

Uncertainty and making friends

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1. Objectives and readers

This publication is aimed at everyone interested in a rational view of friendship, whether for personal reasons or for scientific research. It focuses on the underlying drivers of friendship and highlights the significant uncertainties faced by individuals.

The scope includes romantic love relationships because the best of these combine friendship with sexual attraction.

One key point is that being part of a social group and having friends are not the same thing. It is possible to put a lot of time into social events and yet still have no true friends.

2. The uncertainty

For many people, making friends involves considerable uncertainty, for a number of reasons:

- The foundation of friendships is not easy to see.
- The specific bases of particular, potential friendships are not always

obvious at the outset and we may struggle to form some friendships as a result.

- Developing friendships involves understanding other people, and their thinking is often hard to understand let alone predict.
- Even with a great understanding of friendship and other people, outcomes are not fully under our control because of other events, such as the impact of other people, personal tragedies, and career choices.

This publication begins by clarifying the foundation of friendships and shows how the priorities change through life. It then goes on to examine how we choose people to be friends and how conversations, in particular, help to develop friendship in the early stages. The final section considers how to be more successful with friendships.

3. Characterizing friendship

This section identifies the foundation of friendship and explains the specific bases of individual friendships, which can vary greatly.

3.1 The foundation of friendship

The foundation of friendship is voluntary, reciprocal help and non-harm. We help friends and try not to harm them. They do the same for us.

Exactly what each person provides to the other varies greatly between people and over time. It may not be obvious. It need not be tangible.

Thinking widely and imaginatively about what each person can provide to the other is a way to make even unlikely friendships blossom.

Typical examples of help include:

- Being funny or otherwise entertaining.
- Being reassuring when someone is upset.
- Helping someone understand a problem and think about how to solve it.
- Passing on important information about other people.
- Taking turns to provide food or drink.
- Lending a book, a tool, or a small amount of money.
- Car sharing, taxi sharing, and other shared journeys.
- Doing shopping for someone who is unwell.
- Looking after a pet while the other person is away.

We trust our friends, and when we say we 'trust' someone it usually means we are confident that they will act in our interests, or at least not against them.

(This contrasts with people who may be in our social circle but feel more competition with us than cooperation.)

In friendship, there is an expectation of reciprocation, but not necessarily exact (as it would be with money), or rapid (as it would be with barter).

The friends mentally keep approximate track of favours given and received. If there is a substantial imbalance then this can lead to problems, with one side feeling it is being taken advantage of or the other feeling it is amassing a moral debt it cannot possibly discharge.

Over time, as a friendship matures, the parties may be willing to do more for each other and are less concerned about reciprocation. They will provide support over, potentially, months or even years when one of them needs it much more

than the other, with no relationship problems arising.

Reciprocation is sometimes delayed by years, or may never be achieved, even though one person feels in a moral debt to the other and wishes to discharge it.

We tend to provide more support and expect less back when others are less capable for a period, typically because of disease, age, bereavement, or pregnancy¹.

Romantic love relationships typically involve the most important cooperation of all, which is in sharing genes and raising children. It is a vital and difficult task, most easily tackled when a couple works together effectively to share the load.

In this publication, I argue that other factors in friendship, such as having a similar sense of humour, are important simply because of their connection to reciprocal help and non-harm.

3.2 Feelings of friendship

Our feelings of friendship towards a person represent our willingness to engage in further voluntary, reciprocal help and non-harm with them. This is different in principle to the current level of reciprocal help and non-harm operating in a friendship and occasionally the two can get out of step.

In particular, there may be people we have met many times, always enjoy being with, and would be very willing to help in some way if the opportunity ever arose. And yet, due to circumstances, that opportunity has not yet arisen.

¹ This is not sexism. For example, if a pregnant woman has to stand in a crowded train it is generally accepted that giving up your seat for her is a good thing to do. She *can* stand, but she would be more comfortable seated. A friend would certainly give up a seat for her.

Conversely, there may be people with whom we have an established pattern of mutual help, but we are starting to wish it would end and certainly would not like to go further.

Our feelings of friendship are based on a number of factors, discussed in detail later in this publication, and these go beyond the help so far demonstrated in a relationship.

When feelings of friendship lead to friendship behaviours (i.e. actual help and non-harm) then the friendship is strengthened and feelings of friendship will usually strengthen. They are supported by evidence.

3.3 Friendship and other relationships

One reason for human success as a species has been our ability to cooperate. We are by nature cooperative and probably evolved this way. Our high intelligence, communication with language, and ability to write down plans and agreements has led to some extraordinary feats of cooperation.

Friendship is just one way humans cooperate. Other bases of cooperation include these:

- **Membership of groups:** Each person tries to live by the norms of the group to maintain their membership. Examples include some social groups where, for example, liking the right music and wearing the right clothes is important for acceptance.
- **Power, including physical threat:** This is used to compel cooperation from another person (e.g. master-slave relationships).
- **Democratic government:** Where the society as a whole appoints people to develop and enforce laws.

- **Barter (swapping) or using money, with contracts:** These methods have allowed humans to cooperate when they barely know each other.
- **Employment:** Where we agree to work with others, in a role, for pay.
- **Family relationships:** Here genetic similarity is a factor. It may be instinctive to prefer and support those that carry our genes.

Friendship often exists alongside other bases for a relationship. For example, people who work together (on the basis of employment) often become friends. Family members can become friends. People in a social group often become friends.

3.4 Real friendship?

If you think this idea of voluntary, reciprocal help and non-harm sounds cold, utilitarian, or even mercenary, consider this: is a friendship real when one or both the participants will not help the other, even when they can and the help is clearly wanted or even needed?

Altruism does not have to be one-sided. People usually feel more secure in friendships when there is an appropriate balance.

