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# FRIENDSHIP

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## FRIENDSHIP

"This is my friend." How many times have we said this as we proudly introduced a special person? As children and as adults we have known that friendships are essential to a healthy life. Yet during the times we were driven by addictions and compulsions, we were often uneasy about our friendships. Perhaps they weren't as nurturing and caring as we thought they should be. Perhaps we made a mockery of those relationships by using and manipulating our loved ones. Or perhaps we felt hollow and incapable of investing anything of ourselves in a friendship.

### Friendship in Recovery

At the beginning of our recovery, most of us thought only of freedom. We were so obsessed with our compulsions and addictions that recovery, to us, meant only the absence or removal of those all-consuming drives. We probably didn't realize then how many other areas of our lives we had ignored. We couldn't have known then that recovery would give us the time, opportunity, and vitality for hundreds of growth experiences. But now we realize how en-

riched we are by those experiences and how fulfilling our lives can be as we progress every day in our program.

In living the Twelve Steps, we have shed many of the chains that once kept us from growing. We have learned to live more honestly, to allow ourselves to be more vulnerable, and to focus on positive thought and action.

Today we are better able to forgive, to share, and to love. We are healthier in body and mind now. Our friendships are stronger than ever before. As we grow in recovery, our feelings become clearer, our self-image gradually becomes stronger, and the ability to accept ourselves and others allows us, at last, to develop full and enriching relationships.

Friendships are eloquent testimony to our continued growth and sobriety. We need only contrast our relationships today with those of the past in order to see how far we've come in our expression of love and acceptance. Such a comparison can even serve as an inventory check, as a tool to help us see how much stronger we are and which skills we want to concentrate on. In doing this we accomplish two things: 1) We remind ourselves that friendships — like recovery — are alive and ongoing. There is no instant perfection. There is no standing still. Just as we didn't suddenly recover from

addictive/compulsive behaviors, we didn't become capable of meaningful, sustaining friendships immediately. As we continue to grow in recovery, our ability to form strong bonds with others grows. 2) We are better able to see our strengths and weaknesses. Our present friendships are supported by our strengths. The continued enrichment of our friendships is made possible by our willingness to look honestly at ourselves.

The new friendships we've found and the old ones that are now flourishing in recovery are some of the rewards of our present lifestyle. They comfort us. They support us. Today, as we look at our closest relationships, we see — perhaps for the first time — that we maintain our friendships not as acts of selfishness, but as acts of sharing. No longer do we surround ourselves with people who encourage self-destructive behaviors. Now we joyfully welcome people who expect our best, who recognize our efforts for goodness, and who accept our humanness and failures.

An important measure of our growth is the fact that our friendships affirm the best in us as we are at this moment. We no longer use our friends to protect and insulate us from the truth. Now we reach out to our friends to offer the same support and comfort they provide for us.

We've always had friends — people who share

our time and activities. It isn't as though we were friendless before recovery and now we are blessed with friends. The difference between then and now, however, is in the quality of our friendships and in what we have to offer them. Although some friendships — especially those entirely based on mutual addictions or compulsions — may have cooled or disappeared from our lives, we have many of the same friends we had before our recovery — family members, childhood friends, co-workers.

### **Different Stages of Friendship**

Relationships exist in several stages, and most healthy ones progress from one stage to the next. An acquaintance-type relationship is usually marked by cordiality but maintains distance. Acquaintances are people we know on a casual basis through our work, organizations, or neighborhoods. There is usually little bonding with these people other than proximity or a few mutual experiences.

When we call people friends we have reached the next stage. This stage was preceded by the active pursuit of their presence. We invite them to join us in activities, we call them on the phone, or make other welcoming gestures to show them that we like their company. These

friendships could be called activity friendships because they often revolve around a specific interest or activity. Beginning friendship is deeper than acquaintanceship because more time and personal involvement is required, although real sharing of thoughts or feelings hasn't occurred. Some friendships never progress beyond this point, and it's not necessary that they do. We can enjoy other people's company or share a special interest with them and not need to develop intimacy.

Before recovery, many of us were not capable of any friendship beyond the activity kind. We pursued those relationships which permitted or encouraged our addictions and compulsions, but those very weaknesses would not allow us to develop deeper friendships based on openness, sharing of thoughts or feelings, intimacy, or vulnerability.

