of having a close, platonic friend who is not a

family member, while considering gender, age, marital status, and sexual orientation (Appendix

D).

Description of Sample

The 15-person sample of exemplar friends was comprised 7 men (47%) and 8 women

(53%). Of the men, 4 were married (57%) and 3 were unmarried (43%). Of the women, 5 were

married (63%) and 3 were unmarried (37%). 6 male subjects were heterosexual (86%), with 1

being homosexual (14%). All female subjects were heterosexual. The ages of subjects ranged

from 25 to 61 years-old (Appendix D). Interestingly, all exemplars reported that their identified

close friend was their same gender.

4 out of the 7 men interviewed did not meet the nomination criteria (marking "strongly

agree" to having a close, platonic friend). However, due to the challenge of identifying men who

met our nomination criteria, we elected to include them in our sample for the purpose of

uncovering differences in friendship experiences and strategies between men and women. While

our focus is exemplar strategies of friendship across gender, we felt it pertinent to understand the

potential challenges that men face in friendship and believed this data would provide a welcomed

depth and nuance to our research. Furthermore, while the four men did not "strongly agree",

three marked "mostly agree" and one marked "somewhat agree" indicating that they had an

existing friendship that was worth discussing. Furthermore, the male interviewee who answered,

"somewhat agree", had the least amount of communication with his friend. He reported going

months without communicating and years without seeing his friend in-person. Additionally, to our excitement, he expressed a strong desire to learn how to become a better friend moving forward.

Procedure

After indicating that they had a close, platonic friend on the initial survey, the 15 friendship exemplars received an email explaining that they had been selected for an interview (Appendix B). Once individuals confirmed their willingness to participate, 30 minutes was requested for the interview and availability was discussed. The brevity of the interviews was intentional to ensure feasibility of recruiting a substantial number of participants. Fortunately, many participants were eager to discuss their cherished friendships and graciously continued the interview, enabling us to ask follow-up questions and gather additional insights.

Once an interview date was determined, participants received an email with a Zoom meeting invitation. Participants were told that the interview would be about one, identified close friendship. We asked participants about their friendship's history and experiences (friendship formation, duration of friendship, living proximity, communication mechanisms, friendship maintenance, etc.), what makes the identified friendship special or unique, and their overall perspectives on what constitutes a strong friendship (Appendix C). The interviews lasted 29 to 46 minutes, took place through the Zoom application, and were simultaneously recorded with a transcription application called "Voice Recorder' - an iPhone application that records and transcribes spoken conversations. While one of us facilitated the interviews, the other took robust and detailed notes on a shared Google document. The audio files and notes are stored on the same encrypted drive. After the 15 interviews were completed, we coded the interviews based on the goals established for the study.

The methodology of *coding* is an analytical process that researchers leverage to uncover concepts, similarities, and recurrences in gathered data (Chun Tie et al., 2019). It provides the connection between collecting data and generating a theory that explains the data. Furthermore, it includes "segmenting sentences or paragraphs into categories, and labeling those categories with a term" (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007).

To begin the coding process, we cleansed the data of any personal identifiers. The next step was familiarization with the data through thorough review and identification of initial themes. During this preliminary review, we generated themes based on what the data offered rather than fitting the data into an existing theory or organizing the data based on our pre-existing, biased views on friendship. This coding method is referred to in research as 'grounded theory' (Chun Tie et al., 2019). One of the main characteristics of grounded theory is that it is grounded in data. To code our data using the grounded methodology, we inductively coded as many themes as possible, labeling key words and phrases. Leaning upon qualitative research best practices, the themes we created were as exhaustive as possible, relevant to the study's goals, mutually exclusive, and conceptually congruent (Swanson & Holton, 2005).

Throughout our coding process, friendship themes were purposefully uncovered across two main dimensions - friendship maintenance and friendship strengthening strategies. Friendship maintenance refers to the process of preserving the existing state of the relationship - the practices and principles required to keep the friendship going. Friendship strengthening goes beyond maintenance to include the practices for amplifying the mutuality, vitality, and shared value of the relationship. Due to this focus, our data analysis hovered around 5 core interview questions. Four of the five questions addressed participants' relationship with the identified, close friend: (1) How often do you see this friend in person? (2) How often do you communicate

with this friend? (3) How do you maintain this friendship? (4) Tell me about a time when this

friendship strengthened. The fifth question focused on broader friendship sentiments: (5) What

advice would you give to someone who wanted to foster stronger friendships? The results and

analysis of answers to all five questions are offered below.

Results & Analysis

Table1

Interview Question #1: How Often Do You See This Friend In-person

In-Person Frequency	# of Responses
Daily	3
Weekly	3
Monthly	2
Ever few months	3
Yearly	2
Every few years	2

The coded data across the frequency in which each exemplar saw their close friend in-

person was relatively balanced from daily to every few years. While 'daily', 'weekly', and 'every

few months' were slightly higher than 'monthly', yearly' and 'every few years' (by 1 participant),

we did not discover an emergent frequency theme of in-person connection across examplars. While

the data may not directly contradict the aforementioned friendship research, it was nonetheless

surprising to us. As friends ourselves, we hypothesized that exemplars of friendship would report

spending a significant amount of time in-person with their friends from weekly hangouts to smaller

daily interactions. However, we recognize that many friends don't live near each other nor have

the time, due to various reasons, to see each other regularly in person.

Upon further reflection, a possible explanation for the even distribution across frequencies came to mind. As Hall (2019) argues, in the initial weeks and months of friendship, spending time together is most important. In all cases, the friendships discussed in our study were several years long if not decades, in some instances. Given this, it is probable that the 300 hours required to develop a 'best friendship' had already been invested in by participants. With a strong foundation of seeing their friends frequently in the past, friendship dyads could now see each other when feasible and potentially even less (depending on proximity, work, children, travel, etc.) without diminishing the strength of the friendship. As one friendship exemplar stated: *"The test of friendship is being able to pick back up where you left off - when we get back together there seems to be a preserved closeness and warmth that doesn't atrophy"*.

An additional, related explanation for what we see in the data is the hypothesis that when asked about a close friend, exemplars identified someone who they have known for a long duration but don't see frequently compared to a newer friend they see more frequently. If true, this hypothesis informs that frequency is not the sole indicator of closeness. In addition to what our data shows, we see this manifested in our everyday interactions. For example, you may meet someone very frequently (e.g. co-workers or neighbors) and yet not maintain a close friendship with them. On the other hand, you may only see your best friend once a year yet remain close. If in-person, frequent interaction is not a critical indicator of friendship maintenance and strength, what is?

As proponents of friendship, building upon Hall's (2019) research, we argue that spending time together in-person is an important aspect of friendship - albeit, perhaps more transformative in friendship formation than in maintenance or strengthening. Furthermore, the in-person frequency among friends is unique to and dependent upon each friendship's

expectations and proximity as well as each individual's schedule, commitments, and desires. In

summary, while 3 participants reported seeing their friend in-person daily, and 3 on a weekly

basis, the remaining participants (60%) reported seeing their friend less frequently. Our hope in

sharing this data is to show that there is no 'tried and true' rule for how often you must see your

friend. While time together with our cherished friends is valuable, we propose that in-person

time together isn't essential for maintaining a long-term friendship. However, what we

discovered when diving further into the data is that some form of consistent communication is

critical in keeping a friendship alive.

