

# Friendship

HOW IT WORKS / HOW TO DO IT BETTER



CECILY PATERSON

# friendship

| how it works | how to do it better |

cecily paterson

For Sarah, Sarah and Sarah.  
And Kerri-Ann.

Friendship.  
What it's all about and how to do it better.

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Bible verses taken from the NIV version.

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## Why do I want you to read this book?

Because I think you're like me. The things that gave me the most griefs and worries as I was growing up were not my circumstances, my looks, my body image, my parents or my school work. The things that worried me most and kept me awake most at night were my friendships and relationships.

### **It's just not that easy**

From the age of four, when the most attractive child in the preschool wouldn't give me time of day, I realised that this friendship thing was just not as easy as I thought!

As time went on, I made friends and enjoyed the fun and laughter that being with other people

brings. I struggled, like most people, with the usual school-yard squabbles and alignments. I learned to cope with meeting new people through changing schools, and being new at churches and groups.

Living overseas, I experienced most of my friendships changing every few years as people came and went from our international school. Hellos and goodbyes became a regular part of life. Boarding school for five years in high school intensified all my friendships and changed the way I related to people.

And it often seemed difficult. Sure, there were patches of brilliance – sometimes all my friendships were harmonious and beautiful at the one time, but it didn't seem to last for long.

One of the problems was I just didn't understand how relationships worked. My mother's constant advice was "if you want to have friends, you've got to be friendly". On one level, that is as true as anything is ever going to be. But on another level, it didn't always seem to work. I thought I was *always* friendly. So why were there times when I didn't have any friends?

This book is written for you: to help you understand relationships – how they work, what they are all about, and why they're important. It's to help you see the richness of great relationships, and the tragedy of poor ones. And then to give you some tips on how you can have better relationships.

## You're not alone

I'm convinced I'm not the only person out there who has swung between loving the world and everyone in it, and then feeling completely alone and alien. I'm sure I'm not the only one who has wondered why friendships go wrong, and questioned how I could relate to people better.

A friend of mine is a high school teacher. She sometimes runs a course on relationships for the teenagers in her school. On one course, she asked this question as an opener: "Who goes to bed every night and thinks about their friendships?"

Every person in the room put up their hands.

If you're a young person heading into adulthood, the single most important thing in life is to be right in your relationship with God.

The second most important thing is to get your relationships with people right. And it's never too late to start working on it.

By the way, I use a lot of stories in this book about people I've met or heard of along the way. Many of the names have been changed but all the stories are based on real people.

## Are people a waste of energy?

I was 26 years old when the first of my school friends from our international school died. Amy Jo was a few years older than me, but I felt I knew her well. She was one of those special people who seemed to shine with the love of God. Even at the age of six, she was kind enough to share her Barbie dress-up clothes with a younger girl like me.

In the year or so before she died we had caught up a little, when she and her husband were training to go to India as missionaries. It was clear just how enthusiastically she was looking forward to sharing the gospel in India, how generously she thought of others around her, and how devotedly she adored her husband.

Soon after they arrived in India, Amy Jo fell pregnant. I thought it was wonderful that my baby was due around the same time. But as her pregnancy progressed, she started to get terrible headaches.

At eight months along, she went for some tests where it was discovered that she had a brain tumour and needed urgent surgery. The doctors took out the baby – a little girl – by caesarean, and then operated on her brain.

Unfortunately Amy Jo died, at the young age of 28. When my baby girl was born a few weeks later, it brought tears to my eyes to imagine Amy Jo's little girl without her mother and to think of how her family felt, losing their beloved wife and sister and daughter.

### Loss and grief

Knowing Amy Jo brought warm and constant joy to many people all around the world. Losing Amy Jo brought us all terrible loss and great pain and grief. Is having a friendship worth it when losing your friend brings such trauma?

There are many stories in the world like this. St Augustine of Hippo who lived in the third century was one of the early church fathers and a thinker, philosopher and theologian.

He, too, lost his friend whom he loved very much.

He, too, was devastated.

This is what he wrote after it happened:

“This is what comes of giving one’s heart to anything but God. All human beings pass away. Do not let your happiness depend on something you may lose. If love is to be a blessing, not a misery, it must be for the only Beloved who will never pass away.”

In other words, Augustine said that you shouldn’t waste your emotions on people. Instead, you should give all your love to God, because that’s the only way you won’t be hurt. Loving people will only ultimately bring you misery!

It’s an interesting thought. If I had read his words around the time that Amy Jo died, I might have been persuaded to believe him. I might have said that relationships with people were just too painful.

## Was Augustine right?

Should we really just give up on people and focus only on God?

To find answers to our questions, it’s always a good idea to go to the Bible. And a good place to start is at the Bible’s beginning, in Genesis.

The first chapter is a triumph of creativity and blessing. God is amazing. Just by saying the words, he brings into being this fabulous planet, solar system and entire universe. There are exotic plants, a wild array of animals, a brilliant sun, a beautiful moon and complex life cycles intertwined with weather and geological systems. It is good, good, good, God says over and over again, until we get to Genesis 2:18, and the first negative words since the creation of time:

“It is *not* good for a man to be alone.”

And my question is: well, why not?

I suppose there might be a few answers to this.

There are health issues that come from being alone. Medical studies have shown that children who



are socially isolated have a higher risk for disease. I've met people who have lived alone for years, never mixing socially with others. They are, in a word, extremely odd. Being alone puts strain on your mental health.

Being alone has been used as a torture technique for thousands of years. Solitary confinement is one of the most terrifying punishments ever invented. Being denied contact with other people can make you desperate, frightened and disoriented.

But these things are not the real reason why it is not good to be alone. The real reason is because we are made in the image of God.

## God is like an egg... but so what?

Look back to Genesis 1:27. It says: "God created people in his own image; God patterned them after himself; male and female he created them."

We all know that there is only one God. As well, most of us understand that in that one God, there are three persons, in the Trinity.

The Trinity is something that usually comes up in Sunday school when the teacher brings out the old egg illustration.

"Separately, each of the three component parts, the shell, the yolk and the white are not the egg. They have to be together to make up the egg," she explains.

And children nod their heads. "We get it," they say. But most of the time, they put it on the back-burner as something that is interesting, but not really going to affect their lives too much.

A few years ago I would have said, "Sure, the Trinity is interesting. But really, who cares anyway? Does it make any difference to how I live my life?"

You've probably guessed that I'm going to say yes, it does make a difference!

God's personhood shapes our identity as people. It shapes how we relate to others.

God being Trinity – three in one – shows us three things.

Firstly, it's not good to be alone.

Why? Because God at his very heart is relational.

Have you noticed that each person of the Trinity is named in relation to the other? The Father is not a father, unless there is a son. The Son is not a son, unless there is father. The Spirit is the bond of love between the father and the son, drawing us up into their relationship.

Secondly, it's good to be different and unique.

Each person of the Trinity is different and unique. The Father is not the Son, who is not the Spirit, who is not the Father. Each one plays a different part and has different characteristics.

Thirdly, loving interdependence is the way to relate.

Why? Because the internal relationship of God is love. There is a clear language of affection and love between the different persons in the Trinity. Loving and working together is at the core of God's very being.

## Changing our relationships

If we really believe that God is a Trinity, and that we are made in his image, we will think about our relationships differently.

We'll think about togetherness. Instead of chasing our own stuff, and using people to achieve our own ends, we will look to serve God and others. We will love and enjoy other people.

We'll think about difference. Have you ever noticed that most people are scared of people who are different from them? When we see that each person in the Trinity is unique, we can also see that every person has unique qualities that we can embrace and appreciate, without having to make everyone the same as us.

We'll think about interdependence. If you've ever studied John Donne's poetry in English, you'll have heard this phrase: No man is an island. In other words, what one person does affects another. What one person needs can be supplied by another.