3.5 Other factors

A later section of this publication discusses the factors we use to identify potential friends. This shows how these all indicate the potential value of reciprocal help and non-harm. However, as a first look at this phenomenon, consider these examples of things we often think we look for in a friend and how they relate to reciprocal help and non-harm:

- **A similar outlook:** It is easier to help and be helped by someone with a similar way of life. Mutual

understanding is more likely, along with relevant skills and resources.

- **Kind:** A kind person is someone who wants to help others and not harm them. This general outlook also means they are more likely to be good friends.
- **Fun to be with:** This relates to having a similar outlook, but is also directly helpful because entertainment is something we all need.

3.6 Differences between friendships

Although reciprocal help and non-harm is the fundamental principle of friendship, the specifics of individual friendships differ. For example, some mainly involve emotional support, while others are primarily about practical cooperation. Some provide mainly mutual entertainment while others provide creative, intellectual stimulation for the friends.

Many friendships involve helping each other in many ways and those may change over time, especially as people move on in life. One sign of a developing friendship is that the forms of help change and expand.

Friendships can rise and fall because of life changes. Two people who were once very close friends, often spending time together, may be separated geographically (e.g. by a career move or marriage) and find that they hardly have any contact. If they later find they are close again their friendship may be reanimated, but if not they will have to be philosophical about the loss. The friendship ceased to operate for reasons other than its own failure or the failure of either of the friends.

3.7 Life changes

The help we can benefit from at different stages of life changes in somewhat predictable ways. For example, there is a dramatic change when a child leaves home for the first time (e.g. going to university).

Here are some characteristics of different stages of life:

- **Childhood:** Parents and other adults provide most of the help that is needed or wanted without expectation of rapid reciprocation. Peers mainly help by being playmates. (Play is an important behaviour seen in many larger mammals.)
- **University student:** Living away from home and facing tough independent study challenges, you suddenly have a whole new set of challenges and much less help from your parents. Your peers become a more important source of support that goes beyond play and entertainment. They can help with shared accommodation, shared shopping, finding good sources of food, services (e.g. a dentist) and entertainment, social groups, finding out how to do things, sport and exercise, working out hard problems on your course, keeping up with the work, going to the library and working, and dealing with emotional and relationship problems.
- **Newly in work:** This combines all the challenges of living away from the parental home plus challenges from meeting new people in a new location, getting to grips with your job, sorting out technology problems, and saving money.
- **New parents:** A new baby brings a tsunami of challenges that your friends may have tips on, plus opportunities to get together and share child care time,

help in emergencies, help with part time work issues, choose nursery school, primary school, etc.

- **Later career:** Challenges include finding people to work with, to hire, to provide resources, to be customers, holiday partners, provide a holiday home, or to let a holiday home to.
- **Retirement years:** Expect to be on the lookout for activities to be involved in, people to go out with, people to pop round or call to check you are ok, help with getting to medical appointments, sharing shopping, and solving technology problems.

The toughest and most confusing periods are those immediately after a major change. These are the times when the typical bases of friendships shift suddenly, often combined with a new location and new peers (potential new friends).

Perhaps the biggest change is on leaving home because this marks the big change from friends who are primarily playmates to friends who are also helpful in practical, adult ways. It is easy to identify friendship with being 'sociable' at parties and similar gatherings, and overlook the other elements such as support with school work and help against a bully.

The education system strongly rewards young people for developing capability and demonstrating it through individual examination performance. A child who does well in this way may not be so aware that cooperation with others is important or that they may very soon need help from other people in non-academic areas of life.

3.8 Reciprocation within families

Most babies born in the Western world are then looked after by one or both of their parents for many years before they are self-sufficient adults, able to give more

help than they need. The most recent generations are finding that they need financial support from their parents well into adulthood because of the high cost of living space.

As the parents reach old age they increasingly appreciate and benefit from the help of their children (now adults).

Is this an example of reciprocal help driven by friendship? If it was just this then the child would feel an enormous moral debt building through childhood and be eager to discharge it. In reality I do not think most children fully understand what is happening and the relationship between parent and child is more than friendship. It may be that in later life adults realise that if they look after their own elderly parents then they are setting a good example to their own children.

Having said that, some parents are more supportive than others and it would be understandable if this was then reflected in the amount of help they received from their children. Also, some children do more to look after their ageing parents than others. This may be driven by a variety of factors (e.g. geography, career, disability) but perhaps something akin to friendship is at work. Some people say they feel that their family members are also friends. It is perhaps a good thing if this is the case. Expressing gratitude through the conventional words of politeness ('please', 'thank you', 'how are you?') is still important within families.

4. Discovering friends

Through our lives there are times when we want to find and develop friendships. This is often most intense around a major life change for the reasons already discussed. Some important mechanisms are involved.

Friendship usually strengthens gradually. Quickly made 'friends' are really just people who seem likely to become real friends. Disappointment is common. Patience is essential.

4.1 Rivalry and sorting

Because there must be an opportunity for approximately balanced reciprocation, it may not be viable for two people with greatly differing needs and abilities to be strong friends. If one person is brilliant, happy, and rich but the other is less able, depressive, and poor then the imbalance is great. People tend to seek friends nearer to their own level. If you try to befriend above your level you may find it a strain to keep up. Befriending below your level is easier but not so beneficial and may cause discomfort for the other person.

Taking an intelligent interest in someone's situation and challenges can compensate for being less impressive and having fewer resources with which to help them, but there are some people you just cannot compete with.

In romantic relationships, the tendency for people to end up with others of similar overall attractiveness (all things considered) is strong and well known. It is called assortative mating. A similar effect exists for friends.

Within groups there is rivalry as some people compete for the most desirable friends. This can lead to some quite bad behaviour, including relational aggression where people try to damage the victim's reputation.