Table2

Interview Question #2: How Often Do You Communicate With This Friend

Communication Frequency	# of Responses
Daily	5
A few times a week	5
Weekly	0
Every few weeks	2
Monthly	0
Every few months	3

Compared to the data across frequency of in-person interaction, the data across frequency

of communication showed a clear theme: friendship exemplars spend a significant amount of

time communicating with their friend. As demonstrated in the data, 5 exemplars (33%) indicated

that they spoke to their friend daily and 5 others (33%), a few times a week. While a third of

participants only conversed with their friend every few weeks or every few months, the majority

(66%) maintain regular touch-bases with their friend. As uncovered through our interview

conversations, the vehicles of communication that were used varied across texting, phone calls, emailing, and video calls. The content of virtual conversations consisted of checking in, discussing logistics, motivating each other, and sharing news and jokes, among other topics. As one exemplar offered "*[The communication] doesn't all need to be deep or meaningful, it is also trivial - it is everything*".

It is important to note that many of our interviews were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic when the use of virtual communication increased due to shelter in place orders, social distancing, and remote working. As individuals minimized the time spent with friends in person, virtual communications likely increased. While we explicitly asked participants to reflect on the pre-COVID context, their answers may have been skewed by the mental heuristic of remembering the last several communication instances - via texting and video. Nevertheless, we argue that this data has something significant to say about maintaining friendships.

As we've learned from Hall et al. (2011) and Hays (1985), close friends tend to talk more often than casual friends, demonstrating the importance of prioritizing every day, frequent conversation. "*Friendship enriches my life - it makes me feel that I matter to have a friend check in on me*", one exemplar offered. Sending content that we know they are interested in, expressing a feeling of pride or gratitude, sharing a laugh, or inquiring about their life shows our friend that we're thinking about them and that they matter to us.

Moreover, reciprocal and balanced communication is necessary for friendship strengthening. Friendships that produce the most relationship satisfaction and individual and shared happiness are characterized by *mutual* understanding, *mutual* care, and validation of *each other's* value (Craig & Kuykendall, 2019). As many have experienced, one-sided friendship - consistently being the one who reaches out - doesn't feel like a flourishing friendship at all. It is

when both individuals in a dyad feel understood, cared for, and appreciated, that friendships

thrive. Reaping the benefits of our digital age, we have an opportunity to leverage the fluidity of

communications to unlock the reciprocal care and conversation that we crave as friends.

Table3

Interview Question #3: How Do You Maintain This Friendship

Friendship Maintenance Strategy	# of Responses
Communicate (call, facetime, text)	8
Share experiences	5
Visit each other	2
Share interests	1
Ask for help	1
Mentor each other at work	1
Care for each other's children	1
Be transparent	1

Following our discussion around the frequency of friendship connection and

communication, we explicitly explored the topic of friendship maintenance. The following

maintenance themes were collected and grouped based on similarities. Once again, consistent

communication was the most common answer from exemplars on how they maintained their

friendship. While the mode of communication varied (texting, Facetiming, phone calls, video

calls, and emailing), 53% of exemplars reported that consistent communication with their friend

was essential for maintaining the friendship. Some individual responses included, "*I send*

information I know they will enjoy"; "*I set a reminder to reach out to them*"; "*I mail letters to my*

friend". One exemplar explained, "*You don't stay close because you are good friends, you stay*

good friends because you stay close."

Another common answer (33%) was that shared experiences were a key factor in friendship maintenance. As we learn from Becker et al. (2009) the most common turning point in developing stronger relationships is participating in joint activities. Some exemplars mentioned bonding through a similar phase of life - getting married, having children, going through college or graduate school, or starting new careers. Bonding through work experiences - either working together or sharing work stories - also emerged as a way to maintain friendships. This may be especially true when careers are new and/or demanding and having someone to share ideas with who understands the pressures of the job becomes very valuable in individual and shared well-being. Interestingly, play came up just as often as work did - traveling together, sharing holidays together, and other novel experiences helped to maintain friendships.

Phase of life, work, and play among other experiences may facilitate friendship maintenance because they provide reasons to reach out, content to discuss, and memories to reflect on or cherish. Simply put, shared experiences also give us something to talk about. All in all, regardless of the activity, shared experiences help us to sustain friendships, as reiterated by one exemplar, "*To build a strong connection, you can't just talk. You have to have new shared experiences, new memories*."

Other important strategies that appeared in our interviews for maintaining friendships were visiting each other, bonding over shared interests, and asking for help. While offering support may be easier than asking for help, this act of vulnerability can be an important part of close friendships. Fredrickson (2013a) explains that vulnerability through intimacy is the safe and comforting feeling you get when you know that another person truly understands and appreciates you. By reaching out for help and having your friend respond with support and care, a mutual sense of trust is reinforced by your commitments of loyalty to each other (Fredrickson,

2013a). Moreover, asking for help fosters additional opportunities for frequent communication

and shared experiences as friends check-in, offer support, and show up when we need them. All

in all, the data demonstrates that communication and shared experiences are the core effective

strategies that exemplars employ to maintain their close friendships.

Table4

Interview Question #4: Tell Me About A Story/Time When You Felt This Friendship Strengthen.

What Happened

Friendship Strengthening Strategy	# of Responses
Support through hardship	8
Show up during life's celebrations	3
Support in pursuits/dreams	1
Express interest in friend's passions	1
Provide honest advice/thoughts	1
Find humor in similar things	1

In addition to maintaining friendships, our research is interested in how to strengthen

friendships. We looked to uncover real-world examples of when and how friendships have

strengthened by asking exemplars, "Tell me about a story/time when you felt this friendship

strengthen. What happened?" The core theme that came up consistently among 8 exemplars

(53%) was the act of support. Most often the support provided to a friend was due to a hardship -

showing up at a funeral when they weren't expected, uplifting a friend through the death of their

child, consoling a friend through a miscarriage, or even encouraging a friend to finish a long

assignment. However, the exemplars mentioned that friendship support also manifested through

celebration (20%) and showing up during a happy time - weddings, birthday parties, retirement,

and graduation. Supporting during good times and in bad not only can be an act of strengthening friendship, it is an indicator of friendship for many. For example, one exemplar said, "*When you have big markers in your life, you realize who is there for you - who your friends are*". Many of us view the transformative moments in our life (deaths, weddings, graduations, etc.) as core milestones to reflect on who our close friends are largely based on who shows up to support us.

Additionally, exemplars spoke about the reciprocal nature of support in their friendship: the support they received from their friend and the support they offered to their friend. In the literature, the role of reciprocity suggests that acting generously or providing support to another person would encourage them to do the same in return (Gouldner, 1960). This reciprocal support then engenders the mutuality and positive regard characteristic of strong connections and friendships (Stephens et al., 2012). By being there for our friends in big and small ways, we contribute to the positivity felt between us - strengthening our relationship. We also set the expectation and generate motivation in our friends to be there when we need them most. The influence of this support in our closest relationships is what fosters a vibrancy to our experience. As beautifully mentioned by a friendship exemplar, "*The depth of connection, the love, the soaring joy - who cares about you and who you care about. This is the most remarkable experience we can have as humans*".

Furthermore, the other avenues of strengthening friendships mentioned included supporting each other's dreams, expressing interest in each other's passions, providing honest advice, and finding humor in similar experiences. Across stories from our interviews, it was clear that the actions and activities to strengthen friendship all relied on a core principle: being present. When you offer support and care, express interest, celebrate, or provide advice it is not enough to be physically 'there'. Being present with another person, in their experiences, with them, means

being psychologically available and turning your full attention to another. While attention is

easily consumed or deflected, when we deliberately direct it away from distractions and towards

our friends, it activates a sense of strong, mutual connection (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). When

asked about how to strengthen a friendship, an exemplar exclaimed "*Show up. When it's good,*

bad, when they need it, and when they don't. Show up as yourself." Whether we are supporting

through hardship, showing up in celebrations, or encouraging pursuits and dreams, it is our full

presence and caring support that make our friendships stronger.

