

friendship: science, art & gratitude

this handout with links to all research studies was posted to www.stressedtozest.com on 11.07.11

About every three months I meet up with one of my oldest and dearest friends and we spend twenty four hours or so together checking in on how our lives are going and what our plans are – this "work" links to the post *"Building willpower: the seven pillars."* Our friendship goes back nearly 30 years and we've been doing these check-in's for a decade or so. We know each other pretty well! I'm just back from one of these times and it leads me to think a bit about friendship.

I guess, in many ways, the easy bit is the "science". The blog post *"Strong relationships improve survival as much as quitting smoking"* discussed a major recent meta-analysis highlighting how key the benefits of relationships can be. As the meta-analysis's linked editorial stated *"The researchers reported that stronger social relationships were associated with a 50% increased chance of survival over the course of the studies, on average. The effect was similar for both "functional" (e.g., the receipt or perception of receipt of support within a social relationship) and "structural" measures of relationships (e.g., being married, living alone, size of social networks). Quite remarkably, the degree of mortality risk associated with lack of social relationships is similar to that which exists for more widely publicized risk factors, such as smoking. Arguably, such a level of risk deserves attention at the highest possible level in determination of health policy."* So good relationships are literally a life & death issue. They are also a happiness & wellbeing issue. As I wrote in the post *"Friendship: a three day workshop"* – *"But it's not just about physical health & mortality – relationships are also so strongly connected with happiness & wellbeing. Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter's "Happiness in everyday life: the uses of experience sampling" found highest levels of reported happiness when people were with friends. Diener & Seligman's study on "Very happy people" reported how social happy people are. And it's not just sociability, it's depth too. Demir et al found that friendship variables (number, quality, personality, conflict) accounted for nearly 60% of variance in happiness, with friendship "quality" being of particular importance. Similarly Reis et al's "Daily well-being: the role of autonomy, competence, and relatedness" reported that to satisfy relationship needs "The best predictors were meaningful talk and feeling understood and appreciated by interaction partners". And in a study done this year – "Eavesdropping on happiness" – Mehl & colleagues used digital audio recorders to track real world behaviour and found that 'The happy life is social rather than solitary, and conversationally deep rather than superficial'".*

So that's some of the "science" of friendship. Important and impressive it is too. What about the "art" of friendship? This is where I get a bit "shy" and a bit "tongue-tied". Real life is pretty much always richer than any theory can capture. How do you describe the taste of an orange, the feeling of stroking a cat, the sense of mountain biking down a steep hillside? I know I'm profoundly grateful for my deeper friendships. I know they are a source of so much joy and happiness in my life. I know that they take time, care, nourishing, appreciating. I know that friendships, deep friendships aren't the same as each other. Like pieces of music that one loves, they can be very different ... and yet, with really close friendships there are also parallels. A sense of safety ... that this person knows me so well, has such a broad canvas to see me against, that it's OK if I mess up sometimes ... I'll still be loved, it will be seen in perspective, even with amused affection. I suspect that both the *"Intimate bond measure"* assessing couple relationships and the *"Parental bond inventory"* assessing parent-child relationships would overlap into a measure that assessed friendship quality. Friendship, really good friendship, seems to me a "physical thing". It's as if I change colour, like sunlight changing, bringing out the colours & textures of a landscape. And I'm confident that this sense of "changing colour", of sunlight, of happiness is mirrored in biochemical changes in the body, shifts in cortisol, oxytocin ... see also the earlier blog post *"Meeting at relational depth: links to attachment"*. **[Cont.]**

Not that it's always the same. The really important friendships in our lives are usually, I think, multi-layered. We overlap probably in many ways ... so with the friend I was with at the weekend, we've walked & camped in the Scottish hills together, raised and played with our boys together, we know & are friends with each other's partners, we've run workshops together, so many levels & kinds of interaction. And I believe this is a typical characteristic of key friendships, that they are multi-coloured across many years. And at times they dip down into deep connection and often this is during one-to-one time. I've written half a dozen posts on *"Meeting at relational depth"* and, in the last of the six, I said *"... deep meeting is like having another gear to one's car, another level in one's relationships and one's life. It's typically a "flow state" with all the joy and timelessness this entails. And close relationships where one has had a series of meetings at this depth seem to become coloured and made more precious by these shared experiences."*

So even with my best friends, how close we are, how deeply we're relating, varies from moment to moment ... just as it does in a psychotherapy relationship. And we can track this. In the post *"Meeting at relational depth: what intrigued me most"*, this is precisely what we did in a workshop role-play exercise every minute for 20 minutes. The extraordinary thing was that, despite a probable difficulty in agreeing verbally what precisely we all meant by "relational depth", on a minute-to-minute basis there was an amazing paralleling of depth estimates. And I use this shared knowledge of depth & closeness every now and then with friends. It's a question I've taken from the great psychotherapist Irvin Yalom – *"How do we feel just now about the space between us?"* Try answering that as openly and authentically as possible. It takes one down. It connects.

The "art" of friendship. There's so much I could say. I'm sure that different people "do" deep friendship in different ways. Glimpses, feelings, half-understood impressions. I believe partly the ability to have really close friendships is a profound challenge to one's own wholeness, wisdom, courage, ability to be authentic & loving. I believe it takes time. Like the "treasure buried in the field", like a garden, we need to care enough about friendship, give it enough priority in our lives, work on it. I've probably "fallen out", at some time or another, with nearly all my best friends. Here's the crunch. Is the relationship precious enough to work on, to look at very openly & vulnerably, to learn from, to heal? If we get in very close, we'll sometimes step on each other's toes! I do very much believe that – in Yeats' words (or pretty close to them) – *"A friend is someone who sees the potential in you and helps you to live it"*. I know that close friendships are one of the central aspects of my life that I'm so glad, proud, grateful to have experienced, to have helped happen. And there's the issue too of who to choose as a potential friend. I wrote *"Peer groups ... respect & friendship"* last autumn, saying *"... do some characteristics or qualities that people have make them "better" potential friends than other characteristics or qualities do? For me the answer is a clear yes."* Glimpses, feelings, half-understood impressions. The American poet, e.e. cummings, wrote:

*i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes*

... and I give thanks for friendship ...
