

Please Try This at Home

Monthly Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life

Sustaining Awesome Friendships Super Mario Style

Last newsletter, we compared making friends over age 25 in the midst of multiple challenges to Mario and Luigi from *Super Mario Brothers*, resiliently rising again to defeat each new enemy that came across their path. We also checked out five strategies for defeating Enemies to Connection that fight new friendships.

Unfortunately, though, making friends is not the only difficulty in achieving the kinds of relationships that last and support us when we most need it. We've also got to figure out how to sustain these connections through various seasons of emotions, life stages, and changes in interests and activities. So this time, let's check out a few more attack strategies for the Enemies to Connection that plague the friendships we've already made and would like to keep.

Enemy 6: Staying Shallow

Besides the risk of boredom, cocktail party conversation is typically pretty safe. When men stick to topics like cars or sports and women limit the range of conversation to fashion or self pampering (or whatever is cool in your particular socio-cultural niche), well, people are *supposed* to like those things, right? So the odds of others looking down their nose at us when we're sticking to the "cool" topics are lower. The problem is that none of us, even the most "cool" among us, actually fit those stereotypes to our very core. For probably 98% of us, we secretly or not so secretly dabble in the uncool. We are much less or much more intelligent or "with it" than we are supposed to be. We have geeky or at least uncommon hobbies. We might secretly detest talking about sports or fashion. Plus, we've got very uncool needs, vulnerabilities, weaknesses, eccentricities, and bad hair days.

So real friendship happens when we finally risk showing another person a bit or quite a lot of the uncool parts of ourselves and they either say, "Hey, me too!" or at least respond to that part of us with interest and acceptance rather than rejection and judgment. This is even true for folks who aren't really emotional talkers, but do connection through lots of shared activities over time. They find really supportive friendships when another person wants to be with them and do what they do over and over again so that part of them feels connected and accepted through the long term presence of the other.

Because deeper friendship is based on gradual increases in shared experiences and self revelation, we'll (almost) never get there by sticking to safe topics and occasional activities. At some point, we've gotta take risks to tell people a *little* more about our uncool sides and *gradually* see how they respond. When they respond well, we need to continue taking additional, slightly bigger risks. At the very minimum, we've gotta ask to hang out a *little* more often, risking a "No, I'm too busy," but hoping for the payoff of deeper connection through shared presence together long term. If we refuse to keep taking increasingly larger risks of time and disclosure, eventually, we'll find our lives turning out to be one long, lonely cocktail party.

Enemy 7: Confronting Too Late

There are always things about other people that annoy us from time to time. When annoyances are small enough that we forget them a day or two after they happen, they usually aren't worth mentioning. 'Cause if we actually told our friends *every* time they annoyed us, they'd probably run screaming and we'd have no friends left to annoy us. But there are some things others do in our presence or directly to us that we don't just forget. Though we might not mention it, those things frustrated or hurt us enough that when we're with those friends, the annoyance stays in the back of our mind, causing a disruption in our connection with them. We're a little on guard, wondering whether they are going to do it again, whether we'll be safe around them.

If we fail to mention those kinds of things long enough, we develop a collection of them that can eventually cause such a significant rupture in our feelings of connection that we decide to end the friendship. Or else, we bring up our huge pile of annoyances in a big, emotional way, which of course we just can't help because it's been piling up for so long that when we finally talk about it, there's just no way we can state it calmly and clearly without wanting to hurt the other because we feel so hurt. Then, the other person (rightly) calls "foul," feeling hurt because we are exploding over something we never told them about before, seemingly out of the blue. We didn't give them the opportunity to correct it when it was a little annoyance and now we're coming at them with guns loaded. It's not really fair to them. And it puts the friendship in jeopardy since it's a lot harder to recover from an explosion than a casual mention of something we'd like them to change.

The key here is to start by noticing when an annoyance or hurt has occurred that sticks around longer than a few days. Then, we need to summon our courage and make ourselves tell our friends that we didn't like that behavior, either just a few days after the thing happened (so we can cool off a bit, but not let it fester), or the very next time they do it again, so it's in context, not out of the blue. Using a structure like "When you did _____, I felt _____. Instead, I'd like you to do _____, but perhaps I was missing something and if so, I'd like to know what I was missing" can minimize the others' feeling that we're coming from a judgmental place about whatever it was. It maximizes their ability to hear what we'd like to happen, rather than dwelling on the potential implication that we think they are bad or we're better than them.