Table5

Interview Question #5: What Advice Would You Give Someone Who Wanted To Foster Stronger

Friendships

Friendship Advice Strategy	# of Responses
Prioritize and invest time	7
Offer support	4
Be vulnerable	4
Strike a balance (reciprocity)	3
Be authentic	2
Share similar interests	2
Share 'Yes' to invitations	2
Be loyal	1
Foster trust	1
Be honest	1
Don't judge	1
Respect each other	1
Be present	1
Have fun together	1
Grow together	1

After reflecting on their identified, close friendship, exemplars were asked about friendship in general: "What advice would you give someone who wanted to foster stronger friendships?" In addition to asking interviewees to reflect on their own friendship, we were interested to see how their responses would compare when asked to think outside of themselves and offer friendship advice to others.

Unsurprisingly, 7 exemplars (46%) mentioned prioritizing and investing time as a way to foster stronger friendships, mirroring the other datasets that emphasized the importance of frequent communication and interaction. As mentioned, Americans only spend about one-fourth the amount of time socializing as they do watching television (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). It is not that individuals don't have time to strengthen friendships, it's that they don't use the time they have to do so. In contrast, Hall (2019) believes that individuals will commit to taking the time and energy to invest in friendships once they feel that they can satiate their evolutionary need to belong (Lee & Robbins, 1995).We prioritize the friendships that cultivate the greatest sense of belonging but in order to prioritize them we have to invest time. "You have to spend time investing in people," Hall says. "If we don't prioritize these relationships they are not going to develop." Echoing this research, an exemplar stated: "*You have to nurture it [friendship]. What is the soil that your friendship is planted in*?" Much like how plants wilt without proper attention and care, so do our friendships. By prioritizing our friends - investing time, effort, and presence - we nourish the soil that our dyad is rooted in, contributing to a shared sense of belongingness.

Following the advice to prioritize and invest time in friendships, 4 (26%) participants counseled to 'offer support' and 'be vulnerable'. Both themes emerged in previous data as exemplars reflected on their close friendship. Although it was understandable and unsurprising

that the friendship advice data echoed the practices and principles that exemplars use in their own friendship, we were amazed by the plethora of additional friendship advice offered (as indicated in Table 5 above): strike a balance, be authentic, shared similar interests, say 'yes' to invitations, be honest, foster loyalty, don't judge, and grow together, among others.

Research Summary

By reviewing and analyzing the data from our interviews, we concluded that the processes for maintaining and strengthening friendships while related, are unique - necessitating different types of activities. Nevertheless, one core theme across both processes emerged: prioritizing and investing time. Whether you are striving to keep your friendship alive after moving across the country (maintenance) or are hoping to feel more connected with and understood by your friend (strengthening) - effort, investment, and time are required. Additionally, we found that investing time is not enough by itself. How friends spend their time together matters.

Friendship Maintenance Strategies

In dissecting the data across how exemplars invest time to maintain their friendships, we uncovered that frequent communication and shared experiences were mentioned most often. To keep our friendships thriving we must communicate and check-in, whether about something meaningful or trivial. Reaching out informs our friend that we are thinking about them, that the relationship is important to us, and that we are willing to invest the time needed to preserve it. Through these efforts, we deepen a sense of belonging in the friendship which in turn can motivate our friend to reciprocate in reaching out to us. This shared sense of belongingness and frequent communication then sets the stage for rich participation in activities together.

Whether through life phases, working together, or engaging in playful activities, shared experience is a critical part of staying close to our friends. Similar to how communication can spark shared experience, shared experience can serve as the basis for rich conversation. Additionally, if infused with positivity, vitality, and meaning, shared experiences can facilitate a desire to continue investing time in the friendship, given the benefits gleaned. Used together, communication and shared experiences can facilitate a reinforcing, upward spiral enabling our efforts to sustain the friendship.

Friendship Strengthening Strategies

The communication and shared experience themes, once honed, can cultivate a space for friends to utilize key friendship strengthening strategies. In analyzing the data across how exemplars invest time in strengthening their friendship, providing support to each other and cultivating vulnerability emerged as top themes. Showing up for our friends and being open about the help we need sows the soil for a flourishing relationship. In our research, we learned that offering support and being vulnerable are often two sides of the same coin. Providing support to a friend in hardship or in joyful milestones strengthens friendship. But in order for the support offered to be valuable for strengthening a friendship, the receiver must be willing to accept the support with grace and gratitude - a form of vulnerability.

In addition, vulnerability can promote increased support in our friendships – one friend is vulnerable enough to ask for support and the other friend is willing to provide it. This supplies an opportunity for both friends to feel that they matter. Mattering, as argued by Prilleltensky (2019), consists of adding value and feeling valued. When we ask our friend for help, we provide them with an opportunity to add value to the friendship. When they listen, care, and provide us with the support we need, it demonstrates to us that we are valued. All leveraged together, we found

that communication and shared experiences (for friendship maintenance) and support and vulnerability (for friendship strengthening) will enable individuals to foster enduring and thriving friendships.

Gender Differences & Further Research

One interesting finding that emerged as a key theme in our research was the difference in friendship by gender. While we understand that not all female friendships or male friendships look alike, we discovered a few notable differences worth mentioning. The biggest theme in our research survey that sparked our understanding of gender differences was that women answered "Strongly Agree" to "At this point in my life I have at least one close platonic friend who is not a family member" more often than men. Men more frequently responded "Mostly true" or "Somewhat true". These results begin to tell the story that both men and women have friendships but that women may perceive their friendships to be stronger.

In addition to our findings, existing literature has uncovered key friendship differences between men and women that may explain why women have subjectively stronger friendships than men. The process of forming friendships looks different for each individual, but it specifically differs across genders – friendships among men tend to focus on shared interests and activities, while friendships among women focus on trust and self-disclosure (Stokes & Levin, 1986). Consistent with this difference, men value shared attitudes, values, interests, and group-oriented behaviors, whereas women value emotional sharing and intimacy and have stronger motivation to develop close, dyadic ties (Stokes & Levin, 1986). Because of this, women and men often take different approaches to social bonding. Whereas male friendships can be transitory, hierarchical, and task-oriented, female friendships tend to be more tightly interconnected and focused on emotional bonds.

Interestingly however, when men converse with women, they tend to take on the value of intimacy and self-disclosure, more so than when they interact with male friends. Many researchers have found this to be true, specifically in workplaces - the place most likely for men to form friendships (Fehr, 1996). While male co-workers may have other close male friends in the office, they share more personal information with female co-workers. There are several possible explanations for this, however, they have not been studied and are purely theoretical. Some possible explanations include: (1) Men feel more comfortable disclosing to women because women may show more of an interest in their personal lives and ask more personal questions; (2) Men are more reluctant to show weakness to their male friends than their female friends; (3) Men desire to show competency over warmth when it comes to their male friends, but may choose warmth over competency with their female friends. While these explanations are compelling, they were not explored in our study and warrant further research to inform how men's friendship approaches may change when interacting with women.

Although intimacy styles among men and women for close friendships are most often different, their satisfaction with their friendships are not (Hall, 2011). Men and women define the importance of their friendship in very similar fashions. They want to have friends who are authentic, loyal, and trustworthy. Despite sharing this desire, men are more likely to build relationships that focus on what friends can do for them, what opportunities they can provide, and what resources they can offer - what Aristotle would define are *Utility Friendships*. Women, on the other hand, are more likely to expect their closest friends to offer emotional support (Hall, 2011). Perhaps it is the nature of their friendships - friendship based on utility for men and friendship based on virtue for women - that contribute to the perceived strength of the friendship (as shown in our survey).

These overarching differences in gender may then inform where men and women feel more comfortable spending their time to maintain and strengthen friendships. For example, it may feel more natural or authentic for men to focus on shared activities rather than communication in order to maintain friendships. Additionally, men may take a tactical, task-oriented approach to offer support, whereas women may prefer to be vulnerable as a way to strengthen friendship. Regardless, all maintenance and strengthening strategies can be beneficial for a friendship. We encourage men and women to utilize the maintenance and strengthening strategies offered that feel the most valuable, effective, and authentic to their personality and the nature of their friendship.