4.2 The supply of candidate friends

The number of potential friends in your environment can vary greatly. It is obvious that a person marooned on a small island with just one other person for company has no choice. They must try to

be friends with the other person if possible. Less obviously, it is possible to be in frequent contact with many people and yet still have few candidate friends. At the other extreme, you may be faced with a super-abundance of potential friends.

The number of potential friends can be reduced if people you meet are very different to you.

E.g. The educated, qualified accountant in an accounts department may be intellectually a long way above the rest of the team, making the job strangely lonely.

Age and cultural differences can also reduce the number of candidate friends.

Another factor that affects the number of candidate friends is how settled existing friendships are. Once people have established their circles of friends they are usually less interested in gaining more. Sometimes people jealously guard their relationships, sabotaging attempts by others to cosy up to their friends.

In contrast, in some situations there is an abundance of similar people and many are open to new friendships. This is typical when people start at school, college, or university. With university in particular there are many people who are geographically distant from their established friends and very similar to each other. This triggers massive friendship building activity and competition.

In the rush to secure promising friends many mistakes will be made. Consequently, friendships do not stay fixed after an initial period of frantic activity. Adjustments continue indefinitely, but at a lower rate.

4.3 Size of social circle

A person who is popular is not necessarily a more desirable friend. They may be

extraverted, sociable, often seen at social events, and greeted by many people. They may be more attractive and more fashionable than most people, and able to converse on a range of popular, hot topics. Their social media pages may show they have a large number of friends and they are frequently photographed surrounded by a large group of good looking people having a happy time in a fun location.

These people are popular, in the sense that they know many people. On a diagram of social relationships across a large group of people they would appear to be central people with many more connections than average.

In contrast, there are other people who have few connections, often avoid social events out of shyness or anxiety, are less fashionable and good looking, and perhaps have some personal interests that are intense but unusual. They are nerds, wallflowers, or just a bit odd. Such people can be unpopular, in the sense that they have few connections, without being nasty or harmful to others.

Social media tend to encourage and give particular support to people who seek large numbers of friends. They create the false impression that this is how things should be for everyone. In reality there is a major trade-off to be considered.

Mathematically, the amount of time a person can spend on each of their friendships, on average, depends on how much time they allocate in total and the number of friendships. Being friends with a popular person usually means being quite a superficial friend with them because they are thinly spread, even if they do spend a lot of time on social activity.

In contrast, someone who maintains only a few friendships may be a good friend,

once the initial shyness is overcome and if some common interests can be found.

4.4 Evaluating possible friends and lovers

We often need to evaluate people as possible friends or lovers. What criteria are relevant? How might others be assessing us?

This section shows what those criteria are likely to be and how they all contribute to evaluating the prospects for reciprocal help and non-harm. This is done through a systematic breakdown.

A person (A) will evaluate another person (B) on three things in relation to friendship:

- B's ability to help A
- A's ability to help B
- B's willingness to cooperate with (be friends with) A (helping and not harming).

In evaluating **abilities**, there are general factors and specifics.

Favourable *general* factors include:

- A and B are doing similar things, facing similar challenges.
- A and B are often near to each other (e.g. on the same course, the same workplace, the same club) or coming into contact (e.g. online).
- A and B are ideologically compatible (in the broadest sense, not just religion and politics), because a broadly similar outlook and set of favourite actions is favourable even though some differences are helpful.
- B is capable (e.g. healthy, physically strong, physically attractive, socially adept, intelligent, skilled, rational, knowledgeable, well-prepared).
- B has resources (e.g. money, accommodation, a vehicle, tools).

- B is connected (e.g. has important friends, many friends, has a powerful family, has high social status).
- B has some needs or wants i.e. reveals some weaknesses or areas of ambition not currently fulfilled.

Not surprisingly, many people suitable as friends are similar to each other. They have 'lots in common'. They will often be similar ages, live or work near to each other, have similar educational backgrounds, and so on. They may meet when they are on an educational course together and, as a result, will reach the next few life stages at the same time (e.g. exams, finding somewhere to live, graduation, starting first job). Similarly, they may meet in an antenatal group (organised for the purpose) and so will reach the same parenting stages at almost exactly the same time.

Consequently, they will have similar interests and challenges, not only initially, but also over the coming years even as those interests and challenges change. This is a strong situation for friendship that extends over a wide range of specific types of help and over a long period of time.

If you lack ability to help then you may be able to gain some quickly by carefully chosen research and preparation.

Also, people who have gained friends, or at least made connections, become more attractive as a direct result and tend to get more opportunities to meet people, including new people.

The *specifics* are also important, and there may be quite specific things that another person can give or wants. Clever, innovative, unexpected bases for cooperation can sustain friendships that seem unlikely.

We also can find that we have quite specific and hard-to-fill gaps in our

friendships. For example, a person with many local friends of similar age and education may, nevertheless, feel the lack of people to talk to about some issues. For example:

- Collecting ancient coins
- Philosophy of science
- Mathematical methods
- Online gambling
- Politics from a particular point of view.

(Around where I live, if you love dogs or gardening you will find many friends who can talk about those topics for hours. However, if you think Brexit was a good idea or that the Conservative government is doing quite a good job under difficult circumstances then it is best to keep quiet.)

To find friends that meet those specialist needs requires a focused search for people with similar interests, probably through the internet or clubs set up to bring together people with unusual interests. It may require emailing or otherwise contacting people to make new contacts, perhaps in other countries.

At the same time, it is often necessary to work around incompatibilities with someone who is in other respects a good candidate friend. For example, it may be necessary to avoid talking about politics, religion, or veganism because you do not agree with your friend and the topics create tension.