We don't have to be self-sufficient, independent or a 'solitary hero'. In fact, it's unchristian to be so.

## So what do we get from all this Trinity stuff?

Basically this: being truly human is finding your true being in relationship with God *and* with others, because we are made in God's image, and he is a relational God.

In other words, if you are living apart from God and people, you are not really living.

We need to be in relationships with people. And our relationships must have these three qualities: togetherness, difference, interdependence.

So now we get back to the story of Amy Jo, and the story of St Augustine who said that you

shouldn't love people. Instead, you should just love God, because otherwise, it's too painful.

Was he right? Well, if the highest priority in your life is safety against hurt, he was right. Who wants to suffer? You'll almost certainly suffer if you start relating to people, because relationships of all types are all prone to fail.

But to truly be the people that God created us to be, and to live the way God created us to live, we must run that risk. It's *not* good to be alone.

## To think about

1. Are you a person who prefers to be on your own, or who prefers to be with people? Why?
2. Think about the three ideas that come from God being Trinity: (1) it's not good to be alone; (2) It is good to be different and unique; and (3) loving interdependence is the way to relate. Which of these do you find the most challenging?
3. What is the difference between independence, dependence and interdependence?

## 2

# Why Jess was almost right but not quite

When I'm writing about something I love to ask the people around me what they think of the topic. So when I was starting to think about friendship, I managed to catch off-guard some of the young adults in our church around the dinner table one night and get their thoughts on the topic.

Some of my questions to them were: who would you count as a friend? How do you know they are a real friend? When did they become a friend? Can you define what being a friend means? What does someone have to do to become your friend? Do you have people you think you're friends with, but they don't think the same way?

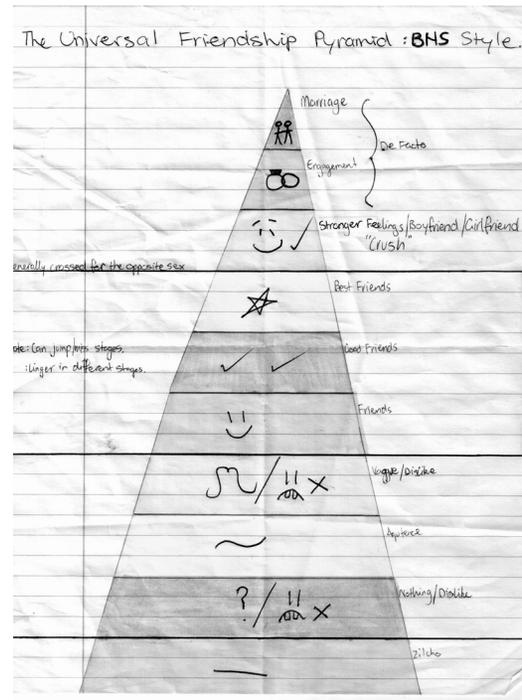
We tied ourselves up in knots for a while arguing about the difference between 'good friends' and 'best friends', and what 'acquaintance' really means.

"I've just remembered something," said Jess. "When I was in year 9, a friend and I were trying to work out where our friends fit in to our lives, so we devised what we called the 'Universal Friendship Pyramid'. Mind you, I think we were wasting too much time in maths!"

## Figuring it out

Jess's pyramid was her teenage attempt to make sense of the relationships around her. We all do this at some point or another. We ask ourselves: Who is my friend? Who am I closest to? Whose company do I enjoy? Who would I keep up with if I moved away?

Jess rightly put a high value on the top relationships in her pyramid. She put a high value on the next level down – her friendships. So far, so good. Where her pyramid fell down, however, was in the negative or limited value she put on the bottom two tiers of



relationships. The vast majority of people in her pyramid fell into the ‘zilcho’ category!

A trap that many people fall into is thinking that only close relationships have value. Their aim is to get more and more close relationships, or take what close relationships they do have to even deeper levels.

But the reality is that there are many ways to be in relationships with others. And all of them have value.

Here’s a slightly different framework to help us think about this. Imagine there are four ‘spaces’ of belonging in your life; public, social, personal and intimate.

## The four spaces

Public belonging occurs when people connect through an outside influence - for example, if you support a sports team, or if you’re the member of a club or organisation. Just enjoying a movie or a book can be a source of public belonging. Public ‘spaces’ include churches, schools, physical places, jobs, universities, after school groups. In Jess’s Universal Friendship Pyramid, the public space was the broadest part of the pyramid, at the bottom. The value she put on these relationships was ‘zilcho’.

But don’t be deceived. Public space relationships are not trivial relationships. To a large extent these define our lives. Our public spaces give us broad brush strokes of identity. They are the things we use when we introduce ourselves. They provide the information other people need to see where we fit in society.

The people who we know by face or name and who we might greet personally belong in our social space. We can find social belonging in fellowship groups and family get-togethers, at camps, church or school, or even on the bus! You might call these people ‘acquaintances’ if you’re being old fashioned and polite. Jess was less polite on her pyramid. Some people in this space on her pyramid get the rating of ‘nothing/dislike’. And that’s also true. You don’t have to *like* everyone in this space.

But these relationships are still important. This is the space where ‘neighbour’ relationships come into play. You’re not good friends with them, but because you belong in the same social space, you’ll help each other out. Social space is also a ‘sorting’ space for those people who you want to get to know better.

Personal space is where we share much more private (but not super-intimate) experiences, feelings, and thoughts. The people in our personal space know more about us than people in our social space.

## Too close for comfort?

Personal space is literally that – space next to your person.

In Western culture, acceptable personal space is between 18 inches and 4 feet. If someone in your personal space stands 6 feet away, you get the unconscious message that they are avoiding you, and you'll wonder what's wrong.



On the other hand, you may have had the experience of backing away from a close talker. It feels like that person is trying to get into a space they haven't been invited into.

Personal space can be the most difficult space to manage. Where is the line between social space and personal space? What if you think someone's in your personal space, but they think you're in their social space? What if you cross that embarrassing line and get too intimate when the friendship can't handle it? It can all get pretty tricky!

For most of my high school years I went to boarding school in the Himalayan mountains and shared a bedroom with several girls from my class. You can get some pretty fierce storms up there, and my friend Sarah was scared of thunder. One night we had a real crasher. There were booms and flashes, and the rain was pelting in on our bedroom window. Sarah was terrified and couldn't get to sleep.

"Cecily" she whispered. "I'm freaked out. Can I come and sleep with you?"

She crawled into bed next to me and we both went to sleep. The next morning she looked at me and said, "Never, never tell anyone about this." The personal space line of uncomfortableness had been crossed!

We kept our mouths shut and never mentioned it again.

We are able to be more honest with them, and sometimes show them the sides of ourselves that are not quite so socially presentable.

Intimate space is reserved for the people you are extremely close to, physically and emotionally. Intimate space is where you share your most personal experiences, feelings and thoughts. This is where you become truly vulnerable with another person.

Who fits into this space? It all depends on your circumstances. The most obvious answer is your spouse if you're married. Apart from that, the space can be filled by parents, children, other relatives, romantic partners or very close friends. In teenage years, the intimate space is often occupied by your best girlfriend, if you're a girl, or your best mate if you're a guy.

## The four spaces have to be balanced

Understanding the four spaces of belonging is a good first step to getting good relationships (and we'll get to that in the next few chapters). But the real trick to it all this: to have healthy relationships, the four spaces have to be balanced.

You can't have *all* intimate best buddies who know everything about you. It's not normal or healthy. But you've got to have a few. And you can't belong to heaps of clubs and organisations and have a fabulous social life, but have no closeness in your life. That won't help you either.

Healthy relationships need harmonious connections within all four spaces. Harmony means more public belongings than social, more social than personal and only few intimate relationships. Harmony also means that we value all of the spaces and the relationships in them. To write off your public space relationships as having a value of 'zilcho' isn't going to give you a healthy balance.