In addition to these findings, there are several areas across gender differences in friendships that pique our interest and will require further research. For example, existing studies show that women explicitly desire less sexual intimacy with opposite-sex friends than men—a pattern consistent with the hypothesis that women perceive friendships as akin to kinship (Ackerman, Kenrick, & Schaller, 2007). Given this, we are eager to understand if opposite-sex friendships can thrive when one or both friends are sexually attracted to the other. Furthermore, because men often desire sexual intimacy with female friends, can opposite gender friendships thrive when one or both friends are in committed relationships with other partners? Lastly, because of these differences, what are effective strategies for maintaining and strengthening opposite-sex friendships?

Overall, we are interested in the value of opposite-sex friendships across well-being and life satisfaction. We hypothesize that all friendships have the potential to positively impact our well-being whether same-sex or opposite-sex. With increased knowledge about the effective

strategies for forming, maintaining, and strengthening opposite-sex friendships we hope that

individuals will have more opportunities to foster flourishing friendships with men and women.

A Scientific How-To Guide to Friendship

Wherever you are, it's your friends who make your world....

—William James

Table6

Friendship Maintenance & Strengthening Strategies

		Strategy	Detailed Tactics
Friendship in Adulthood	Maintaining Friendship	Consistent Communication	• Listen empathically and actively • Express optimism • Foster reciprocal communication
		Shared Experiences	• Cultivate positivity resonance • Exercise together • Incorporate play into your experiences
	Strengthening Friendship	Offering & Providing Support	• Capitalize on positive experiences, events, and news • Be present and supportive through hardship and loss • Respond in an active constructive manner • Recognize, appreciate, and cultivate character strengths
		Being Vulnerable	• Provide cues/responses marked by empathy, care, and love • Foster trust • Engage in a mutuality of self-disclosure

As we considered our shared friendship exploration - why friendships are important, how

we develop friendships, and what's required to grow flourishing friendships - we felt strongly

that real-world tips were the essential finish to our journey. While it is a noble cause to study and

learn about friendships, we felt it personally pertinent to gather the tactical practices to sustain

and improve friendships in our everyday experience.

Before we embarked along this pathway of discovery, my adult son approached me one day and said, "Mom, you have really great friends. How do you make and keep friends?" This was not a passing question but a heartfelt plea to learn and understand from someone he considered to be a "friend" expert. His question, however, stumped me. While I agreed I had a strong, supportive circle of close friends, I couldn't put into words how I made them, how I strengthened them, or how I maintained them. I have thought about his question many times as we studied and researched friendship. As a mother and friend, I now feel better equipped to answer his questions, along with so many others who ask, "How do I maintain and strengthen my friendships?"

The question of how to strengthen and maintain friendships was less important when structures were in place that naturally cultivated strong connections - tribes, church congregations, bowling leagues, close knit communities, neighborhood block parties, and locally-based workplaces. Today, however, due to various reasons, many of those institutions are gone or diminished and the question of building connections that matter to us has become more of an individual quest than a group dynamic.

Through this work of arming individuals with friendship strategies we hope impassioned readers will disseminate these practices to their friends, families, neighbors, teachers, and bosses-infusing vibrancy, support, and friendship into their communities. We dream of a world in which all individuals feel empowered and efficacious to develop, sustain, and strengthen the types of friendships they need to live a flourishing life. We are confident that this friendship toolkit will pave their journey - just as it did ours.

How-To Maintain Friendships

In this section we provide key suggestions for maintaining friendship among adults, leaning on research in positive psychology, stories from exemplars, and our own experiences. To us, the phrase 'friendship maintenance strategies' signifies the processes of preserving the existing state of the relationship - the practices and principles required to keep the friendship going. These practices, among many others, as shown in our research include: communication and shared experiences between and among friends. The forthcoming information provides details on the theory, science, and application of each of these maintenance strategies.

Before diving into the suggestions, it is important to remember that an essential aspect for maintaining friendships is *consistency* in communication and shared experiences. Some ideas for creating this consistency in friendship are (1) Establish regular times to talk to or meet each other in person (i.e. certain days/times of month or year – weekends, birthdays, celebrations etc.); (2) After each interaction, set a date for the next interaction (i.e. plan the next movie night at the end of the current movie night); and (3) Establish habits or traditions that create consistent patterns (i.e. always celebrating your birthdays together – in person or via phone). By creating consistent habits for communication and shared experiences, friendships can be successfully maintained through different phases of life, diverse experiences, and distant physical locations.

Communication Tactics

Ultimately the bond of all companionship, whether in marriage or in friendship, is conversation.

—Oscar Wilde

Communication Tactic #1: Effective Listening

Effective listening is often overshadowed or deprioritized when friends are too focused on their own goals for a conversation - how they will respond or what they want to express - instead of hearing what the other person is saying. Many, if not most people, listen as a means to make their own point rather than as a vehicle to better understand the speaker (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). Effective listening is a key element of high-quality connections and is characterized by being empathetic and active. Empathetic listening centers on the friend who is speaking with the intent of understanding their point of view rather than expressing your own. Active listening includes being present and responding thoughtfully to the point of view that is shared (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003).

Prior to responding, there are two core strategies to foster stronger connection while listening: eye contact and smiling. Eye contact has been shown to be especially powerful for effective communication (Farroni et al., 2002; Niedenthal et al., 2010). Studies show that eye contact is needed for facial mimicry to occur (Schrammel et al., 2009), such as when your friend smiles, you also smile. This facial mimicry, in turn, is necessary to accurately decode what your friend is feeling (Maringer et al., 2011). By making eye contact with our friends as they express important reflections or emotions, we are able to more effectively understand them and are therefore better prepared to respond with empathy.

Making eye contact is a prerequisite to our ability to use smiling effectively in conversation. Looking intently at our friend allows us to discern when it is appropriate or helpful to smile at them. It's often natural for us to reciprocate a smile when a friend smiles at us. It is more nuanced however, to understand how to leverage smiling when friends are sharing bad news, painful emotions, or unhappy experiences. While smiling isn't appropriate in every

situation, research has shown that smiles evolved not only because they provided the 'smiler' the opportunity to express their happy emotional state but to enable the 'smiler' to evoke positive emotion in others (Owren & Bachorowski, 2003; see also Gervais & Wilson, 2005). Given this, smiling can be used to reciprocate positive emotion or as a mechanism to cultivate positive emotion in your friend.

Hasson et al. (2004) have found significant evidence that shared positive emotions, such as smiling, in conversation is good for friendship. Through research studies, they discovered that there is widespread brain coupling between speaker and listener during emotional moments in which communication is effective (Hasson et al., 2004; Stephens et al., 2010). When people share positive emotional states, they also share key biochemical and neural patterns. What is even more significant is that the greater this speaker-listener neural coupling, the greater the understanding in conversation (Stephens et al., 2010). Given this, the more we are able to share positive emotions during conversation, whether through eye contact, smiling, or other strategies, the more shared understanding we will foster with our friend.

Ideas for Application – Effective Listening

Once you have listened fully and intently, making eye contact, smiling and giving your presence to your friend there are many strategies to employ to embody empathic and active listening (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003).

➢ Paraphrase - Express in your own words what you heard your friend say

➢ Explore - Not only reflect on the content of what was shared but your friend's emotions, voice (pitch, speed, volume), and body language

- Emotion: "I heard you say you were proud, what made you feel that way?"

- Voice: "Your voice got higher and you sounded excited when you mentioned X. Tell me more."