In evaluating **willingness**, there are (again) general factors and specifics:

- General: B seems to be generally a helpful person (i.e. generally caring and prosocial) who wants to be agreeable. B also seems to be conscientious.
- Specifics: B seems to be interested in cooperation with A, indicated by doing

the things necessary for friendly cooperation (e.g. pays attention, stops to talk, smiles, asks the right kind of questions, remembers answers, shows consideration for our situation and interests, offers to help in small ways, says please and thank you).

Romantic relationships that work well for a long time tend to be between pairs who are agreeable and conscientious, and not neurotic. Opposites do not attract, similarity tends to attract but, most importantly, pairs of nice people get on best. (Luo et al, 2008, provide a useful review of the literature on this.)

4.5 Initial contacts

The search for people suitable as friends can begin even before people meet for the first time.

This may be by choosing the events at which you meet new people, picking events likely to attract the right types of people.

Also, a person may go online to research people they expect to meet, such as people at work, in education, in a club or society, or at a party. They may also ask their existing friends for advance information about others they may meet.

While some people have no online presence, many do. If you know someone's name and one other thing about them that is distinctive you can usually find people on social media, if they have a profile. Virtually all professional academics have a web page and this gives details of their working lives and, within their publications, incredibly detailed information about their knowledge and views. Consultants, musicians, artists, and many others often have a personal website or web page. Company directors are often profiled on their company's website. Politicians and would-be politicians have web pages. UK Members

of Parliament typically have personal websites but they can also be researched using <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/>, which gives full details and analysis of their voting and their statements in parliament. You might be surprised to find that someone you know has a YouTube channel under a different name.

Instead of searching for individuals, an alternative is to search for an organization (e.g. a company, society, venue) and look for people associated with that organization. These are people you might meet in connection with the organization. The characteristics of the organization might also provide clues to the types of people it will attract and that you might meet.

If romance is the objective then there are many online services to help you find suitable people. These use a variety of techniques to raise the search for suitable people to a high level of sophistication.

Most of the people we meet are the result of our choice of school, college, job, and neighbourhood. Some of those people will be introduced to us (e.g. at work), but others are just there with no opening for a conversation. In both cases, online research and asking people we already know can give valuable information about potential friends.

In addition to helping to identify potential friends, the information can help to guide initial conversations and even provide a reason for an initial contact.

E.g. 'Excuse me, sorry, we've seen each other but not spoken before. I understand you have a Chihuahua. So do I! Yours looks so sweet!'

E.g. 'Hello, I'm Morag. I'm from Aberystwyth.' (This might be said to someone you know from prior research is also from Aberystwyth.)

E.g. (By email) 'Dear Professor Gamble. Last year you wrote a very interesting article about pre-school communication patterns that I have found useful. I am looking at the same topic but with a slightly different research method. Your point about age differences was particularly insightful and I wonder if I could ask you for your views on some questions around that?'

If an existing friend introduces someone new this may be just with a name or, much more helpfully, with a name and some information to help get a conversation started.

4.6 Conversation elements

The specific behaviours that indicate willingness to be friends are worth looking at in much more detail. We can identify them by thinking about what is necessary in order to be a friend.

To cooperate in a friendly way with another person we must:

- pay attention to them
- learn about them, their circumstances, events, and ambitions
- think about the implications of that information, especially when events happen or when considering our own actions
- act so as not to harm the other person and/or offer to help them and actually help them if asked.

In a conversation where friendship is being sought, or at least explored, we want to do the following:

- gain information to assess the other person's:
 - ideas, capabilities, and resources
 - challenges (ambitions and gaps/weaknesses)

- willingness to cooperate in a friendly way
- provide information on our:
 - ideas, capabilities, and resources
 - challenges (ambitions and gaps/weaknesses)
 - willingness to cooperate in a friendly way.

Ideally, providing information will be in response to questions by the other person, which are signals of their interest in possible friendship.

Willingness to develop friendship is signalled by willingness to spend time on this kind of conversation, supported by attentive body language.

Attentive body language includes looking at a person, turning towards them, getting close enough to hear them clearly, and nodding and smiling to show understanding and encourage them to talk.

4.7 Relevant information exchange

Although the conversation elements that are important will not change, the mix of them and the specific content will change depending on the likely bases of friendship.

For example, if two intellectuals meet in a setting where intellectual work is relevant then they are most likely to focus on their views on some key issues. If they were to become friends it would probably be based on intellectual cooperation, even if this was just having interesting conversations from time to time.

In contrast, if two young parents meet then they are more likely to exchange information about their children and childcare challenges. This could lead to an exchange of useful tips or more direct mutual support.

Often the exchange of information is through direct question and answer. People might ask each other typical networking questions. At other times it is by doing something together and making deductions from behaviour. For example, two intelligent undergraduates looking for people who can help them grow intellectually might debate an issue and learn from that how each thinks and debates.

A major uncertainty for people hoping to explore friendship is what that friendship might be based on. What kind of friendship is viable? If you are unsure then how do you decide what to talk about?

Several clues can be used:

- **The occasion:** A birthday party is very different to a business networking event or an academic conference. The occasion tends to influence the conversation topics that most people start with and think appropriate. If the other person is happy to move out of the expected areas then you can.
- **Their characteristics:** Anything you know about the other person's situation, age, interests, or abilities might be a clue to what they are interested in and what might be a viable basis for friendship.
- **Your interests/vacancies:** Your existing network of friends may mean that many of your needs and wants are already met. Your remaining interests will be in other areas.

A conversation might range widely in a search for common interests, common friends, and points of potential cooperation. Conversation itself also reveals a lot about a person's way of thinking and interacting with others.