## Fitting it together

So how does being made in God's image tie into all this talk about four spaces of relationship?

Well, good relating is modelled on the Trinity. Togetherness, difference and interdependence are all necessary for a good relationship. And relationships are of many different kinds.

In the next few chapters we'll talk about what makes a great relationship in every different space.

### 3

## How to cut a public figure

**I'm a little bit embarrassed** to say that I love reality TV.

I especially like what I call the 'fish out of water' shows. Whether it's the mums of two different families swapping houses for a fortnight, or an Aussie family going to spend a month with an African tribe, I like the idea of seeing how people react when they don't belong.

There are lots of comedies based on this premise. Think of the oldie *Crocodile Dundee*, where Mick Dundee, a bushie from the Northern Territory gets transplanted to New York City. He's never seen so many people in his life, he can hardly understand the accent and he doesn't know why people look at him oddly when he says hello to everyone he sees on the street. And one of my favourites, *Legally Blonde*, which dumps Elle Woods, a pink-loving, Californian sorority blonde and Bruiser, her pet chihuahua, into the middle of the serious, cynical, academic world of Harvard Law School.

### Public space

The laughs in these shows come from watching the people who are the 'fishes out of water' learn the rules and find their place and some sort of acceptance in their new environment.

All of these shows are dealing with the idea of public belonging. In other words, they look at how people relate in the public space.

In the last chapter, we saw how public belonging occurs when people connect through an outside influence. What does it mean to relate to other people in the 'public space'? What skills or qualities do you need? And what about the idea of togetherness, difference and interdependence?



## Togetherness

One of the basic ways we relate *together* in the public space is by practicing some degree of social conformity. Every society or group has socially accepted rules and practices. They are what show us that we belong together as a group.

Social rules in the public space govern the kinds of things we almost never think about.

For example, how close is too close to the person in front of you in a supermarket queue? What about at a big rock show or concert? If you get on a bus, how are you going to choose your seat? (If there's only one other person on the bus, it would be incredibly rude to sit next to them. But if the bus is full, it's fine.)

Then there are rules about socially acceptable ways to walk down the street. If you dance, shuffle or do cartwheels, people will think there is something wrong with you.

Talking in public is also subject to rules. You don't yell unless you're at a sports game. You don't normally start talking to the stranger next to you unless you're both in the middle of an emergency. Talking to yourself is also a big no-no.

Following the public rules gives us a certain level of confidence in relating to other people. We know that it's unlikely they will do something we won't understand. We have a basic understanding of how togetherness works with them.

If we don't know the rules, we can find ourselves in all sorts of problems. For example, in some countries, touching food with your left hand is as bad as bringing used toilet paper to the table. In other countries, when you are offered food, you must say no the first time around, or appear greedy.

If you find yourself in a new culture or even just a new group, it's worth learning the unspoken rules before you get yourself into a situation you never intended.

Hang back a little and observe closely. What are people doing? What are they not doing? Should you ask someone for a few clues or hints?

## Difference

Imagine how boring life would be if everybody wore the same clothes, ate the same food, supported the same team, went to the same school, listened to the same music... you get the idea. Our world is so much richer for having differences.

But if it is important to obey the ‘rules’ in a public space, is there any place for being different? And how do you do it?

The biblical character Daniel has a lot to teach us about being different. He was a young Hebrew brought as war ‘booty’ to Babylon. Because of his good looks and intelligence he was selected for a training course designed to turn out well-educated, elite young men ready for the king’s service.

The course was a little different from any training course we might go through today. For a start, if the participants failed, they could be thrown into jail. And if the teachers failed, they could be killed.

The safest thing for Daniel would have been to keep his head down, do what everyone else did, obey the rules and hope for the best. There was a lot riding on his performance.

Daniel, however, knew that he had to be different. For reasons which are not very clear in the passage, somehow his belief in God was tied up with the fact that he had a problem with the food that was served. He needed to eat different food from everyone else, but he also needed to stay in the course and survive.

He approached the official in charge of him quietly and with a great deal of tact. At first, the official’s answer was ‘no’ - he was scared for his own life. But Daniel was able to persuade him without throwing a hissy fit or stomping out. Daniel somehow was able to be different, but not threatening.

Our differences in the public space need to be expressed in a non-threatening way. We need to be able to use the ‘rules’ of togetherness so as to make other people feel comfortable but still be who we are.

I heard a story recently of an alternative school that was so accepting of people’s differences that they let one child, who didn’t like to wear clothes, attend completely naked. (To be honest, turning up at school naked was one of my recurring bad dreams when I was a child.)

I don’t know whether the story is an urban myth, but it’s a good illustration of how expressing differences in public can make others uncomfortable. Differences are great, but shouldn’t be threatening. Hopefully when the child is an adult he will express his dislike of clothes at a nudist camp and not his workplace!

## Interdependence

The complicated dance between being the same as, and appreciating the differences between, people in the public space is called interdependence. It is possibly the dance that we humans do least well.

One good test to see if you live interdependently in the public space is to ask yourself if you talk in

## All about appearances?

I spent my holidays from boarding school in Pakistan in the Sindh desert, living in the midst of different groups of outcaste Hindu tribal people. The old traditions and customs are still current, including the way they dress. Just by looking at what a tribal woman is wearing, you can tell what tribe she comes from and whether she is single, married or widowed. In Sindh, the way you look tells everyone around you where you belong.



As a teenager who liked to change outfits several times a day and try out different looks, I thought it would have been incredibly restricting to have been a tribal woman, with only two sets of clothes (one ordinary, one for weddings) and no chance to ever wear something different. I hated the idea that everyone could know about you just by outward appearance.

“At least in my culture you can be anonymous in public,” I thought. “No-one can tell what group you come from just by looking at you.” But I think I was wrong! Whether we are a surfie or an emo, or a westie or a city accountant, we can still tell where people belong publicly by what they look like.

A lot of Christian people spiritualise this whole area of life. We say, “it doesn’t matter what I look like on the outside: it’s what inside that counts,” Of course that’s true—to an extent.

But looking appropriate is a relationship issue. And relationship issues are spiritual issues. You don’t have to be an over-the-top fashion plate but if you’re wearing clothes from another era (and you’re not just into vintage), it sends out the message that you don’t belong here, and you don’t want to belong here or you don’t know how to belong here. It raises a question about whether you have a barrier to relating to other people.

What you look like sends messages. Are you aware of the messages your physical body sends? Are you comfortable with them?

stereotypes about other people?

I was sitting in a conversation recently where a few people were telling me about their church.

“We have two services in the morning,” explained one. “The first is quite traditional, and the other is, well, let’s just say it’s a bit ‘happy-clappy.’” From the other side of the room came a very strong protest.

“You shouldn’t call it that. It’s *not* happy-clappy, whatever that means. I’ve asked you not to call it that before because I find it very offensive and I know other people do to. It says to me you aren’t taking that service seriously and giving it the same importance as the other one.”

My head swung back and forth like a spectator at a tennis match as I listened to these two slug it out. In the end, the protester was right—and he won the day. His friend had resorted to a cheap stereotype to describe his public space of worship, and he was prepared to defend it to the death—or at least as long as it took his cup of tea to get cold.

In the public space, interdependence comes when we recognise that we are all part of a whole, and each different part of that whole deserves respect, even if we don’t particularly like it. Labelling groups, styles, communities or any other type of public space that people belong to is a way of depersonalising them and assigning them less value.

Racist language depersonalises other racial groups. It is rightly considered a serious offence, but even labels that are supposed to be funny can lead to separation, hurt and divisions.

## Get rid of fear

Persecution of different groups comes from not knowing how to be interdependent. We don’t know how to live together with people who are different from us because we are so busy trying to protect ourselves. Interdependence will come if we can get rid of fear and self protection and if we can be willing to see difference as a positive thing.