- Body Language: "Your shoulders slumped when you talked about X. How does X make you feel?"

➢ Summarize - Pull together the themes of the discussion into a few points

➢ Solicit Feedback - Ask if your friend felt heard and understood; "I'm working on my listening skills, where could I improve?"

Communication Tactic #2: Optimism

Another contributor to a healthy friendship is an optimistic explanatory style. An explanatory style is defined as the way we most frequently explain the causes – positive or negative - of events that happen to us (Peterson, 2009). Learning and implementing methods to strengthen an optimistic explanatory style can help us experience more positive events in our lives, build stronger connections with others, and help us achieve higher psychological and physical well-being. An optimistic explanatory style may also help us maintain and strengthen more meaningful friendships, since optimists are more likely to benefit in the social domain.

For example, a study by Brissette et al. (2002) described how students coped with the challenge of starting college. Their study found that optimists - those that explained more positive causes to the events that happened to them - experienced greater increases in their social networks during the first semester than pessimists. Additionally, pessimistic women who were being treated for breast cancer were more likely to withdraw from their social activities more often than their optimistic counterparts (Carver et al., 2003). There is evidence suggesting that social networks and optimism may have mutually reinforcing effects. Segerstrom (2007) found

that obtaining and maintaining larger, more supportive social networks over a 10-year period of time was related to increases in optimism over that same time period.

Optimism is a positive resource for maintaining relationships through communication. One reason may be that optimists are easier to like and more enjoyable to be around and talk to than pessimists. Studies have confirmed that we want to be around people who express positive expectations for the future more so than people who express negative expectations (Carver et al., 1994; Helweg-Larsen et al., 2002). Understandably, social interactions with optimists are more positive than interactions with pessimists (Räikkönen et al., 1999).

Another explanation for optimist's ability to more effectively maintain and build friendships may be that optimists work harder at their relationships. In a study by Srivastava et al. (2006), relationship partners began by having a conversation in the laboratory about the area of their greatest disagreement. The couples then had the opportunity to rate their own behavior and their partner's behavior during this interaction. After one week, the couples were asked how well the conflict had been resolved in the preceding week. Researchers discovered that optimism predicted perceptions of greater supportiveness from their partner, which predicted more positive engagement in the conflict discussion. These perceptions of supportiveness through positive engagement was a beneficial effect of optimism on the couple's conflict resolution and communication (Srivastava et al., 2006).

Although there are relatively few studies of the role of optimism in friendships, existing evidence suggests that pessimists have a harder time than optimists in relationship satisfaction – romantic or otherwise. Given the importance of close relationships for our well-being (Seligman, 2018), optimists appear to have the advantage in strengthening and maintaining close friendships and cultivating well-being. As Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "The only way

to have a friend is to be one." Perhaps he should have said, "The best way to have a friend is to be an optimist."

Ideas for Application – Optimism

While some research shows that explanatory styles - optimistic or pessimistic - are influenced by genetics (Peterson & Steen, 2002), positive psychology has shown that they are also highly modifiable by specific experiences (Seligman, 2018). The following provides tactical ways to increase optimism in your life, conversation, and friendships:

➢ Reflect on how you explain life events and begin to practice an optimistic explanatory style. The aspects of explanatory styles include:

- Permanence - Whether you think an experience is stable or unstable - how long you think it will last.

    i.   Negative Event: Family member passing away

    ii. Pessimistic Explanatory Style: You believe that you will never be able to find comfort and hope again

    iii. Optimistic Explanatory Style: Understanding that you will be able to have joy, happiness, growth, and many other positive emotions and experiences once again

- Personalization - Whether you attribute an experience to internal or external factors - if you consider the experience to be your fault.

    i.   Negative Event: Family member passing away

    ii. Pessimistic Explanatory Style: Attributing the loss as entirely your fault (when it was not)

          iii.   Optimistic Explanatory Style: Ability to untangle your responsibility from the event and attribute it to external factors

- Pervasiveness - Whether you see experiences as global or specific - if you believe an event will affect all areas of your life.

          i.   Negative Event: Family member passing away

          ii.   Pessimistic Explanatory Style: Believe that you won't be able to find success or happiness in any aspect of your life - parenthood, career, health, or friendship etc.

          iii.   Optimistic Explanatory Style: Pivoting your perspective to consider that while sadness may always remain, happiness can still be cultivated

➢ Visualize Your Best Possible Self: What would your best possible self and life look like in 3, 5, or 10 years? The Best Possible Self exercise asks this question and includes spending twenty minutes a day visualizing and writing a narrative description of what you envision. This mental exercise encompasses various domains of life and is intended to uncover your most desired life state, having considered deeply held goals and envisioned them achieved (Lyubomirsky, 2008). Researcher Laura King found that individuals who did The Best Possible Self exercise showed immediate increases in positive moods and were happier several weeks later compared to those who wrote about other topics (King, 2001). Additionally, thinking and writing about your Best Possible Self taps into the cognitive benefits of optimistic thinking (Lyubomirsky, 2008).

➢ Visualize Your Best Possible Friendship: What would your friendship look like and feel like in 3, 5, or 10 years? In addition to envisioning your best possible self, we would encourage you and your friend to envision your best possible friendship. This discussion could include

friendship goals - for example, experiences you want to share, places you want to visit, skills you want to teach each other. It could also include commitments and detailed strategies to stay connected over time. While studies have not been conducted on the Best Possible Self exercise adapted for friends, we strongly believe that the positive moods and optimistic thinking generated from individual reflection would be present and perhaps even amplified in this shared friendship reflection.

Shared Experiences Tactics

A good friend will try to bail you out of jail. A best friend will be in a cell next to you saying, "Damn, that was fun!"

—Anonymous

Shared Experience Tactic #1: Positivity Resonance

Consider the last time you went to a concert or a comedy show with a friend. Did you feel boosts of joy, amusement, or awe? Was there symmetry in your smiling, swaying, or singing? Were you grateful to be there, sharing that experience, with your friend? If so, you were experiencing positivity resonance. Positive emotion expert, Barbara Fredrickson (2013a), outlines that the supreme emotion, *love*, or what she calls positivity resonance, is an upwelling of three tightly interwoven events: (1) positive emotion between you and another person; (2) a synchrony between you and another person's biochemistry and behaviors; (3) a motive to invest in each other's well-being that cultivates mutual care. This science shows us that love isn't set aside solely for family or romantic partners; it is the foundation of friendship.

In her work, Fredrickson (2013a) ensures that she emphasizes the critical factor in the difference between intimate love and other love: time. As Fredrickson (2013a) writes, "The clearest difference between the love you feel between intimates and the love you feel with whom

anyone you share a connection with is sheer frequency. Spending more total moments [through shared experiences] together increases your chances to feast on micro-moments of positivity resonance. These micro-moments change you" (pg 30). Leaning upon our shared experiences, with a simple uplift in positive emotion, synchrony of brains and behaviors, and mutual care, our friendships can become powerful intimate relationships, infused with love.

The co-experienced positive emotion, characteristic of positivity resonance, that reverberates between individuals, *broadens* awareness and *builds* social bonds of trust and commitment over time (Schneider & Fredrickson, n.d.). Fredrickson (2013b) has long shown the benefits of shared positive emotion between individuals. For example, the joy of attending a concert together is associated with higher levels of flourishing, mental health, and lower levels of loneliness and depression (Major et al., 2018). We know that experiencing bursts of positive emotion can increase our individual well-being; however, if we are able to share in positive emotion with others, there would be amplified social benefits for our relationships and collective flourishing (Schneider & Fredrickson, n.d.). When we engage in shared positive experiences – visiting a museum, putting on a play, singing together - we not only boost our individual well-being but feel more connected to those around us.

