

Please Try This at Home

Monthly Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life

Making Awesome Friends Super Mario Style

Anyone else noticed that somewhere in the mid twenties it starts getting exponentially harder to make and keep good, supportive friends? So many Enemies to Connection start popping out all over the place, it's almost like we're playing Super Mario Brothers, where just to win one real friend in the end, we are constantly having to dodge foes of various sizes and severities:

- People get so busy that finding enough time to spend with them to get close takes a lot of effort.
- Singles start pairing off into couples and then have kids, making it just about impossible to hang out like we did once.
- Friends we've worked hard to get close to move away or we move away to communities where it feels like everyone already has friends.
- Those we run into at work or other regular activities are in different seasons of life that bring challenges and preferences that we, in our particular life stage, don't really share.
- As we get more specialized in our interests or learn life lessons and mature, the circle of people we'd actually want to hang with narrows as we see how different others are from us or we recoil from their areas of immaturity.
- Our growing list of relational hurts makes us reluctant to open up to others as easily.
- Finally, our resulting loneliness can make us feel so needy and unwanted that we fear others will recoil from us if we're honest about our need, so we hesitate to open up to them, further isolating ourselves.

Over time, it gets harder and harder to feel that initial "click" with people, figure out how to get close to them, and then hold on to them a good long time.

Unfortunately, as most of us move away from the family "home base," our need for a network of supportive people actually increases over time. Navigating life transitions like finding work in a down economy, weathering the anxiety and depression of the dating roller coaster, navigating the struggles of marriage, finding sanity time while raising young kids, not being married or having kids when "everyone else" is, surviving divorce or the death of someone close, changing careers, caring for aging parents, managing chronic pain or terminal illness—all of these life events are buffered by having a network of close, supportive friends. They really can make the difference between our experiencing life as overwhelming and devastating or manageable and ultimately strength-building.

Attack Strategies for Enemies to Connection

Since good friends are essential for helping us weather the difficulties of life and feel like we matter, and the path to good friendship is fraught with Enemies to Connection, how do we march out like Mario and Luigi, tackling each enemy as it comes and bouncing back from defeat, rather than becoming lonely, embittered hermits? I'm happy to share the Enemies to Connection I've encountered and the attack strategies I've learned (the hard way!) for making and keeping friends after age 25:

Enemy 1: Looking for a Quick Click

Often, when we are looking for friends, we'll begin by attending a gathering around a certain activity that we enjoy, mingle a bit there, and try to see if we "click" with anyone. If we don't feel a connection after a few times attending, many of us move on to the next activity gathering. Now certainly, there are some kinds of gatherings and some kinds of people that are such a bad fit that it just makes sense to move on. Where we miss out, though, is when our interactions with people at a gathering are just okay at first, though not amazing, and rather than staying around for awhile to see if a great connection could develop over time, we move on too quickly.

Few good friendships happen fast! And often, we're not as good as we think we are at quickly discerning which people we will ultimately "click" with. Some of my going on one-or-two-decade friendships have been with people who, in the first 5-10 times I met with them, I didn't think I'd ever like. But over time (usually an average of about 100 hours of face-to-face time for slow-to-get-close folks like me), I came to appreciate the invaluable qualities these friends revealed only upon longer acquaintance in different kinds of circumstances and environments. *After* I'd committed to hang around with them in groups and one-on-one over time—a commitment of at least 10 meetings—*then* the "amazing click" began happening, not the other way around.

Enemy 2: Initiation Fatigue

Asking someone else to hang out with us can be exhausting. We have to 1) think about what we want to do, 2) decide who we want to do it with, 3) make the call/text/email, 4) face the possibility that they could say "no" and that we'd have to deal with that disappointment and try not to take it personally, 5) figure out the logistics if they say "yes," and then 6) organize our lives around the commitment we made to do something at that time, and 7) weather the disappointment if something changes our plans at the last minute. If we are introverted, shy, easily hurt, depressed, low energy, or over-committed, these things become even more difficult. So some of us just wait for others to do it and feel rejected when they don't. Others of us will do it once or twice and then give up when the other person doesn't start initiating back. Still others of us will continue to initiate when the other doesn't, resent that they don't and take it personally, and let it gradually sour the friendship rather than telling the other person that we'd like them to initiate as well.

Overcoming this friendship enemy requires a combo of stamina, direct communication, and choices about our attitudes. To begin with something obvious to most of us, but not all, we need to stop assuming that we are the only ones who fear initiating. When others aren't calling us, that doesn't always mean they don't want to hang out with us. It usually means that they are as bad at initiating as we are because of their personal set of challenges to reaching out. If we want friends, we've got to simply decide to be the first initiator, no matter how scary that is. We need to grow into thinking of ourselves as Initiators, so it's just what we do. If the other isn't initiating back, but we still want to keep them as friends, we need to keep initiating long enough to develop the closeness required to then tell the person that it would mean a lot to us if they would do some of the initiation as well. That might be 3 times for some of us who are direct communicators, or 20 times for those of us who aren't.