It will also come if we have an attitude of citizenship. It’s an old-fashioned concept, but it basically means that we belong to something that is bigger than just us. Consideration for others is over everything. Are we prepared to live that way?

## To think about

What public group or groups do you belong to? Which groups do you definitely not belong to? How do you feel about those groups?

What do you think your appearance and your body language says about you?

Read the passage below. From what you know about public belonging describe what you see happening here, both in the problem and the solution?

**Acts 6:1-6** In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. <sup>2</sup> So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. <sup>3</sup> Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them <sup>4</sup> and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." <sup>5</sup> This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. <sup>6</sup> They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

## 4

# Getting over the social butterflies

**In the days** before Facebook, chat apps and Skype (I know, unbelievable, right?) having a ‘pen-pal’ was the way you got to know people from other places. You actually wrote letters on real paper with real handwriting and mailed them in real envelopes. In seventh grade I had a pen-pal from France. One of the very first things we did (and it felt like the most important thing) was to exchange photographs.

Imagine that you have one of those really, really old fashioned instant polaroid cameras. Every time you have an interaction in the social space, it is as if you are spitting out a snapshot of yourself to give to the person you’re talking to. From the pictures you give out, and the pictures that are given to you, you are both able to decide if you want to get to know each other better.

## Together in the social space

I went to a small boarding school in the Himalayan mountains of Pakistan, an area that attracts people who like adventure. A young Christian couple who were cycling around the world passed through the region one year. They dropped in and spent a few days hanging out with us.

I remember Liz as pleasant, friendly and interested in everyone. But Brad, her husband, was a different story. He remained in the corner of the room, either talking earnestly with a small group around him or silently watching everyone else. To my young eyes he appeared aloof, arrogant, distant and unfriendly.

Someone asked if Brad was okay, and Liz explained, “Oh, Brad doesn’t like small talk. He only likes to talk about important things.”

She said it with such pride and delight that I was impressed. *I must have been wrong*, I thought. Brad was clearly a person who had thought his life through. He obviously had it all together and was a *serious* Christian. All the rest of us who continued to enjoy talking about things like makeup or sport were not as mature as Brad.

When they left our school and headed on their way, Liz and Brad said their goodbyes. After only three or four days, Liz knew everyone and was giving out hugs and smiles everywhere. Brad stood back. He wished a few people well, but he was mostly waiting for Liz to get through farewelling all her new friends.

How did Liz and Brad get on in social space? The difference between them was notable. Liz made



more and better relationships in a shorter time than her husband because she would talk on any level. Brad only talked to a small number of people, and only about what he considered to be important.

What we need to understand is that in the social space it's not the content of what is said that's important. Rather, social space is about offering to *share* yourself. Social chat builds relationships, even if it has no particular topic.

To be fair, I have to say that people who are extroverts find the social space *much* easier to navigate than those who are introverts. Some people are so shy or nervous of this kind of interaction that they develop social phobias and would rather pull each hair out of their scalps, individually, for hours than have to make small talk. I'm not saying it's not hard, even crazy-hard for some. And the extroverts need to understand that. But we introverts do other people a big favour when we share our lives with them. And we need this space just as much as the chatty, social loud people do.

## Staying separate

Valuing separateness in the social space means acknowledging who you really are. Imagine the Polaroid photograph again. It needs to be a photograph of you— not someone else.

## Just not deep enough?

I often hear Christians say that they feel frustrated with their church because as people mingle after youth group or services there are not many 'deep' conversations going on. They feel annoyed that most conversations are about 'surface' things.

If we can understand the value of social space relationships, however, we will be less frustrated. Christians need to relate in the social space and build relationships this way.

We build togetherness in the social space by being willing to share ourselves, even if the content of our chat is not what we would necessarily choose.

(Alright, you might have airbrushed your pimples for the time being, and nobody needs to see all of your warts straightaway but don't pretend to be another person.) If you are a quiet person you don't have to pretend to be loud. If you really love country music why not say so? You don't have to be into indie bands like everybody else.

Valuing separateness also means allowing others to be themselves. People need respect – not jealousy or competitiveness or patronising put-downs. Valuing separateness stems from having confidence in yourself. This confidence starts when you know that you are loved by God and forgiven by grace and it allows us to love others freely without fear.

### Interdependence

I love Jane Austen novels and I always watch the adaptations on TV. There must be someone who works as a full-time coach for 18th-century dances in the TV industry because every film includes one or more long dance scenes.

Relating well in the social space is much like dancing. There are certain steps and twirls that are necessary to avoid treading on the other person's toes. Both people must participate and some are naturally better at it than others. This doesn't mean that you can't improve, however.

As a teenager I took great delight in tormenting my younger brother about his lack of dancing skills. To prove me wrong he went out and took a year of lessons and ended up dancing a fabulous routine

with his wife at his wedding.

Interdependence in the social space comes from an attitude of love, a commitment to truth and a desire to make the other person feel comfortable. How do we make the other person feel comfortable? Generally, we chat. And mostly, it's the kind of chat we call small talk. It's not deep, it's often silly. But it's sharing ourselves. And that's valuable.

## To think about

Think about a recent social exchange you have had. Do you think it went well? Why or why not?

Have you ever given out a social snapshot of yourself which was not entirely accurate? What would you do differently next time?

*"I have often heard Christians say that they feel frustrated with their church congregations because as people mingle after services there are not many 'deep' conversations going on. They feel annoyed that most conversations are about 'surface' things."*

What is your reaction to this comment?

## 5

# Personal space and friendship

**When I was 16**, I moved to a new school, a new town, a new church, a new country and a new continent all in one hit. My family shifted from Pakistan, where we had lived for 13 years, back to Australia, which was hardly 'home', despite the fact that we're Aussies.

I had known we'd be moving for a year or more, but as I tried to imagine what was coming, and what life would be like in Australia, all I could see ahead of me was a big black hole. I had no idea what to expect.



## Help!

It occurred to me (oddly enough) that God just might be able to help. So I prayed about it.

"God, I have no idea what will happen, but I think I might just be able to manage it if I have one friend. So could you please set up a friendship for me? I don't mind who it is. It could be the old lady next door, but I'd prefer it if it was a girl, a Christian and about my age. Please!"

When we arrived in our new town, practically the first person I met was Tiffany. Not only was she both a girl, *and* a Christian, she was just a month older than me!

We were good friends from the start, and it was true, having her as a friend helped me manage the stresses of moving and settling in. She was a real gift from God. (As it turned out, the old lady next door wouldn't have been a good prospect for a friend. She was very cranky and strict and had two very fierce, very enormous dogs!)

Tiffany and I quickly began to relate in the 'personal space'. We had an immediate connection, found

a lot in common and as we got to know more of each other, we enjoyed the time we spent sharing our lives.

The personal space can be a tricky thing to define, but it's where social space relaxes and deepens a little. This is where you really start to call each other 'friends'.

If you relate to someone in the personal space, you do more together, share more, express liking, invite and accept.

## Togetherness

When a friendship works, there is an amazing synergy and feeling that is rarely surpassed. Friends truly are the joy of our lives. It is a gift to have people with whom you can fully relax, and who you can really enjoy. Being with our friends is delightful, fun and reassuring.

The power of friendship can be dangerous! When two or more people get an idea, stuff happens. World changing movements have come about because of friendships. The abolition of slavery, the reformation, the Renaissance, Marxism, female suffrage, the breakdown of apartheid -- all of these were fueled by friendships. Having others with us spurs us on and makes us strong to do things that would be impossible alone.

In fact, you find out more about yourself from the challenge of other people. My friends have challenged and inspired me to think bigger, try new things and be a better person.