4.8 Some all-purpose questions

Here are some questions designed to elicit information that provides the basis for reciprocal helping and non-harming between adults. They can be adapted to explore different specific bases and all show an interest in being friends:

- *How are you?:* This picks up when someone is struggling and might appreciate a bit of help. How they answer will depend on what is important to them at the time. Usually people say they are fine. If not, follow on might be 'Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. Is there anything I can do?' Or, 'Oh dear. If there's anything I can do please don't hesitate to ask.' In situations where families are important the questions might be 'How are your children?' and 'How is X?' (where X is the name of the person's partner).
- *How are you getting on (with that)?:* This also picks up where someone is struggling but in this case it is struggling with some kind of project and the follow on might be to offer help with any problem arising on that project. Alternatively, the project may have progressed to a new stage in which new types of help might be welcome, so this can be identified and developed.
- *What brings you here?:* This is usually one for people you don't know well and gives them an opportunity to talk about whatever is relevant to them in the context. This might be their background, current plans, and intentions. This is crucial in helping people.
- *What do you hope for?:* This puts the focus more on what the person aspires to or hopes will happen, and may reveal opportunities to help people make progress. In a professional context you might respond with 'That's

very interesting. I know a few people involved with that. Here's my card and don't hesitate to contact me if you think I might be able to help you along.'

- *How might that affect you?:* This shows consideration for their situation and interests. It could also be part of 'If I do X, could that create any problems for you?' or just 'Do you mind if I X?' These questions aim at non-harm rather than help.
- *I heard about X; will that affect you?:* This shows inferences from news to the impact for the friend.
- *Do you have any concerns about ...?:* Gives an opportunity to share worries that you might help with.

Here are some statements and questions designed to provide information that gives people an opportunity to help. They also show an interest in being friends:

- *What I'm hoping is ... / What I'm looking for ...:* Just launches into an exposition of what you are hoping for and that people might help with.
- *Do you know anything about ... ?:* Is a general way to ask for help. It only asks if someone has information, but that could lead to more.
- *I'm concerned that ...:* Reveals something that you think might happen and that they might be able to help you avoid.

4.9 Proposals

Where the basis for some mutual help is identified in a conversation it may still need someone to point this out and suggest a next step. For example, within a conversation someone might say:

- *If there's anything I can do to help with that, please just ask.*

- *This has been very interesting and I'd like to talk with you some more about it.*
- *Since we are both going, would you like to share a taxi?*
- *I really enjoyed meeting you and was wondering if we are likely to meet again.*
- *That sounded very interesting; could you send me a link?*
- *That was really interesting and I would be happy to help you with it. May I offer you my contact details?*

Alternatively, a proposal might be made later. Again, this will point to the opportunity and suggest a next step. For example:

- *There's another lecture on next week about morality. I was thinking about going. Are you?*
- *When we met you mentioned you had nobody to go running with and I'm in the same situation. How about a run this coming week?*
- *I was thinking of playing some badminton next week. Would you like to come along and play? Not too serious.*
- *I'm a bit stuck on this week's problem sheet. Did you get anywhere with it? I'd appreciate some hints.*

4.10 Acknowledgement and gratitude

An important part of reciprocal help is that it is acknowledged explicitly by the friends. This usually happens when a proposal is made and when some help has been provided.

Letting someone know you are grateful for their offer or their help shows them that you have recognized what is going on and reduces uncertainty as to how the

friendship is progressing. It is often a chance to show whether further reciprocal help (friendship) is desired.

For example, if an offer is made then it may be rejected because more friendship is not wanted or because friendship is wanted but the proposal is not something that would be helpful at that time. It is important to say 'no' in the right way.

E.g. You are moving to a new flat at the weekend and someone you have met quite recently offers to help you with moving your stuff. If you like them but do not need help you should explain why, as in 'Thanks very much. That's a kind offer, but I already have my family coming over and that will be plenty of help.' On the other hand, if you do not like them so much and would rather not incur the moral debt of such a significant act of helping at this stage in your relationship then you might say 'Thanks, but I can manage.' Finally, if you like them enough and you would value the help then you can say 'Thanks very much. That's kind and some help would be very much appreciated. I was planning to do most of it on Saturday ...'

Once help begins, friends again usually express gratitude to make explicit their recognition of the help provided. This is particularly important if the initial proposal and acceptance were not explicit.

E.g. You are at a party and have been cornered by someone you do not like. They are talking on and on but then a friend of yours approaches, interrupts the bore's flow, and says you are needed somewhere else. The friend apologizes to the bore and leads you to safety. At this point gratitude might be expressed with 'Thank you so much. I just couldn't get away.' There was no opportunity for an explicit proposal and acceptance, but the

friend acted correctly and acknowledging the help in words was important.

4.11 Low risk suggestions

At this point it should be obvious that the conversations that build friendship are very ordinary and familiar to most people.

Nevertheless, some risk is involved because we cannot read minds directly. Our understanding of how a friendship has developed may be very different from the other person's. What seems to us an appropriate proposal may seem to them to be too much or too little.

The principle of reciprocity is well understood by most people and they will often refuse help that they think is too much or not really needed but which would put them under an obligation.

To manage the uncertainty and stay within comfortable levels of obligation, it is usually best to keep proposals small (at least initially) and make them casually. The idea is usually to help in small ways and then see if the other person reciprocates.

For example, when I was a teenager it was expected that a boy would make an invitation to a girl he liked to go out together. This was called 'asking her out' and was a hugely intimidating psychological challenge to many of us including me. It would be very clear that you were 'asking her out' and rejection would be equally clear.

A better initial approach was to casually ask her if she wanted to join you and some other friends. This might later develop into asking her if she would join you alone for something relatively minor, like walking to the bus-stop. Only if things were going well might you move on to a recognizable 'date'.

4.12 Politeness

Polite conversation includes some crucial rituals that show others we are aware of the importance of reciprocal help and non-harm and we are mentally noting when this is happening in a relationship.

Routine elements that acknowledge reciprocal help and non-harm include 'please', 'yes please', 'thank you', and 'no thank you' at appropriate times.