If we get to the point where we've asked the other to initiate a few times, they haven't done it, and we're starting to resent it. We need to decide whether we enjoy being with the person enough that it balances out the annoyance of having to be the sole initiator in the friendship. If it doesn't, we may need to find a new friend who is better at this skill. But if we decide that the person is indeed worth initiating for, we need to remind ourselves on an ongoing basis that we

are choosing to be the initiator because it is an area of weakness for them, but we enjoy them enough that it is worth the imbalance in this area. Finally, we need to decide to stop holding this weakness against them so it doesn't ruin our relationship with resentment over time. Each time our annoyance comes to mind, we need to say, "I am choosing this. This friend is worth it to me for other reasons."

Enemy 3: Focusing on the "Shiny" People

We've all met them: those people who, when we're with them, make us feel *really* good. They laugh at our jokes, ask great questions, tell interesting stories, offer to help, say nice things about us, seem really interested in what we have to say, and are super generous. After being with them even just a few times, we're hooked! We want to hang out with them often and forever.

What I have learned about this "shiny" kind of person, though, is that they tend to attract a lot of people as friends. Often, they are so good at pleasing people that they get addicted to it. So it's a struggle for them to set reasonable limits with their time and energy. As they try to lavish energetic, quality attention on lots of people, they end up being spread thin and so they start flaking out on us. Schedule packed full, they have a hard time getting together on a regular basis. Or, feeling like they have to be on their A-game all the time, they tend to cancel on us or just disappear for awhile when their A-game isn't working out for some reason. In the long run, they tend to be unreliable, which really stinks if they happen to be our only friends or our closest ones.

Because they *are* so fun to be with when they do show up, I'm not recommending avoiding them. But it may be good to think of them as the "garnish" of our circle of friends, not the main course. Consciously deciding to pursue other friends in addition who might not be as "shiny" with their social skills, but can keep their commitments come rain or shine is a darned good idea.

Enemy 4: One-Stop Friend Shopping

Along the same lines, though time consuming, it's really wise to invest in a number of friends from a number of different circles, not just one. Plenty of us have met our group of friends through high time commitment work environments, one particular organization or activity, or the circle of people we meet through our significant other, only to find that we're out on our ear when work eliminates our position, conflict ravages our favorite club or place of worship, or we breakup with the person who was also friends with everyone else we knew. Yikes!

Working to maintain connections with friends in more than one circle is good insurance for when things go South. It also helps keep us from falling into the rut of hearing the same perspectives and doing the same activities over and over again. If all of our friends are routine-loving accountants, our ability to take healthy risks and discover unknown joys atrophies. But throw a few spontaneous adventurers into the mix and we're choosing to keep hold of and develop parts of ourselves we'd otherwise lose. Diversity in our friends helps us to be all we can be (without joining the armed forces...).

Enemy 5: Thinking Good Friendship Should Feel Convenient

Hold on a minute, here. Are words like "sacrifice," "commit," "time consuming," and "consciously deciding" making it sound like finding and sustaining friendships is a full or at least part time job,

not just fun we get to have when we want to? Well yes, it might actually help us to think of it as an investment like a job, rather than a leisure activity. Let's face it. We're not always gonna be in the mood to hang out. Sometimes, we're gonna wanna sit in front of the TV rather than making the effort to go meet people... again, especially if we already have a friend or two and they're more or less okay to be with. Friends can be annoying. They ask for help moving. They have needs at inconvenient hours. Their internal timing on when to get together is often different than ours. They have irritating traits that we've got to confront if we are going to be able to stand being with them. Yes, friendship is fun, even adventurous sometimes. But it is also work.

Not only is it a personally difficult, thinking of friendships as an intentional, sustained commitment, a *top priority*, means really bucking a cultural trend. As the internet and cell phones bombard us with events, opportunities, and the possibility of last minute communication, our culture is getting more and more laid back about RSVPs, showing up on time, keeping appointments even when it's tough, and prioritizing face-to-face or phone time over texting or email. This trend is brutal on relationships because it reduces the face-to-face and voice time that our brains have to have to form strong connections with others. We get cancelled on last minute so often that we hardly notice anymore how corrosive that can be to our trust that others will be there for us when we really need them.

Creating lasting friendship with people who will be there for us during hard times requires that we refuse to go along with what "everyone else" is doing and prioritize our time with friends over just about anything but *actually urgent* family, work, or spiritual requirements. It means keeping our commitments to each other even when we're tired, a better offer comes along, we don't feel like it, or our boss asks us to do "just one more thing before we go." Yes, it is hard, but the best things in life often are! When we can really get our minds around that, we'll be a lot better at doing what it really takes to invest in people today who we will need to invest in us for tomorrow.

Tune in next time for strategies on combating four more Enemies to Connection!

If you or someone you know would like help making or keeping friends, feel free to call me at 303-931-4284 for a free 20-minute consultation or email info@jenniferdiebel.com.

Thanks for reading!

Jennifer Diebel, MA, LPC
Licensed Professional Counselor

303-931-4284
info@jenniferdiebel.com
www.jenniferdiebel.com
5370 Manhattan Circle, Suite 203
Boulder, CO 80303

Jennifer Diebel, MA, LPC is a Licensed Professional Counselor who works with individuals and couples in her private practice in Boulder, Colorado. For more information about her areas of expertise, background, and methods, as well as additional helpful resources and past newsletters, go to www.jenniferdiebel.com.

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