## Separateness

Imagine a forest and yourself a young tree. The most healthy relationship you can have is with another young tree, quite close to you, sharing, but not competing for, the same sunlight and water source, both trying to grow up to reach the tree line.

Imagine, though, that a vine wants to be friends with you. Rather than grow next to you, it grows on top of you. Rather than share the resources, it takes all of yours. The vine doesn't want to grow in the same direction as you—it has its own agenda. Eventually there is only room for one — and in the case of trees and vines, vines usually win. It might take years, but in the end the vine owns the tree.

An unhealthy friendship is where one person tries to own the other. But 'having' a friend is not like having a possession. However much we like our friends, we do not have exclusive rights to them. Our

## Things that build a friendship

Encouragement – by word or letter

Doing things together

Similarity and common experiences, or the willingness to listen and understand

Respect for the other person's life

Asking questions for interest, not interrogation

Having and giving the freedom to make your own decisions

A gentle manner and tone

Being polite, but open and honest

Knowing yourself well

Challenging each other by setting extraordinary goals



## How do you get friends?

The number one question when adults talk to young people is, "do you like school?" The second question is, "do you have some nice friends?"

Sometimes I wonder what the reaction would be like if we were more honest and said, "No. I really need to make some more."

There are definitely times in life when we need more friends. But making them seem so daunting.

It helps to realize that friends first of all usually have something in common with each other. Perhaps you like the same things or have similar interests, you have been to the same places or you have the same values and beliefs. You might look similar or own similar things or you may have experienced the same things at the same time in life.

What happens if your experiences are different from the people around you? Perhaps you need to have some new experiences or be even more interested in the lives of others.

But it's not as simple as that. A 'spark' is needed to bring the friendship from social space to personal space. Unfortunately that's almost impossible to describe or define. It can happen quickly or it can slowly. I had an immediate spark with Tiffany, but another friendship of mine took over a year for the spark to ignite. When I first met her I didn't like her at all!

Here is a challenging thought: people who simply 'want friends' can rarely find any. Friendship must be *about* something. So to have friends, we need to be friendly but we also need to be interesting, and interested in life. We need to have purpose and direction and passion. We need to be moving in the same direction as our friends.



friends must be free to make new friends as well.

When I met Tiffany, she already had friends. She didn't need to give them up to have me as a friend as well. In a healthy personal space friendship, having more *real* friends join in can actually make the friendship stronger and better. Friendship in this space is not like romantic love, where three is definitely a crowd.

Being separate in a healthy way also includes understanding and valuing our friends' personalities, their gifts, talents and interests, and even their personal style of relating. If you are a fast talker, but your friend takes a little while to get going, it's worth realizing that she just needs a little more space than you. Don't fall into the trap of thinking she's not quite as smart or witty. If you are a slow talker and your friend is fast and loud, try to appreciate that and not label her arrogant or pushy.

## Interdependence

How do we stay interdependent in the personal space? Respect, equality and keeping the right distance between you.

Equal relationships are where both sides give the same value to themselves and the other. An unequal

friendship might be where I say (or don't say but actually believe), "I'm so good and you're so stupid," or "I'm so awful and you're so great for putting up with me."

Equality is shown in equal give-and-take in conversation, eye contact, touch, time and attention. If



you are giving lots, and your friend seems to be pulling away, you may need to hold back a little. If she is giving too much, you are probably resisting and wishing she would back off.

If you have trouble reading these types of signals and you find yourself losing friends constantly or thinking people are friends when they're not, it may be worth talking to someone about it. This could be a very easy problem to fix with the right advice -- or mouthwash!

## Friendship is risky

Hollywood loves to make movies about friendships where one of the parties turns out to be a psychopathic killer.

It is relatively unlikely that you'll make a friend who turns out to be dangerously crazy (although who knows?) but there

are other dangers with friendship. One of them is exclusiveness. Just the fact of having some people as friends means that other people are not friends. It's an easy step from choosing *this* person to excluding *that* person. Even when we have great friends, we must not fall into the danger of thinking we and our friends are better than the rest of the world.

There is also the risk of rejection, whether you are being rejected or doing the rejecting. Even if your friend seems normal and not psychopathic at all, she may not turn out to be the person you thought. And there is always the possibility that a friendship will not go any deeper but remain at a social level, despite your best hopes.

## 6

### Intimacy issues

When I was six, I found my soul-mate, Sarah. Nearly the first thing we discovered about each other was that our birthdays were exactly one week apart! This was huge. We were twins. And the clincher was the fact that we both had red t-shirts and white skirts with flowers on them. It was a friendship made in heaven.

#### How to get an intimate relationship

Everyone wants a best friend. Besties make us feel safe. They bring us joy. We love them. We need them. So the big question is: how to get these kinds of relationships, right?

I told you Sarah was my best friend at the age of six. But I didn't tell you yet that five years later the relationship was in tatters.

Sarah and I had been sort of best friends from afar. She lived up country, I lived in the city. But we wrote avidly, and saw each other a few times a year.

Sarah went off to boarding school at the age of nine. But at boarding, it's imperative that you have an ally so she became best friends with another girl.

Now, keep up. Here's where it gets as complicated as only preteen female friendships can. I came to the same boarding school at the age of 11, not knowing that my friend had switched allegiances.

Unfortunately, I found myself without a best friend, but also, the target of Sarah's new best friend who was feeling very threatened by me and my prior relationship and was determined to keep Sarah to herself and away from me.

To solve my problem I made a plan — find a new best friend.

It became my consuming passion. "How can I get a best friend?" was my biggest problem.

But I was asking the wrong question.

The question is not how can I get this kind of relationship? The question is: how can I be the best person for this kind of relationship?

If you're desperate for relationships you'll probably never really succeed in forming them because you

## Control and abuse

Shantalle's family life was not happy when she was growing up. Her dad had anger problems and had affairs. Her mother kept the peace at all costs.

Shantalle was determined not to fall into the same trap, but she seemed unable to find boyfriends and close friends who treated her with respect. She eventually married a guy with pizzazz and charm, but who turned out to be abusive and controlling.



Controlling relationships use emotional manipulation, guilt, violence and abuse in order to keep someone close. This is extremely destructive. Shantalle lost whatever confidence and sense of self she had and started to believe that she was worthless.

If you come from an abusive, controlling or dysfunctional family or are in a controlling relationship now, you need help to work through the hurts you have suffered and either end the relationship or find a different way to exist within it.

In a less extreme scenario than Shantalle's, intimate relationships can become one-sided. One person's needs, career, hopes and wishes can start to drown those of the other. In the words of the old Bette Midler song, one person is the eagle 'flying higher', and the other is 'the wind beneath their wings'.

Personally I think the whole idea of the song is flawed. One person is never going to be the wind for another. If they are, the one who is flying definitely has the better deal. True intimacy is a mutual relationship. Both people gain from it and both people give to it.

are looking for a product. Someone who sees a friendship as a process of two people growing together, not as a product, is going to have more success.

So how do intimate relationships work? What do separateness, togetherness and interdependence look like in a best friendship?

## Together

Firstly, you have to be willing to be close to someone. And then you need to make good decisions about the person or people you choose to be close to.

Are you willing to be close to someone? It might sound like a silly question, but it's an issue for many of us.

Perhaps you have had to say too many goodbyes in your life. You have had good friendships with people and lost them. Or you've been hurt often by friends, peers and family. You would rather be self-sufficient.

Sometimes we teach self-sufficiency as a positive character trait. We think that the individual who either doesn't have problems or who hides them really well is a model of Christian maturity.

People who become self-sufficient do so as a survival mechanism. They construct a front that looks fine and lets them make a few acquaintances and keeps them from being overwhelmed by loss and grief. But survival mechanisms are for short term survival – not long term living.