The closest relationships involve many stages. These could be called growth friendships, and they are many-faceted and characterized by the often unspoken emphasis on growth in ourselves and our friends. In this type of relationship, friends feel good about themselves and about each other. They allow themselves vulnerability without fear of being hurt. They feel compassion and empathy for the other. They support. They nurture. And, equally impor-

tant, they are independent; they don't need each other.

Since our recovery, most of us have probably experienced that independence in a friendship. We have been delighted to suddenly discover that we can disagree with our friends and not fear losing them — or know that a friend's disagreement with us is not a rejection of us or the friendship.

Before recovery, certain weaknesses — character defects — prohibited us from forming relationships beyond the acquaintanceship or activity level. But now we've been blessed with an awareness of growth, of how we grow through hard work and our Higher Power, and of how rewarding this growth is in all areas of our lives.

The blessing of friendship in recovery isn't always that we have more friends, but that our relationships are enriched and we are more capable of nurturing them. We need only look at the qualities that have developed in us through recovery, to better understand and appreciate the rich friendships we are now capable of enjoying.

### **Qualities in Recovery and Friendship**

**Fearlessness.** This quality developed early in our recovery when we were encouraged to look

at ourselves and our lives. The Fourth Step has helped us face the fears that have controlled our lives and dictated our actions. We may have been afraid of change, of normal people, of our own thoughts, of the truth, or of a thousand other threats to our limited lives. But this beginning showed us how little we really have to fear when we deal with ourselves and others honestly.

Our friendships reflect this today. When we aren't afraid we can look away from ourselves and toward others.

**Openness.** Shedding our fears allows us to discard many me-centered concerns. The games of denial we played before prevented us from being open. We had secrets. The poor image we had of ourselves had to be concealed, not shared. Perfectionism and an overwhelming need to please others prevented us from being open. Our addictions plus our conflicting character defects forced us into isolation. We couldn't be open with others because we dared not be honest with ourselves.

Now we are freer to open our minds, hearts, and arms to others. We don't have secret territory to protect anymore. Our worst fears can be faced. When placed in the open, even our darkest thoughts and deeds don't separate us from the care and understanding of those who love

us. Instead, they often help our friendships grow because these admissions — instead of pointing out how different or bad we are — can bond us in the truth that we are human, we are flawed, and we are doing our best to change the things we can.

**Honesty.** The freedom we've found in recovery, we know now, is not only a matter of drug-free or compulsion-free living. We are free to be ourselves. We are free to love ourselves. Our ever-increasing honesty — with self and with others — allows us to strip away the pretense, self-deception, and half-truths that were barriers to healthy relationships.

If we were people pleasers, we saw ourselves as the means to others' happiness or we were afraid we would not be accepted if we were ourselves. Often, this underlying dishonesty ruined chances for friendship because we adapted chameleon-like behavior believing that is what others wanted. As actors and caretakers in their lives, we deprived other people of an accurate picture of us.

**Maturity.** The childishness of before has gradually given way to a wisdom and a maturity that doesn't require everything to be our way.

We've been told that maturity halts once a person becomes enmeshed in an addiction or

compulsion. In other words, if we were addicted by age seventeen, we stopped acquiring the living and coping skills that come later. Some people believe addiction, of necessity, brings on the unreasonable, childish behavior to protect itself. But however it happens or whatever causes it, the fact is, most of us lived childishly in an adult world. We manipulated others. If criticized or challenged, we may have pouted, exploded, or cried. The one thing we didn't do was discuss issues rationally or maturely. And how could we? The center of our lives was a compulsion with no rational, mature defense. The upshot of our addiction was that we were incapable of adult communication with others because we were incapable of the open, honest communication that is the basis of a healthy friendship.

What a gift our growing maturity is! And what joy it brings us and our loved ones. We can trust ourselves and they can trust us to carry our share of life's joys and problems without resorting to childish behavior.

**Acceptance.** Maturity allows us a greater acceptance of others' peculiarities and of our own weaknesses or failures. We're not so frightened of being different, and we're more able to trust our judgment of events and of people. Now we tend to see ourselves and others as being part of

a total picture. We see more grays and fewer blacks and whites.

We are better able to accept the circumstances of our lives, whether created by ourselves or by some outside source. What was, was. But what can be has a bright and shining potential.

**Forgiveness.** What we can accept, we can forgive. No longer do we carry that bag of anger filled with real and imagined wrongs. We aren't as concerned with keeping score on who's ahead and who's behind. We've learned how much of that excess baggage can be discarded when we forgive. This wonderful quality is now part of us and gives us peace.