Asking for something with 'please' shows you know that you are asking for help. 'Thank you' shows you know you have received it. If someone offers you a drink you might say 'yes please' or 'no thank you'. The 'please' and 'thank you' acknowledge that a favour has been offered. When the drink is provided we say 'Thank you' again, which shows we noted that a favour was provided.

The greeting 'How are you?' checks if help is desired.

The question 'Do you mind if I ...?' checks if the other person might be harmed, even in a small way, by something we are thinking of doing.

It is usually polite to ask people if they want our help with something. We say 'Would you like ...?' or 'May I help you with ...?' This request is partly because assuming they want help can be taken as implying that we think they need help, and so can be taken as an insult. It is also important because it makes explicit the giving and receiving of that favour.

Omitting these crucial words signals that you are not interested in reciprocation. It is usually a mistake, even with your own family.

4.13 Some examples

Here are some snippets of conversation with a friend or candidate friend, with notes on the implications of what is said for friendship.

E.g. A student on the course you have just started asks 'do you know where we need to be now?'

This is someone who may be struggling to understand the timetable and layout of the campus. They may be annoyingly disorganized or just struggling with changes generally. It is kind to help them by answering the question and perhaps they have strengths elsewhere that may turn them into good friends in the future.

E.g. You are talking to another parent of young children and explaining how you have been struggling to find interests for your son. The other parent says 'Our son has started playing the guitar. We found a wonderful teacher. Young and a great player. Tom is so enthused.'

This could be someone just pointing out that they are a better parent than you but, more likely, they are indirectly offering help. The best response is 'Really? Do you know if the teacher is taking new pupils at the moment? My son has never shown an interest but you never know.'

E.g. You have reached the end of a tiring but successful week at work and someone you have been working closely with says 'We're going to the pub for a drink. Do you want to come?' Imagine you have a family and would prefer to just go home. You say 'Thanks, but I'm really tired and looking forward to seeing my family tonight. Another time. But, before I go, I did want to say thanks for your help to me this week. I really appreciated your advice and you didn't have to do that.'

The colleague is giving a friendly signal by proposing the drink after work. In this instance the evening out is not attractive but you have responded warmly in a way that fosters a friendly relationship. This is

by acknowledging that the colleague's advice was more than just doing the job. It went beyond that to become a personal act of helping.

E.g. You are studying computing at college and have been working on a problem sheet for a couple of hours. The person at the next desk is on your course but very quiet and wearing a hoody with pi to hundreds of decimal places. You have not done more than nod to each other in the past but you think they may be nicer than they seem. You say 'Have you done these problems yet?' The geek blinks at you. You continue 'It is just that I am totally stuck on problem five and I'd appreciate a hint from someone.'

This opening gives the geek an easy, unthreatening conversation and an opportunity to be helpful. If they are stuck too you could say 'Stuck too? Shall we try it together? Maybe two heads will be better than one.'

4.14 Actions

Conversation on its own is not always enough. Perhaps help can be provided through conversation, but often more is required. It is important to follow through.

In some situations it may help to move a friendship along to swap small favours in a more contractual way initially. You might say 'If you could help me with X then I will help you with Y' and so start a pattern of behaviour that later does not need an explicit agreement in advance. There is a danger that this will create a relationship that always needs a contract. It may be better to just offer help when an opportunity arises, without requiring agreement for reciprocation, to establish a more friendly basis.

4.15 Romance

Romance combines friendship with sexual willingness (not necessarily immediate).

The friendship is usually focused on social, emotional, and practical help rather than, for example, intellectual cooperation. So, conversation will usually try to be entertaining and to focus on who each person knows, how they are feeling, and what their life hopes are. Intellectual conversation may be more a way to gauge cognitive ability than a search for intellectual help.

Sexual willingness will usually be signalled by body language initially, such as eye gaze that occasionally strays below the face. Individual signs may not be definitive, but a consistent pattern of body language can clearly signal willingness to have sex at some point in the future.

Willingness to have sex is not the same as willingness to have sex *now*. Rushing into sex may signal a lack of care, low standards, and low interest in an enduring relationship. Besides, the best, most exquisite sex happens when two people want to give each other pleasure and keep learning from each other how to do so more effectively. A drunken fumble is worthless, dangerous, and not much fun.

Since romantic relationships are hugely important to most people and involve at least the theoretical possibility of a lifelong partnership and children, they can be hard to form. Be confident in your worth even if you are rejected. Rejection happens to most people and is not a reason to give up.

5. The end of a friendship

5.1 How friendships end

Some friendships end only with the death of one of the friends.

Many others simply become dormant when the friends are separated by distance and other priorities. Typically they relocate, change jobs, end an educational course, become ill, or marry. They may be people you have not seen for years but still get a Christmas card from.

Some friendships wither because one or both of the friends changes. Perhaps they join or leave a religion, make a radical lifestyle change, or find fame or great wealth.

Still other friendships never really get started. They wither early when the almost-friends discover more about each other and decide to pull away and perhaps invest in other options.

All these endings are normal, natural, and not upsetting for most people.

Occasionally we feel some guilt at not keeping in contact with people we once knew well in the past but now are separated from, but there is no need to feel that way. Time is precious and leaving people undisturbed is usually the kindest approach.

However, there are other ways for friendships to end that can be more hurtful.

Sometimes a relationship of some kind continues but the friendship has died. Lovers may continue to live together even though they no longer like or respect each other. Friends who started working together may find themselves still business partners even though they are no longer friends.

A friendship can end because of an actual or perceived misdeed by one or both friends. The friends fall out. Perhaps one friend failed to help the other in a crisis, or did something for their own gain that seriously harmed the other. Infidelity

between lovers is a common reason for a falling out.