It's a good thing to be needy. It means you are human, and you're embracing God's grace for real. If you can never admit your weaknesses, you stop other people really getting to know you. You set up a pattern where you are the strong one in the relationship, which then of course means that the other person is the weak one, which isn't a great way to have a relationship.

Self-sufficiency is based on fear. And fear is not God's way to live.

Perfectionism is also based on fear. You may have grown up believing you have to be 'good' and the best at everything in order to get love and approval.

Through facing our fears of being close, and allowing others to love us, imperfect though we are, the fears will disappear and we'll be healthier and have much better relationships.

For a good intimate relationship, being willing to get close is a good first step. For the second step, it helps to have the right kind of people to get close to.

Think back over your close friendships and relationships. Have you been intimate with people who have valued you, been vulnerable with you, and who have opened up to you in love and truth? Are they

people who love God and want to serve him?

Or have they been people who have taken what you've given and then betrayed you? Have they gossiped about you? Have they tried to control you? Or have they let you make all the decisions in the relationship – so that they are completely passive?

Of course no one is going to be perfect. All our friends fail us at some point, just like we fail them at times. But we need to be wise about the people we are closest to. The Bible teaches that the people we are with influence us. Don't be too close to big drinkers or drug takers or people who are constantly cynical, critical and bitter. Avoid trusting people who have a pattern of letting you down. Use your wisdom and pick safe people. And be a safe person for others.

## Difference

Togetherness is important, but difference is also a crucial part of healthy intimate relationships.

I am a different person from you. You are not the same person as me. Even the people I am closest to are different from me. I love quilting and making my own clothes. My mother thinks sewing is too hard and it gives her a headache. She trained as an infants' teacher. I couldn't think of anything worse than spending hours per day in a classroom full of little children.

My husband and I are quite different. He likes cricket. I can't see the point. I love going for walks. He'd rather stay home. I go to bed early with a book. He stays up late and watches sci-fi movies.

Sometimes these differences cause friction. Why can't they be more like me? It would make life so much easier! What if we could turn around our thinking? Rather than seeing difference as something that alienates us, we could see it as proof of God's richness and diversity.

Yes, it's easier to be intimate friends with people who are like us. But there is so much to be gained from people who are *not* like us in personality, background, interests and all areas of life. If we can see difference as a benefit, a growth or a stretching, it is not something to avoid or run away from.

There's another side to difference too. Think of it as 'space' in a relationship. You might be really great at being *together* with people, but hopeless at letting them have some space from you. And that's as much a killer for a relationship as not enough togetherness. I'm not you. You're different from me. You can be my best friend, but that doesn't mean I can live your life for you and through you.

Good relationships require space – or difference – as well as togetherness.

And that's where interdependence comes in.

## Fights and arguments

Cindy and Adam were a couple very much in love... until they had an argument. “We broke up,” Cindy told her friend. “It seemed in the end he just wasn’t the one for me.”



Unfortunately Cindy will never find the ‘one for her’ if she thinks that that person will never fight with her. Two people just can’t be close without finding some areas of dispute. Arguments will happen. The trick is in what happens next.

Most fights are reparable, *if* both sides want to make the relationship work and *if* they are prepared to change to make it work. The best foundation you can they build on is Christ’s forgiveness and love, self-understanding, the desire for growth and loving truth-telling.

Intimacy requires attitudes of forgiveness, truth, loyalty and understanding for both yourself and the other person. You both need patience, an attitude of sacrifice, and the ability to have fun and enjoyment.

You need to be sure that God loves you and is working in you to change you. You need to know yourself and your own gifts, talents and vulnerabilities. You need to be sure that God loves the other person and is working in them to change them. You need to respect the other person’s differences, gifts, talents and vulnerabilities. You need to be sure that you are not God and cannot solve other people’s problems, although you might be able to help.

You need to trust and be trustworthy. You need to know when to be close, and when to give space and to not resent the space. You need to be able to speak the truth if and when necessary. You need to be encouraging and loving in your words and actions. You need to be willing to say sorry. And you need to be willing to forgive.

## Interdependence

I told you about my experience with Sarah. I didn't tell you that that first year of boarding school, where I was desperate for a friend, but feeling completely alone really had a huge effect on my future relationships, even still to this day.

I found myself in a situation where I had to survive daily emotional (and the occasional physical) attacks from the little girls in my class. I needed understanding, friendship and love, but I didn't get it, so I developed ways to make myself liked and to protect myself from hurt.

Self-sufficiency was one defence mechanism. I developed the idea that I didn't really need anyone because needing hurt too much.

Then I found that listening to people or doing things for people got a good reaction, so I made sure that was the thing that defined my relationships. Being responsible and caring got a good reaction too. If people need you to do things for them, they probably won't turn on you!

So I became independent. I could cope and function without letting other people getting close enough to me to really hurt me.

But I still wanted to be close. And when I did find someone I trusted, I clung on for grim death. I wanted to make sure whatever friends I found would never leave me.

I didn't understand how interdependence works. Basically, it is where togetherness (being close) and difference (needing space) come together. Imagine us all as little hedgehogs in winter. We need to stay together to keep warm as we hibernate, but we can't get too close and crowd in because we'll prickle and injure each other.

Interdependence is the hedgehog dance between being close and giving space. It's the wisdom about how close to get, and how much space to give. And it is tricky to get right.

## Change things now

At the beginning of this chapter I asked the question: *how can I get this type of relationship?* When I was in my late teens, this is the question I and my friends were all asking. We all wanted close friends and we all especially wanted to find a boyfriend or girlfriend to love us. Most of us found someone reasonably easily, of course, with a few hiccups on the way.

And you probably will too. Even if you feel you have no friends right now, you probably will have

them. The majority of people will have a number of close friends in their twenties. The majority will find a wife or husband by the time they're 30. That most people *will* have close relationships is not really in question.

But think about this. So many people that I know now, ten to 15 years later, are breaking up. Divorce hits over 30 per cent of marriages. Families have painful feuds. Personally, I have lost friends. I know of many people's close relationships that have been broken.

So the real question is: how can you be the *best* person for this kind of relationship? Will your relationships in the future be a cause of joy and growth? Or will they be toxic tragedies which cause you disaster and heartbreak?

You can choose.

## To think about

Take a look at yourself. Are you actually willing to be really close to people? Or are you fearful?

What would you normally expect to be the opposite of fear? Does it surprise you that this verse says that fear and love are incompatible?

**1 John 4:18** *There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.*

Have the intimate relationships you have had so far in your life been positive ones? What would you like to do differently?



## Part Two: You've had the theory. Now some implications.

In part one of the book, we explored the theory of friendship—why it's important, what it looks like and how the different spaces balance out in our lives.

Now it's time to see what those theories mean in real life. For example, what does togetherness and interdependence look like in a world that's constantly online?

This part of the book is as good as place as any to add some thoughts on the friendships described in the Bible, and I really wanted to get down some stuff on something that's dear to my heart—how to be a great 'new person', and how to be a great welcomer of new people.

# 7 Technology

In the olden days when I went to uni I was the first person in my course to own a laptop. The other students were amazed when I turned up to lectures and typed my notes instead of using pen and paper. However, my advances into modern technology were limited. I only used the laptop and my 9-pin dot matrix printer for very basic word processing. Nobody really knew about the internet, Google wasn't invented yet and my PC didn't even have Windows.

While I was studying I got a job as a secretary for barristers. My boss owned a mobile phone. She was the only person I knew who had one. It was the size of a brick and weighed a ton. She once gave it to me while I was running an errand, and as my shoulder ached from the extra weight in my bag, I thought, "This will never catch on."

I was rather wrong.

## Connect or die

Today, our technologies have become extensions of our bodies. Everyone has a mobile phone. Everyone knows how to text. Most people never turn their phones off. Comparing phones is a regular point of conversation. A friend of mine takes great delight in stealing other people's phones and changing the language—just for fun.