When positive emotions flow between you and your friend, you begin to mirror each other's postures and gestures, even perhaps, finish each other's sentences. You are literally and biologically on the same wavelength. True connection is physical, in-person, and grows in real time. It requires sensory connection (Fredrickson, 2013a). Scientists contend that one of the most important triggers for connection, behavioral synchrony, and therefore love is, eye contact. In addition to strengthening communication between friends, eye contact opens up a realm of other behavioral synchrony opportunities such as smiling and laughing (Fredrickson, 2013a). When we

are sharing a fun, enjoyable experience with friends and notice their behaviors - dancing,

singing, and laughing - we often join in. This shared positive emotion and behavior then charts

us towards love in our friendship.

In addition to positive emotion and behavioral synchrony, an investment in each other's

well-being is key to love in friendship. This may look different across friendships, but it always

hones care and concern. Friends extend their trust and compassion, attending closely to their

friend's interests and needs. We participate in activities that are meaningful to our friends. We

willingly develop skills in new areas to connect. We cheer friends on and help them as they

grow. The frequency in which we experience this shared love - positive emotion, behavioral

synchrony, and mutual care - then serves as the foundation for our flourishing friendships.

Ideas for Application – Positive Resonance

Select shared activities that spark positive emotion and create opportunities for behavioral

synchrony (examples are not exhaustive):

➢ Joy - karaoke, dancing, playing music

➢ Gratitude - volunteer, travel, acts of service

➢ Serenity - meditation, yoga, spa, outdoor activities

➢ Interest - movies, cooking, book club, puzzles

➢ Hope - religious/spiritual activities, writing, reading

➢ Pride - exercise, sports, competitions, learning a skill/language

➢ Amusement - comedy show, amusement park, board games

➢ Inspiration - cooking, museum, Broadway show, painting, dancing, singing

➢ Awe - concert, travel, watch a sunset, hike, spot acts of kindness

➢ Love - volunteer, activism, make new friends, get to know each other's family

Shared Experience Tactic #2: Exercise Together

As a deep dive example of an impactful shared experience that hones positivity resonance, exercising together was mentioned as a potential contributor to friendship maintenance in our survey. For both of us, this finding resonated since we have exercised daily with friends for many years. This shared activity has become an important part of the day when we can laugh with a friend, talk through ideas, share important events, and reveal personal experiences. It often serves as a vehicle for communication, support, and vulnerability - the other three core aspects of our friendship maintenance and strengthening findings. Due to this, the daily interaction through exercise has kept our friendships alive and strong for several years.

Exercising with friends also has the potential to contribute to daily well-being. Research shows that physical exercise activates the cerebellum - the part of the brain that coordinates movement along with our thoughts, attention, emotion, and social skills (Ratey, 2008). When moving, brain cells activate, connect, and enable us to focus and learn more effectively (Ratey, 2008). When exercising with a friend, our brain is better attuned to shared emotion and is more neurologically prepared to learn about our friend and remember what they share with us. Given this, if you already have a daily exercise routine, why not do it with a friend? You will boost your individual well-being while amplifying your connection. As one exemplar explained, "*The human experience is not meant to be experienced alone.*" This shared human experience with friends can apply to something as simple as daily exercise.

Shared Experience Tactic #3: Play

As we consider the way we formed friendships as children, play was an integral part of how we spent time together. As adults, play continues to be an important activity in friendship

maintenance. When we connect with others through play - sports, board games, competitions, karaoke, or frisbee at the beach, among others - we connect in ways that are novel compared to our normal routines. Connection through play is useful for reducing stress by taking us outside of our typical roles and routines and allowing us to see each other in a different light (Hallowell & Ratey, 2005). This may be especially important when we are building and maintaining friendships with coworkers outside of the workplace. When we are fully engaged with others through play, there is a sense of leaving the "real world" which allows us to take more interpersonal risk and enjoy a loss of self-consciousness (Hallowell & Ratey, 2005). In our interviews, several exemplars spoke of play and humor as an integral part of their friendship; some activities involving play that were mentioned were traveling together, taking a sunrise bike ride, playing sports, and choreographing a funny lip sync performance.

Humor also plays an important role in friendship. Humorous people tend to be more socially attractive to others (Sprecher & Regan, 2002). There are also many physiological benefits to laughter. When we laugh with others, there is an increase in the oxygenation of our blood, and we enjoy better health overall. Humor can also decrease social anxieties, thereby generating more opportunities for social connection (Institute on Character, n.d.). A good sense of humor was found to be one of the most desirable traits individuals look for in a friend (and a romantic partner; Sprecher & Regan, 2002). In our busy and stressful lives, play, humor, and laughter with friends can reduce our stress, strengthen our relationships, and make life more enjoyable.

Ideas for Application – Play

➢ Plan activities with friends that include play - karaoke night, casino night, bingo, obstacle courses, sports tournaments, dance-offs, etc.

➢ Plan activities with coworkers that involve play to establish friendships outside of normal

   roles and activities

➢ Find ways to use humor with friends and laugh at each other's jokes

➢ Play funny board games, go to comedy shows, plan harmless pranks

➢ Lighten up and don't be afraid to show your immature side to your friends

How to Strengthen Friendships

In this section we will provide key suggestions for strengthening friendship among

adults, leaning on research in positive psychology, stories from exemplars, and our own

experiences. To us, the term 'friendship strengthening strategies' signifies the practices for

amplifying the mutuality, vitality, and shared value of the relationship. These practices, among

many others, include: offering support during hardship and celebration and being vulnerable

through self-disclosure. The forthcoming information provides details on the theory, science, and

application of each of these strengthening strategies.

Support Tactics

Friends cherish each other's hopes. They are kind to each other's dreams.

—Henry David Thoreau

Support Tactic #1: Active Constructive Responding

As we've discussed, relationships with others are one of the most significant contributors

to life satisfaction and emotional well-being (Berscheid & Reis, 1998). Much of relationships'

impact on our well-being is influenced by the ways in which we respond to each other's life

events and experiences. Interestingly, research in psychology has long focused on the increase in

relationship satisfaction and well-being when others support us during times of challenge or

distress. While important, what can we learn from positive psychology literature about offering support during times of success or excitement?

As argued by Langston (1994), good experiences will happen to us and when they do, we often share them with others. This process of sharing positive news is known in the field of positive psychology as *capitalization*. Capitalizing on positive life experiences has been linked to shared positive emotion, relationship quality, and boosts in well-being; however, these benefits are largely due, not to the positive event itself, but to the reactions of those with whom the experience is shared (Gable et al., 2004). Given this, how we respond and offer support when others capitalize has a significant impact on our individual well-being and ability to foster flourishing relationships.

When a friend approaches you with a lightness in their step and excitement in their eyes, how do you respond? Gable and Haidt (2005) found that daily reports of positive event occurrences outnumber negative event occurrences 5 to 1, signifying that there may be more opportunities to respond to positive events than to negative. When preparing to respond to the capitalization offered by a friend, there are four response types to consider (Gable et al., 2006).

➢ Response Type #1 - Active Constructive Responding: Active constructive responding is characterized by enthusiasm, support, and authenticity. For example, an active-constructive response to a new job could be, "Wow, this is great news! Your hard work interviewing has paid off. I am so proud of you! Tell me more about what you will be doing."

➢ Response Type #2 - Passive Constructive Responding: The second response type, passive-constructive, is marked by quiet, understated support such as, "Good work!"

➢ Response Type #3 - Active Destructive Responding: Active-destructive responding entails

   demeaning the event – "Wow, I bet your new job will be hard. Are you sure you can handle

   it?"

➢ Response Type #4 - Passive Destructive Responding: Lastly, passive-destructive responding

   is characterized by ignoring the event, such as saying, "What do you want for dinner?"