Another reason for a friendship fading is that one friend finds one or more preferable alternative friends and switches attention. There are several reasons why an alternative might be preferable.

5.2 Dealing with endings

The end of friendships is common, normal, natural, and usually blameless. Life moves on and things change.

It is best to take a long term view and recognize that there are many people in the world who could be friends in future.

You may also be in a period where you do not want so many friends and will be quite contented with less friendship.

As you learn more you will become more adept at finding and developing friendships.

6. Winning at friendship

Previous sections have considered the bases of friendship and the mechanisms by which friends are discovered and developed. This next section considers how this knowledge can be used to advantage.

6.1 What success looks like

For some people, success would be simply having any friends at all. For others it would be surviving the problems caused by their so-called friends. For still others it would be having the most impressive social media profile with the maximum number of 'friends' and many photographs of themselves with their many wonderful friends looking very happy. These are understandable specific priorities, but we need to step back and consider a more general framework.

Overall, we would like to have an appropriate variety of good quality friendships without having to spend too much time or money gaining and maintaining them. Considering each point in more detail:

- **Appropriate variety:** This is because we would like our friends to provide a variety of types of help at different times. The mix should be appropriate for our current and near future challenges.
- **Quality:** This means that the friendships involve quite valuable help (in the broadest sense, as usual) and are reliable.
- **Time and money:** This is important because these resources are limited and we have other things to do.

In the worst case, you could spend all your free time in pubs and parties, 'socialising', and yet find you have no individuals you can count as good friends who would help you in a crisis. Instead, all that time has just made you a member of a social group, invited to help create ambience. The individuals in it, if they are friends at all, are no more than booze buddies.

In the best case, you could spend only an hour or so a day on friendships, and yet be valued by several people who regularly provide help and encouragement. These friends don't just invite you to parties; they deliberately introduce you to chosen people who might become friends or even lovers (just as you would for them). These friends don't just give ill-considered advice over a pint of beer, but come to visit you, make a hot drink or a meal, and help you think through your issues effectively. When you have important work to do these friends encourage you and maybe even work with you, instead of just suggesting going out and forgetting the work.

6.2 Increasing your success

To get more success with friendships it is possible to make improvements to every element described in previous sections of this publication. However, some elements are easier to improve than others.

For example, it is hard to become more intelligent or richer. There is only so much you can do to become physically stronger or better looking. You may have little choice about where you live or work.

In contrast, you can more easily make changes in the following areas:

- **Intelligence gathering:** Go online or ask friends to find out more about people you are likely to meet, would like to meet, or have met superficially. Use that to find good candidate friends and to help make initial contacts and conversation.
- **Selection:** Choose a variety of suitable people and types of help. Attend a variety of venues and events for meeting people. Reach out across the internet or travel to find individuals who share your special interests or abilities.
- **Preparation:** Increase your ability to help by getting informed about likely challenges in advance. You are then ready to help if things get confusing for others.
- **Hygiene:** Basic personal hygiene remains important, particularly being clean and avoiding unpleasant smells.
- **Information exchange:** Take an interest in people. Ask good questions that uncover bases for friendship and share such information of your own.
- **Proposals:** Do not waste opportunities for friendship by failing to make appropriate proposals. Put up with occasional rejection in order to make more proposals.
- **Reliability:** Be consistent in following through with help offered and accepted. Keep appointments and be punctual. Return borrowed items promptly. Keep secrets for people. Avoid harming others unnecessarily.
- **Explicit signalling:** Make sure you explicitly acknowledge and show gratitude for reciprocal help and non-harm.
- **Focus:** Do not spread yourself too thinly. Some people are extremely popular and have hundreds of acquaintances, but they cannot give much attention to most of them. A person who is more focused can be a better friend to a few people.

The final point about focus can be important in particular when you are looking for a lover, and especially if you seek a life partner. This can become competitive and your competition might be someone who is better looking, more charming, and perhaps richer than you. The way to compete with this is to focus on the downside of their strength, which is that they can appear less likely to be faithful. Someone looking for a life partner may take you more seriously than an alternative potential lover who could easily find someone else.

One difficult area, especially for some people, is to talk about the job they do or the educational course they are taking. Almost any specialism has its critics and image problems, but also has its value. Your description should be positive without being exaggerated, and should focus on the value you provide. Here are some examples:

- **Computer programmer:** 'I program computers to make them do things that are useful to people. My particular speciality is statistical analysis of medical trials, so it's really important to make no mistakes and avoid delays.'

- **Bin collector:** 'I'm a bin man. It's tough, especially when the weather is really hot, cold, or wet, but it's important. If we stopped, the borough would be disgusting within a fortnight. We do much more on recycling now than when I started.'
- **Kennel worker:** 'I look after dogs at a kennel when people have to be away. It's really important that people know they can trust us with their dogs. Some dogs are quite mean and aggressive but most of the dogs are lovely and we are a friendly team.'
- **Undergraduate mathematician:** 'I'm studying maths. Some of it is abstract but a lot has practical use. In many ways, it's a personal commitment to thinking very, very clearly. Whatever I do after university I hope that will be useful. I'm interested in a lot of other things too.'

6.3 Competition

Humans are a species of ape and, like other apes, there is often intense competition for group leadership and other levels of status, though only some individuals participate in this.

The competition can lead to some very bad and confusing behaviour. People often behave as if they are two people in one; one is generous, relaxed, and forgiving, while the other is selfish, ambitious, and socially competitive.

Some people can maintain quite big lies for a long time, making the truth more shocking if it emerges.

One aspect of this is that banter often includes teasing and insults. If relationships are solid then this can be harmless, and the very fact that it can be done without damaging relationships is taken as a positive sign.

However, these insults often have a real basis and are not just jokes. It is better to stay respectful at all times, even with close friends. People sometimes take offence even while they are laughing.

