

# Friendology: The Science of Friendship

Why do we like the people we like?

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Friendships are unique relationships, but defining the relationship and its related dimensions can be a challenging task. Determining a single, fully adequate definition of friendship may be an insurmountable goal based on the wide variety of categories and life spheres in which friendships are formed throughout our lives. However, most researchers agree that friendship exists within the socio-emotional realm and that it is hallmarked by interdependence and the voluntary nature of interactions.

## Friendship Themes

Although everyone may have their own individual definition of what friendship should be, a few common themes of what friendship entails were revealed in a recent study.

1. Friendships are considered to exist when pleasure is taken in the company of another; when being with someone becomes a duty, rather than a preference, friendships begin to wane.
2. The construct of friendship implies reciprocity and give-and-take. This is not in the sense of an immediate even exchange economic model of behavior, rather that support is expected to flow both ways as needs arise for either party.
3. Levels of friendship commitment vary over a lifetime, depending on the energy required by family or other commitments at the time. However, many of the women believe that when crisis strikes, true friends can be counted on to offer support, regardless of any inconvenience or challenges they may face to do so.
4. We engage in friendships on a voluntary basis and we recognize that our friends are also making the choice to engage in the relationship. This strong mutual alliance was summed up clearly by one woman in the following manner, "I feel like my circle of friends are the family I chose."
5. Perhaps most importantly, genuine friendships will flourish only if mutual respect exists between friends.

## Who Do We Choose as a Friend?

Models of friendship show that there are two main categories of factors that influence our choice and pursuit of potential friends: individual factors and environmental factors.

Individual factors include such influences as approachability, social skills, self-disclosure, similarity, and closeness. Environmental factors include influences such as proximity, geography, activities, and life events.

Research continues to support our preferences for friends who we believe to be similar to ourselves and who have personalities that we enjoy being around; choosing friends such as these most likely decreases the possibility for interpersonal conflict.

### Do "Looks" Really Matter?

Level of attractiveness also comes into play during the initial stages of friendship. Americans tend to be drawn towards beauty, and we tend to believe that attractive people are more like us in their attitudes and values, regardless of where we rank in the world of beauty or style. Researchers have explored this seemingly innate attraction to attractive people and have found out some interesting things. For one, an attractive face tends to feel familiar to us—we feel like we have already interacted with this person previously, even if we have not. This feeling of recognition may partly explain why we might be drawn initially to an attractive person—their presence may help us feel comfortable in a social situation. However, it is still unproven that attractive women actually have more friends than less attractive women. In fact, research tends to show that we pretty much choose friends who we would rank at about the same level of attractiveness that we rank ourselves—the same way we tend to choose long-term romantic partners who are similar to us in their level of attractiveness.

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## Social Skills might matter more

We also want friends with good social skills—this makes friendship development that much easier for both parties in a friendship. Not only do good social skills help facilitate a budding friendship, researchers have also found that when someone shares positive words with us, it generates feelings of familiarity.

When it comes down to it, the people we like to be around are those who make us feel good about who we are, what we believe, and what we enjoy doing. Although not every friend will meet all of those preferences all of the time, the ones who support the aspects of our identities that matter the most are the ones we are most likely to count among our collection of good friends.