   (Gable et al., 2006)

Among these four response types, the responses perceived as Active Constructive

Responding (ACR) by the capitalizer (the individual sharing the positive event) have the power

to positively influence friendships. By embodying enthusiasm and authentic support, we can

unlock enduring relationship benefits such as, individual well-being and higher relationship

quality, increased intimacy and trust, higher relationship satisfaction, fewer daily conflicts, and

enhanced engagement in fun and relaxing activities (Gable et al., 2004).

In close relationships, knowing that our friends are there for us when things go right plays

an important role in our individual health and the health of our relationship. To activate these

benefits and strengthen existing friendships, individuals should utilize active-constructive

responding, demonstrating enthusiasm and authenticity. By doing so, we not only show our

friends that the positive event itself is important, but that our relationship with them is important

(Reis & Gable, 2003).

Ideas for Application – Active Constructive Responding

When a friend shares exciting news with you...

➢ Develop a self-awareness of your response style - how do you usually respond to your

   friends' good news?

➢ Match their excitement in your response

➢ Express positive emotion

- Awe - "You amaze me"; "I am impressed by you"; "I admire you"

- Joy - "This is exciting"; "I am happy for you"

- Pride - "I am proud of you"; "I am lucky to have you as a friend"

- Interest - "Tell me more"; "I want to hear all about it"; "You inspire me"

➢ Ask questions

- "How did it feel?"; "What was the best part?"; "How do you want to celebrate?"

➢ Apologize if you have not responded in an active constructive manner and try again!

➢ Be open and accepting to feedback on your response style from your friends

Support Tactic #2: Character Strengths

Unsurprisingly, while sharing positive events, we reveal our unique strengths - the skills that we've developed, the challenges we are able to overcome, who we are authentically, and what makes us special. Having these strengths validated and appreciated, through active constructive responding, can be additionally beneficial for our well-being and those with whom we share (Gable et al., 2006).

Character strengths are positive traits that reflect our personal identity, are energizing when used, are personally fulfilling, and are essential to who we are (Niemiec, 2018). Character strengths align with numerous positive outcomes and are valued across cultures (Niemiec, 2018). In studies examining the relationship between character strengths and the five PERMA dimensions of well-being (positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment), all strengths were positively related to PERMA (Wagner et al., 2019). When we identify and use our strengths regularly, we can create supportive cultures, improve relationships, and increase well-being (Niemiec, 2018).

While Character Strengths have been examined under the lens of romantic relationships, we believe, based on our findings, that the same results can be cultivated in platonic, close, intimate relationships – or *friendships.* While similarities often exist in friendships, individual differences and strengths are what make friendships unique and interesting. Theorists argue that there is an adaptive value in recognizing and appreciating the strengths of our partners (Murray et al., 2006). Recognizing and appreciating the character strengths in our close friends can improve the quality of our relationships. An awareness and cultivation of strengths offers a springboard to stronger attachment bonds (Johnson et al., 1999).

A study by Kashdan et al. (2018) found that greater appreciation of a partner's strengths predicted greater relationship satisfaction, commitment, and investment. There was also greater perceived support for both promotion and prevention goals and greater sense of self-expansion or growth from interactions with one's partner. When we appreciate our partner's strengths, we are more likely to recognize and use our own strengths more often (Kashdan et al., 2018). When our romantic partners are appreciative of our strengths, we tend to experience greater satisfaction in our relationship, greater use of our strengths, and more positive interactions. While Kashdan et al. (2018) focused on romantic partnerships, close friendships can benefit from the appreciation of our own strengths, as well as our friend's strengths. Incorporating Character Strengths, a foundational piece of positive psychology, into our lives and our friendships is a critical aspect of our own well-being and may help us foster more meaningful connections with each other.

Ideas for Application – Character Strengths

➢ Take the VIA Character Strengths Survey with your friend

➢ Share your Signature Strengths (top 5 strengths on the report) with your friend

➢ Reflect on the strengths you have in common and how they amplify your friendship

➢ Reflect on the differences in strengths and how they amplify your friendship

➢ Spot Character Strengths in Your Friends: Individuals often offer that strength spotting is easier to do for others than for ourselves. Character strength spotting provides an opportunity to enhance a connection, appreciate the best in our friends, and validate what makes them feel unique and special.

1. Become familiar with the 24 Character Strengths on

   https://www.viacharacter.org/character-strengths

2. Label the Character Strength - What is the strength that you observed in your friend?

3. Explain the Character Strength - What was your friend doing to embody the strength?

4. Appreciate the Character Strength - Why do you value this character strength in your friend?

Vulnerability Tactics

Friendship is born at a moment when one person says to another, What! You too? I thought I was the only one.

—C.S. Lewis

As previously mentioned, vulnerability is an important strategy for strengthening friendships. When we share privileged information, accept support, and disclose personal feelings, we build intimacy in our relationships. When our friends feel like we "get them" and we feel like they "get us" there is mutual understanding which creates strong relational bonds (Fehr, 1996). Without vulnerability, friendships may remain in a more shallow and transactional state - consider Aristotle's friendships based on utility or pleasure rather than virtue. Furthermore, if personal information is shared with others without our friend's permission, trust dissipates and

our friend may retreat back to a more superficial level of communication, weakening the potential of the friendship (Fehr, 1996).

When a friend wants to disclose personal information to us, they must anticipate a positive response before deciding to share (Altman & Taylor, 1973). For example, they are watching for cues which may include genuine concern, willingness to listen, and reciprocal disclosure (Greene et al., 2006). Self-disclosure typically begins at a superficial level and then progresses to more intimate topics, depending on the reaction by the recipient. Given this, it is critical that we provide cues and responses characterized by empathy, care, and love. Furthermore, we can set the expectation that our friendship is a safe-space and that we are trustworthy by sharing personal information and trusting our friend first. Barbara Fredrickson (2013a) explains that the simple act of sharing an important secret from your life with someone increases your naturally circulating levels of oxytocin, which in turn raises your confidence that you can trust that person to guard your privacy (pg 49). Additionally, Greene et al. (2006) explain that when we disclose often, we are more likely to be the recipients of high levels of disclosure. This *mutuality of disclosure* is an essential part of strengthening friendships and progressing to more intimate relationships.

In Mandy Len Catron's (2017) essay, "To Fall in Love With Anyone, Do This," she refers to a study by psychologists Aron, Melinat, Aron, Vallone, & Bator (1997) which led to *The 36 questions that Lead to Love.* This essay explores whether intimacy can be accelerated by asking personal questions. The purpose of the 36 questions are built on the concept that sustained, escalating, reciprocal, and personal self-disclosure will promote closeness. While this essay was designed for the acceleration of romantic love, it is often used to promote non-romantic self-disclosure given that the concept of increased intimacy and closeness can also

apply to friendship. The following questions are a sample of the question list and could be just as applicable to friendships as they are to romantic unions:

➢ For what in your life do you feel most grateful?

➢ If you could wake up tomorrow having gained any one quality or ability, what would it be?

➢ Is there something that you've dreamed of doing for a long time? Why haven't you done it?

➢ What is the greatest accomplishment of your life?

➢ If you were to die this evening with no opportunity to communicate with anyone, what would you most regret not having told someone? Why haven't you told them yet?

By asking and answering questions that are more meaningful than "small talk", we build trust, increase intimacy, and strengthen friendships. Altman and Taylor (1973) argue that if our interactions with each other are rewarding and positive, the breadth and depth of our disclosures will increase. The way you and your friend respond to disclosed personal information will determine the growth and intimacy of your relationship (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998).