**Trust.** When we set anger and grudge-carrying aside, it's easier to trust, to have faith in other people and in ourselves. At one time our distrust of others was instinctive — directed by the compulsions we protected so fiercely. Our distrust, teamed up with low self-esteem and anger, gave us little ground on which to build loving friendships.

Now, the acceptance and forgiveness we've learned to give without being asked allows us to trust more readily. We can be vulnerable because the imagined threats are gone. And if, by chance, there are real threats and our trust is betrayed, we can easily accept, forgive, and then

trust again.

**Confidence.** Our self-esteem grows daily, and as it does, our old people-pleasing behaviors have gradually decreased. Many of us have increasingly rejected our perfectionism which had once condemned us to feeling like perpetual failures.

It's rewarding to see how far we've moved from the old degrading patterns that went with a low self-esteem. At one time we denied many of our basic better qualities in order to accommodate the demands of our compulsions. The subverting of our honesty, loyalty, dignity, and love had to be expressed some way. Since we believed our addictions were not to be violated, we turned against ourselves. Friendships do not grow easily among people who don't like themselves. How many times did we distrust people who seemed to find something worthwhile in us? How many times did we say to ourselves, "Oh, if they only knew what I was really like"?

Our acceptance of our human nature — with all its strengths and foibles — offers us the opportunity to take more chances with ourselves. It allows us to take reasonable risks with confidence.

**Centeredness.** Where once we were self-centered, we are now able to see ourselves within a center of living activities that include

our work, our family, our friends, and all the other aspects of our existence. At one time our addictions and compulsions demanded we center our lives around them. There was no room for compassion, sympathy, empathy, or unselfish love when our total energies were focused on our own or someone else's compulsions.

We no longer childishly manipulate the world to fulfill our will; instead, we see the interrelationship of all these people and their needs. We haven't become selfless nor do we reject our needs. We accept the validity of our needs but don't expect others to put them before theirs.

**Loving.** No healthy, growing friendship can flourish without love. We've come so far in our ability to love. Our love was once narrow and self-directed, which meant events and people had to be manipulated to suit our needs. We withheld love to get our way. We used affection to reward those who enabled us to continue in our self-destructive patterns. It was nearly impossible to develop depth of character and full potential for love when our energies were totally directed toward protecting self-defeating behaviors. Before recovery, our addictions rejected growth, openness, and a concern for others. We knew people on only superficial levels. We were probably incapable of love as we know it today.

Now, we are free to love with no other motive

than to express feeling for another person. We are now able to love without wondering what's in it for us or protecting our weaknesses.

**Spirituality.** At one time, we wanted to be in charge. We wanted to be in control. We were so brainwashed by our compulsions that we believed only weak people asked for help. At the root of our self-centeredness, fears, problems, compulsive behaviors, and negative traits lay our unresponsiveness to a Higher Power. Our lives had no room for the guidance or the serenity of God as we understand Him; they were filled with the rigid, unyielding demands of addiction.

The gradual deepening of our relationship with our Higher Power, and the serenity that comes from letting Him direct our lives, have had a great impact on our relationships. For many of us, our spirituality is a bonding with all life. It certainly carries with it a greater respect for others and an identification with them as fellow travelers. How many times have we heard or said to ourselves that this is a spiritual program? The spiritual energy we've experienced is clearly evident in our higher self-esteem, greater trust, maturity, courage, confidence, and ability to love. No part of the program and no growth in ourselves is possible without the spiritual component. We experience

this every day in our friendships.

### **Friendships and Growth**

As we've moved along in recovery, we have steadily grown. And we are still growing and will continue to grow throughout our lives. We will never reach perfection, and we remind ourselves it is growth and not perfection that we strive for. We are not perfect; so we love imperfectly, trust imperfectly, and practice our spirituality imperfectly. Our very best characteristics are imperfect, but they're improving every day.

Recovery isn't a one-time event; neither is a friendship. We didn't suddenly recover; we recover a little more each day as we earnestly work the program. Our friendships — whether they be with spouse, children, long-time friends whom we now see more clearly, or new friends with whom we make a new history — reflect the same progress and growth our recovery does.

The reward of friendship in recovery is actually a discovery of ourselves at our best — at the best we are today — with the optimism of knowing we will be even better tomorrow. Our friendships affirm our growth each time we look at the people who are such a basic part of our lives and say, "These are my friends."

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