The internet has become another space for interaction and information. Just like having an ad in the yellow pages, every business now needs to have a website or it doesn't really cut it. I catch up with friends through facebook and my blog.

The point I'm going to make should be fairly obvious. Technology brings with it many advantages and opportunities. It also brings with it many challenges and pitfalls. Mobile phones and the internet are wonderful for keeping in touch with people. However, they can fail when they come between people.

A face to face conversation involves more than just information being exchanged. Words are only a small part of communication -- body language accounts for more than 70 per cent of how we get our meaning across.

As well, there is energy from our physical presence in the room. There are unspoken communications

in silence, rest and posture that are rich, subtle and beautiful. These can rarely be expressed when we use technology for communication.

The answer to the question “How are you?” asked by one person to another in the same room is going to be a lot different than the answer to the question “How r u?” on a screen.

Technology can break down connections between people in a few different ways. One is the physical presence of the phone and its ability to intrude into a gathering. The noise of a ring tone can disrupt a conversation.

When people are gazing intently at their phones, texting or changing settings, or playing games for lengthy periods, they become emotionally absent from the gathering, even though they are there in person.

It can be fun. Or it can be a way to escape.



## Just unplug

Here's a challenge.

Turn off your phone, the computer and the TV and DVD for a day. Then get some friends and do any of the following:

Take a walk under the stars.

Read aloud to each other.

Gather around a campfire.

Volunteer together at a camp or beachmission or a community event.

Stay up late, light candles and drink hot chocolate cooked on the stove, not in the microwave.

Play Frisbee.

Go to the beach or take a bushwalk.

Plan a fishing trip.

Volunteer for a working bee at your church or local school.

Listen to some incredible music – preferably live.

Do whatever it takes to fire up your senses of touch, smell, sight, hearing and taste and share the experience with others.



When we are with people, we need to be ‘present’ and truly ‘with’ people. Technology can become a way to escape others, even when we are there with them. And frankly, it’s just plain old rude to talk on the phone with others around.

## Living online

Computers are another mixed blessing. Now that they’ve become indispensable to nearly everyone’s lives, we rely on them and spend more and more time on them. We even conduct our social lives around them.

Facebook and twitter and similar sites are responsible for a big shift in the way we communicate with others. It’s useful to contact people through the internet, but I would be wary if my computer screen began to replace the air between me and my real friends.

Computers can be addictive. I know, because I get withdrawal feelings when my internet goes down temporarily.

But let’s be clear about this. Machines are not our friends. The word ‘user-friendly’ to describe a machine is a lie. Machines cannot be friendly. They may be easy to navigate, or simple to understand (although I sometimes doubt that) but they are not friendly because they are not people.

We need to have relationships with people, not machines.

### To think about

How much time do you spend interacting with people through technology? How much time do you spend with them face to face?

What are some of the advantages of technology in relationships? What are some of the pitfalls?

How would your life be different if you switched off for a day? A week? A month? A year?

## 8

## Hello and goodbye

My younger brother has a moving bug. Up until the edge of 33 he could count a different house for every year of his life. That's 33 beds in 33 years. Shifting back and forth from different towns and cities in different countries will do that for you. He loves it. And he starts to feel weird when he's stable enough to buy a fridge.

I'm the opposite. Moving makes me feel weird. I'm still not used to it, even after doing it in a big way at least 17 times in my life! I get nerves and jitters. I get stressed, angry and jumpy when I meet people for the first time. I come home tired and worn out after only two hours in new company.

My brother feels exhilarated, cosmopolitan and challenged by moving around. He enjoys the differences and the feeling of belonging nowhere but everywhere. I feel disrupted, unrooted and cranky when I move.

Wherever you are on the spectrum between me and my brother, moving takes energy and know-how to do it well.

### Moving out

There are two parts to moving, saying goodbye and saying hello.

Personally I'm terrible at saying goodbye. My usual technique is to get stressed packing up and to put all my energy into the physical details of moving. I pretend I'm not going to miss people and say only quick perfunctory goodbyes. Unfortunately, I get to the new situation and feel terribly depressed for the next six months and then spend a lot of money on counseling.

A friend of mine, Katherine, does it much better. Her process takes time and thought and starts at least two weeks before she leaves anywhere!

First of all she thinks about it. What groups did she find a sense of belonging in while in this place? Next she lists the individuals who were close to her or who she would personally like to encourage before she leaves. She then finds ways to tell them how much she appreciated that care and enjoyed their friendship. She sends cards, notes, photos or gifts or just takes them out for coffee.

The next step is to keep a database and get her friends' contact details. She also gives friends a chance



to give her a farewell message too -- by writing on a T-shirt, a teddy bear or in a notebook. Then she grabs the camera and takes pictures of the special people and places she loves.

Saying goodbye can be emotional. My friend gives hugs and sometimes will cry. Finally she remembers that goodbye is short for "God be with you". She prays and commits her friends' lives to God.

## Fitting in

Once the goodbyes are over, the hellos can begin. Making new networks—public, social, personal and intimate—in the new location is important and can be daunting. Anyone who is new will face the challenge of fitting in. There is no magic solution. The answers are only found in time, initiative and humility.

Whenever I have moved somewhere new, I have had to work hard to make common experiences to share with others. I try to get out there and spend time with people and take the initiative to get myself

to groups and take part. And I have had to be persistent.

## Getting your L-plates

It is easier when you join something where everyone else is also new. It might be university, college, or being in the new cast of a play in a drama group. Everyone else is in the same boat, and it's a fresh start.

But where people already have history together, you have to accept that you are the one who will have to fit in with them. How is this possible? I think through having a 'learner' attitude and to a certain extent, giving up your past and its importance.

Shelley and her husband moved to the city so that he could train in ministry. They moved away from all their friends and family and Shelley particularly felt the loss of her best friends. She tried to keep up with them as much as possible by phone and by making the hour-long trip home whenever she could. She put in a lot of effort to keep their friendships going.

However she began to notice a distance in her relationship with her friends. They would hold a party and not invite Shelley and her husband. They asked other people to be godparents to their new babies. Shelley felt sad and rejected. She put a lot of energy into a long-distance relationship but could see it falling apart despite her best efforts.

Shelley began to spend more time with the people around her to meet her needs for friendship and relationships. Over time she realized that her original friendships would have to be given up to a certain extent, and new friendships embraced if she was going to stay happy and connected to the present life.

Shelley discovered that to survive the future, you've got to give up your past in many ways, and start living in the present as much as possible.

This is where saying goodbye effectively comes in. If we have not said goodbye, and we are still living in the past, things going to be much harder.

## Live in the here and now

Of course living in the present is not easy. It can make you feel core-less, root-less and like a pre-tender, while you go through time, building history and internalising it with others. But the bad feelings don't last, especially if you can understand the reasons why you feel that way.

## Do the work!

Want to find friends? Try these ideas.

Get out of the house and go places.

Accept that you will have uncomfortable feelings and sit through them—they will go.

Invite people to your place.

Invite them again.

Take risks and be brave.

Accept invitations to be social.

Organize a trip to the movies with people you've just met.

Go to youth group every week for at least one term before you give up.

Pray for friends.

Read the rest of this book.

Try your best to be friendly for at least eight months before you give up!



Don't just suppress your past. Allow your past to be grieved. Enjoy it with some others as often as you can but don't continue to live there. You need to say goodbye to the old so you have room for the new. If you're trying to hold on to the old tightly with both hands, you'll stay there. You can't grow into the future.

Do all your experiences have to go out the window? Do you ever get to talk about what you've experienced? Yes, sometimes, but not all the time. People here and now resent always being compared to the former situation. I met an American exchange student at University who was really nice. I wanted to get to know her but she had the habit of constantly talking about "all my really good friends back home in Virginia." In the end it was irritating. I thought, 'Well – if you like them so much, go back to them.'