Ideas for Application – Vulnerability

➢ Instead of just sharing the experience that happened to you, share how you felt about it - your emotions and reflections

➢ When a friend discloses personal information to you, show interest and care

➢ Value confidentiality - always keep confidences

➢ If you break trust, own your mistake, ask for forgiveness, and make amends

➢ Assume positive intent

➢ Ask for help and support from others

➢ Accept help and support from others

➢ Share good news and bad news

➢ Don't be afraid to show your weaknesses to your friends

➢ Don't pass judgement - demonstrate compassion and empathy

➢ Ask questions that get past small talk to more meaningful topics

➢ Validate your friend's emotional response before sharing your own reactions

➢ Don't offer advice unless asked for it

➢ Be reliable - show up for your friend again and again

Our Friendship Vision

Friends are the family we choose ourselves.

—Edna Buchman

In a world with increasing social disconnection and loneliness impacting our health and happiness, friendships can be a key part of the solution. Among an insidious, global pandemic marked by social distancing, stay-at-home orders, and remote working, loneliness and disconnection are on the rise. Through a review of existing literature and our own qualitative research on friendship, we hope to not only address this loneliness epidemic but provide real-world strategies to foster friendships as a way to enhance happiness and well-being.

As we began our review of relationship literature, existing research unquestionably made a strong case for social connection and its influence on well-being across physical, emotional, and cognitive benefits. However, as we dove deeper, we quickly realized that the majority of the connection studies focused on romantic or familial relationships. While research on romantic and familial relationships can inform friendship practices, we were eager to discover the nuances of building meaningful friendships for individuals.

Therefore, our capstone's focus on friendship emerged due to: (1) Our personal experiences of friendship being a vital component of 'the good life'; (2) The emerging research that friendship has more of an influence on happiness and well-being in adulthood than familial or spousal relationships; (3) The overall limited instruction of friendship strategies in homes, schools, and communities. Thus, we felt responsible to enact our own qualitative research, through interviewing friendship exemplars and collecting real world strategies for maintaining and strengthening friendship in adulthood.

As we learned from existing research - friendships take time to develop and bloom into flourishing relationships. Because of this, we were interested in how to maximize the time spent with friends once it's prioritized. Unsurprisingly, the overarching theme of our qualitative research echoed Dunbar's (1998) work showing that friendships require time, energy, and investment. As we listened to stories of friendship, the themes of maintenance and strengthening strategies surfaced. Friendship exemplars taught us that maintaining friendships requires consistent communication and shared experiences. To strengthen friendships, individuals must offer support and be vulnerable. Through our research, we discovered that friendships take time, effort, and specific strategies to create meaningful relationships in our lives.

With the hope that our work and research will be leveraged in practical daily ways, we developed a scientifically-backed, real-world supported, "How-To Guide" for friendship. It offers tactical strategies for individuals to foster their own flourishing friendships. We dream of friends, parents, educators, religious leaders, and community influencers applying this toolkit on a broader scale to persuade and support all people in their pursuit of friendship. While we focused on friendships in adulthood, we recognize the importance of teaching friendship skills starting in children and adolescents. As Muhammad Ali said, "Friendship is the hardest thing in

the world to explain. It's not something you learn in school. But if you haven't learned the

meaning of friendship, you really haven't learned anything."

Appendices

Appendix A - Consent Form & Survey Questions

The Present Study
You will be asked to take part in a research study about social behaviors. You can decide if you want to participate or not. Before you decide, read the information below. If you have any questions, please contact pterni@sas.upenn.edu.

What will I be asked to do?
You will be asked to answer 3 questions about your social relationships. If you provide consent by providing your email address in the survey, you might be contacted for a chance of having a conversation with the researchers. In that case, you will to learn more about the study and the researchers will learn more about social behaviors. You do not have to do anything you don't want to.

What happens if I don't want to participate?
You can choose whether you want to be in the study or not.

Can I leave the study before it ends?
You can quit the study whenever you want to.

What are the risks?
This study should not be risky for you, and you cannot get hurt from doing anything for this study. You do not have to answer any questions you don't want to. You do not have to enter any personal information (email address) if you don't want to.

How will I benefit from the study?
Your answers will help researchers learn more about social interactions and behaviors.

Will my answers be kept confidential and private?
Yes. Data will be stored in a password-protected database. If you provide your email address, it will be deleted right after the researchers have completed their follow-up conversations. The de-identified survey responses (with none of your personal information) could be stored and distributed for future research.

Will I be paid for participating in the study?
No.

Who do I contact if I have questions about the study?
If you have questions about the study, please email pterni@sas.upenn.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in the research study, please contact the Office of Regulatory Affairs at the University of Pennsylvania at 215-898-2614.

Participation Agreement

By clicking the 'Next' button, you agree to participate in this study. You have read this form and had your questions answered. You understand that it is your choice to participate and you can stop and withdraw at any time.

Survey Questions

Welcome! As scientists who study friendship, we'd like to know...

1. At this point in my life, I have a very close platonic friend who is not a family member.

2. What makes your closest friendship special?

3. What do you do to keep your closest friendship strong?

Thank you! To receive a snapshot of what we learn about friendship, please let us know where to email you. You'll also be considered for a follow-up conversation with Penn Professor Angela Duckworth to learn more about friendship.

First name:

Last name:

Email:

Please re-enter your email address:

Age:
Thank you so much!

Be a friend (to us, Angela Duckworth & team) and **please forward this survey** to your friends so we can collect as many responses as possible.

Shareable link:
https://sasupenn.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_eSh4TvxJ47ZNQJT

Appendix B - Request for Interview

Subject line: You've Been Selected for A Friendship Interview!

Dear,

You are being asked to participate in an interview for a research project. Your participation will help us, graduate students in the Master of Applied Positive Psychology program at the University of Pennsylvania, uncover exemplar strategies, behaviors, and practices for maintaining and strengthening close friendships.

We have selected you because you self-reported that you have at least one close, long-term friendship. Your involvement in this research and the insights you provide will help us develop a framework for lasting friendship and enabling empirically-validated strategies for fostering these friendships in adults.

Would you have 20-30 minutes sometime next week or two to connect? If so, let us know what day/time works best for you. We look forward to hearing from you and answering any questions you have.

Your friends,

Kristin Elinkowski & Madison Romney

Appendix C - Interview Questions

Our Goal:
Our goal, through qualitative interviews, is to uncover real-world strategies for maintaining and strengthening friendships in adults.

Demographic Information (ask in the interview):
- Gender:
- Marital Status:
- Age:
- Sexual Orientation:

Interview Question (in-order):
- How long have you been friends?
- How far away does your friend live?
- How did you become friends?
- How do you maintain this friendship?
- How often do you see this friend?
- How do you usually meet with this friend (one-on-one, in groups / at restaurants, one of their houses, community space etc.)?
- How often do you communicate with this friend? What type of communication do you use (skype, texting, call)? How does this type of communication influence your friendship?
- What is special about this friendship?
- How do you celebrate with your friend?
- Do you share aspects of your life with this friend that you don't with other friends? Why?
- Tell me about a story/time when you felt this friendship strengthen. What happened?
- Tell me about a story/time when you felt this friendship weaken. What happened?
- What do you think characterizes a great friendship?
- Why is this type of friendship important to you?
- What advice would you give someone who wanted to foster stronger friendships?
- How has your friendship adapted given COVID-19?
- What questions should I have asked?

Appendix D – Exemplar Demographics

Variable	#	% (of 15)
Gender		
Female Exemplars	8	53%
Male Exemplars	7	47%
Age (years)		
25 and under	1	7%
26 - 35	4	26%
36 - 45	7	47%
46 - 55	2	13%
56 - 65	1	7%
Relationship Status		
Single	6	40%
Female Single	3	
Male Single	3	
Married	9	60%
Female Married	5	
Male Married	4	
Sexual Orientation		
Heterosexual	14	93%
Female Heterosexual	8	
Male Heterosexual	6	
Homosexual	1	7%
Female Homosexual	0	
Male Homosexual	1	

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