This is not easy. Every time we confront, we are risking that the other person will respond poorly, say they don't really care about us or that we're too sensitive, and then leave us. Many of us are so afraid of that that we don't confront until it's too late. Instead, we let our frustration build until we can hardly stand the person and then we explode, often causing the other person to leave us because of our self-righteous anger and explosiveness, not because of the original issue(s) at all! Confronting early feels terrifying, but it's actually much, much safer. Ultimately, it preserves many friendships.

Enemy 8: Electronic Emotion

Speaking of confrontation, no doubt you've noticed that it's often much easier to be assertive over email or text than when you are face to face with someone. Over e-communication, the other person can't see our super hurt or super angry (because of the hurt) face or hear that voice tone. They can't cut us off, so we can actually unload everything we're feeling. If we're not quick thinkers, we have time to say what we want to say, rather than fudging it in the moment. We can turn off our phone or our computer for awhile if we're not ready to handle what they might say in response. Let's face it: e-confrontation seems lots easier.

The problem, though, is the same as what feels easier: the other person can't see our super hurt face or hear our hurt voice tone. They can't see that the confrontation is hard for us, too. And in the absence of that info, most of us read into e-communication much more anger, sarcasm, disrespect, and nastiness than we observe in person or over the phone. Of course, I know that there are exceptions, but boy, do I wish I had a buck for every relationship disruption I've heard about that was made 100 times worse because it was done over text or email.

I have learned the (very) hard way that the best way to keep conflict to a minimum and preserve friendships, rather than ending them over unnecessary drama is to set some hard and fast rules for ourselves:

1. If we're feeling any trace of negative emotion, we need to slow down and think about what we're feeling and what we actually want to happen in the situation, rather than responding right away.
2. We need to absolutely refuse to text while we are in an emotional frame of mind.
3. Then, we need to decide whether to talk to the person face to face, on the phone, or on Skype; or write a longer email that contains the context of how we're feeling, include an acknowledgement that we could be misinterpreting and we'd be open to clarification and further discussion, and then wait at least 24 hours (48 is better) before re-reading it or asking another person to read it for us before sending it to the person.

Again, this is hard to do when we're all riled up and the juices are flowing. But if we can manage it, our relationships will be smoother, closer, and last much longer. Friends don't let friends do emotional texting!

Enemy 9: Joining the Competition

There are some people who relate to others primarily through competitive comparison. It's like their friendship invite says, "Come hang out with me so that I can check out your career, spouse, kids, paycheck, house, sports ability, toys, skills, etc. and then constantly show you how mine are better so that I can feel better about myself." If someone does this all the time, they probably aren't a keeper. May need to throw that one back into the pond. But other times, there are folks who are frequently supportive and relationally skilled, but they periodically drop into this competitive comparison dynamic. When they do, we leave our times together feeling "one down" rather than like they value us and have our back.

The temptation, when we feel "one down," is to jump into the competition and mention all the things that are good about *our* lives and that are better than what *they've* got going on. Pretty soon, it's a race to the bottom where both people feel threatened and return to each encounter with more ego-supporting ammo to make the other one see just how inferior they are. It's a game without a winner because if one person clearly wins, the other's not likely to stick around to feel beaten and inferior forever.

Instead, we can try responding to the name-dropping, bragging behavior by saying back to the person what we heard them say or encouraging them, rather than jumping right into what's good about us instead. For example, if Javier mentions the giant promotion he just received, rather than talking about how great we're doing in our job or some other area of success, we might say, "That must make you feel really valuable in your company. I know that's really important to you." Responding with that kind of reflection and encouragement, rather than with something we did well gives the person the message that we are so secure in who we are that we can afford

to celebrate with them that they are doing well, rather than having to enter the competition to take them down.

If we keep encouraging them and refusing to compete and they just keep going on and on about themselves, it might be time for a confrontation like we talked about earlier: “Javier, I’m so glad that things are going so well for you in your life. One thing I’ve noticed is that when I mention good things about my life, it seems like you often respond by right away telling me about something that’s going well for you, rather than first taking some time to be happy for me. I’d appreciate it if you could also give me some ‘Atta boys’ when something goes well for me. I’d like us to be really good at being happy for each other because there are so few places in life where that happens. Could you give that a shot?”

Yep, that’s hard, too. And it’s not the kind of thing that guys, especially, are accustomed to saying. But if the Javiers out there are actually capable of encouraging their friends—they just never knew they needed to—then we’ve purchased an actually supportive friend at the cost of one or a few brief awkward comments. We’ve successfully avoided the competitive race to the bottom that often ends the friendship.

My heart goes out to you all in this struggle to sustain close connections to others over age 25. It’s a hard road out there, but it sure is worth it!

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!

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