Some people are desperate to be accepted into a social group. Fortunately, there are many social groups and it is not necessary to be a fixture in any.

Social events can be stressful even when they feel pleasant or exciting.

6.4 Some errors

If you are looking for more friends or more friendship then there are many potential mistakes that may stop you.

6.4.1 Complete lack of understanding

A person with no understanding of the mechanisms of friendship may struggle to engage with others.

With no understanding it may be intimidating to meet people and talk with them. A person may feel shy or socially anxious, and may avoid social contact altogether.

6.4.2 Confusing social with friendly

Many mistakes arise from identifying only part of the process of friendship and focusing on it to the exclusion of other elements. Perhaps a person noticed that particular behaviours produced a positive reaction from other people and so followed up with more of the same. Some of these mistakes arise from realizing that social behaviour – attending social events, making conversation, joining groups – is important but not realizing that help and non-harm are the foundation of friendship.

A person may become quite a skilled and enthusiastic conversationalist, perhaps even charming and entertaining, without realizing that the cooperative elements that pave the way for friendship are special and need to be followed up.

Others may think that such a person is superficially friendly but that something is missing.

A person may think that going to 'social' events, perhaps especially those that involve consuming alcohol, is the key to gaining friends. Or they may focus on events where there is always loud music even though this blocks conversation, making these poor venues for developing friendships.

Alternatively, they may confuse being part of a social group (e.g. a gang) with having friends. It is possible to be an accepted member of a group that spends a lot of time together without developing friendships with any individuals in that group. The anxiety over acceptance in a group – adhering to group norms on dress, tastes, and behaviour – may be largely unnecessary.

6.4.3 *Attractiveness wasted*

Other mistakes due to understanding only part of friendship involve working hard to be more attractive as a friend but then failing to turn that into specific friendships.

A person may focus only on being an overtly generous and caring person, but direct this at charity cases rather than the people they live around. They want to save the whale, be good to the disabled, fight racism, and yet they don't have time to help their friend move flats or get ready for a party because they are too busy with activism.

Alternatively, a person may know that being capable is important for relationships and work hard on skills, tasks, and resources but still not help people who would be friends or give others a chance to reciprocate.

Another error if you want friends is to be so intent on showing your capability that you fail to pay attention to other factors,

such as showing willingness to cooperate and showing that there are things others can do for you.

6.4.4 *One-sided helping*

Still other errors arise from not pursuing or allowing *reciprocal* help and non-harm.

A person may be so keen to focus on the other person and their needs that they fail to give the other person opportunities to reciprocate.

Conversely, a person may be a taker only. For example, someone who is often unhappy and in need of emotional support may find that this, initially, attracts interest, sympathy, and support. However, as they continue with this pattern and fail to give anything back they find that their friendships become strained and weaken.

One may be duped by someone who is good at engendering strong feelings of friendship but then exploits those as a way to get what they want without giving back.

Sometimes people do favours for others without permission that are unwanted. Even if the favour is valuable, the person may not want to incur the moral debt involved. This will usually fail to develop friendship. Reciprocal help needs to be voluntary.

6.4.5 *Narrow helping*

The range of help provided can be important. Feelings of friendship typically involve willingness to help in a range of ways, not just in one way.

Long term friendship often involves adapting to each other's changing needs and interests.

If the help you provide is always focused on a person's unhappiness then you can become associated with that unhappiness, weakening the friendship.

6.4.6 Deceivers

People can be deceptive in various ways, providing some of the signals of friendly feelings but without having them.

For example, a person may gush warmly around their new best friend but quickly cool and switch to someone else they think more appealing. The intensity level is unreasonable given the circumstances.

A person may be unreliable, saying they will help but then not showing up.

Most cruelly, a person may feign friendship as part of bullying, intending to humiliate at a later stage.

6.5 Illustration of winning at friendship: Freshers week

Freshers week at a university creates a number of challenges socially:

- The sheer number of new people.
- An environment rich in potential friends, with increased rivalry and lack of fidelity at first.
- A lot of people whose social role has, in the past, been as the smart one, who now find they are no longer different in this respect. Now some vie to stay the smartest person and there is rivalry. Others struggle to function socially without the help of a key attribute that has made them attractive to friends in the past.
- Many who continue with just the childhood mode of seeking playmates, and may accentuate this by adding booze and/or other drugs to this situation, making the confusion and ill effects worse.
- Many who are, in various ways, a bit odd due to being extreme and perhaps more in the grip of their intellectual mistakes about relationships, rather than just going with instinct.

- Many who are anxious about the whole experience, including the academic work.

In response a person who understands that these factors are at work can:

- Take a longer-term perspective.
- Be open-minded about potential friendships.
- Use different types of reciprocal help to cultivate the new friendships.
- Start to seek a wider variety of friends, including study friends (on your course), play friends, exercise friends, and intellectual inquiry friends.
- Look for different friends in different environments; you don't have to be in one gang only.
- Be kind to others who are struggling with shyness by gently taking an interest and helping them with practical things.
- With people who are mistakenly not doing the whole reciprocal arrangement, take the lead and guide them through by your questions and suggestions.
- Know a lot about the course, the university, the town, etc and use that to help people from time to time (without being a know-all).

7. Conclusions

The basis of friendship is reciprocal help and non-harm. Exactly what that involves differs between relationships.

Here is a summary of action points:

- Seek the right mix of different types of friend.
- Think about using a variety of types of help as the reciprocal help element in relationships, including more that have

a practical, adult basis. (Not all people to have a laugh with.)

- Do all of these:
 - Ask people questions that would allow you to understand and help them (or at least not harm them).
 - Give people information that would allow them to understand and help you (or at least not harm you).
 - Make sensible proposals for giving and requesting help.
- Monitor friendships and see how they develop. Take a longer term view.

8. References

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