## How long does it take?

James joined a church at the beginning of the year and by March he seemed like part of the furniture. He had a naturally friendly personality, he went to everything and he was lucky enough to come into a group which welcomed and wanted him.

How long does it take to settle in somewhere? It depends on you and on the situation but if you're putting in the work and the people are friendly I would estimate a minimum of six months before you start to feel a little bit at home. My husband and I have moved nine times in our married life so far. Each time I have noticed a sense of belonging begin to emerge by about the eighth month.

Sometimes, however, feeling at home in a new place just doesn't happen easily. Kelly and her husband joined a new church and looked for a Bible study group. They were put in a group with other young couples like themselves but everyone in the group had been friends together for at least 10 years. While they were polite, they were not interested in being close. After persisting for several years, Kelly and her husband found a new group and were much happier.

Sometimes it's impossible to try to penetrate a group of close friends. It's better to give them up and look around for other people who are feeling on the edge like yourself. There is always someone else who is looking for a friend.

# 9

## Welcoming Others

My husband loves it when he gets an opportunity to buy a car. He spends hours finding the best fit for our needs, and then takes great delight in chasing down the best possible deal.

A few years ago he found us a cute little Holden Barina. We had never had a small car before, and I didn't know anyone who had a Barina. However, after we bought it we saw Barinas everywhere for weeks! We'd point them out on the road, park next to them in carparks, be stuck behind them in traffic jams. It's not as if they weren't there before. It's just that we only started to notice them after we had become Barina owners ourselves.

Why was this? Before we bought our Barina, they were not directly relevant to us. They were part of the general mish-mash of life. We knew they were out there, but we didn't



notice them much. (Oddly enough, now that we've sold it, I don't seem to see them anymore.)

Here's my point: when you walk into a group of people, who do you see? You might see someone who stands out a lot. Perhaps they have more piercings than is usual, or odd looking clothes. More likely, however, is that you'll 'see' the people you already know – or the people who look like you with the same age, style and look.

## People filter

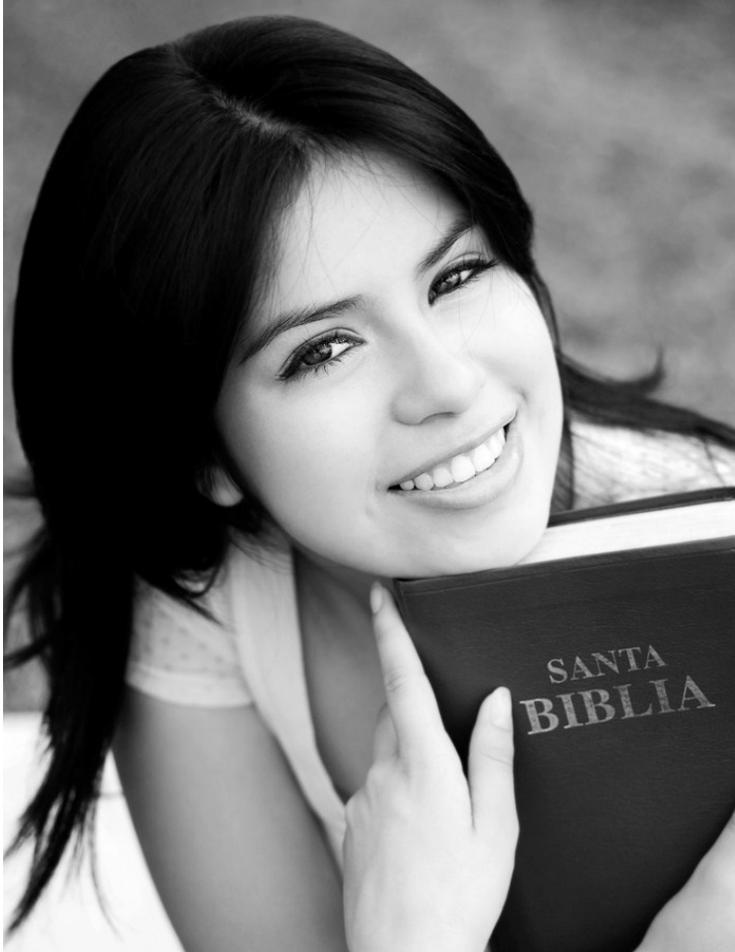
It's almost as if we all have a 'people filter'. Its default setting is to filter out everyone who is not relevant to us. It takes from our conscious view the people we would have to work harder with or the people we don't know.

Sometimes I go out by myself to a meeting or a function while my husband stays home with our children. When I get home, his first question is often: "Who was there?" Sometimes my answer is: "Oh, no-one really."

Of course, that's patently untrue. What I mean is, no-one was there who was relevant or interesting to me. I'm very good at dismissing most of the world's population because they didn't make it through my people filter.

When we talk about welcoming others, the first thing we need to admit to ourselves is that we have a people filter. It's hard to admit that most of the time it's switched off for the people relevant to us, and firmly on for the people who are newcomers or strangers or different.

Why? Well, it's scary to be welcoming. When we reach out to anyone, we risk rejection. We risk



feeling uncomfortable. We risk the fact that we might not like them much once we do make that first step. We risk that having new people in our world can disturb our comfort and our current relationships. Being disturbed can make us feel uncomfortable, ill at ease, and challenged. Things might change. We might have to change. And most of us avoid change if we possibly can.

## Why welcome?

It goes back to the character of God, and the idea that we are made in his image and are imitators of him as his children. God is the ultimate welcoming God! He welcomed sinners – people who were poles apart from him – by sending Jesus. He welcomed prostitutes, tax collectors, children and women, the lowest rungs of society. He welcomes everyone who accepts his grace.

If we're children of God and if what he says makes a difference in our lives, we are going to be welcoming people.

Yes, it's risky. But risk can be fun. You might prefer to jump out of an aeroplane before you would speak to a new person. But think about the rush you might get if you actually did get out there and talk to someone.

And quite frankly, how would you feel if you were the new person? Wouldn't you want someone to come over and talk to you?

## Walk in their shoes

Jenny had lived in the same town and gone to the same church in England ever since her university days. She considered herself a friendly person in general. If someone new visited her church, she would chat to them briefly and make them feel welcome, or so she thought.

When Jen moved to Australia for a few years, she had a tremendous shock. All at once she was away from her friends, her family, her church, her house, her pets, her job, her town and everything she knew. For several months, Jenny cried frequently. She hardly felt like herself at all. She thought things might improve when she and her family started at a new church, but it didn't really help. People were polite and mildly kind when they spoke, but they didn't really include her. It took her weeks and months to feel like she was even beginning to belong.

"When I go back to England, I am going to really change the way I welcome newcomers," Jenny told

me after a few months of this. “I thought I was being welcoming before, but I didn’t have a clue how new people feel. Now that I do, it makes a whole lot of difference.”

Set a little challenge for yourself and go along to a new group or visit a new church for a couple of weeks. How does it feel? Now write it down and remember it!

## To think about

Have you had much experience at being new? How did you feel about it?

Discuss some practical ways you could welcome newcomers to your group or congregation?

What do these verses say to both newcomers and those who are welcoming them?

**1 Peter 4:9-10** *Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.*

## Friendship in the Bible

For years I thought that God was inefficient. It just didn't seem to make sense that the Bible is so big and so full of complicated stories. Surely if God really wanted us to know what he was like and how to live, he could have done it in less space and with the use of a few well-placed bullet points.

Thankfully, as I have gotten older, I have come to appreciate efficiency less and relationships more. Now that I understand that God operates in relational ways, it makes sense that his story is told within the rough-and-tumble of relationships in history.

The Bible is full of friendships – between God and people and between people themselves. We can learn a lot about our own relationships by looking at theirs.

### Ruth and Naomi

The book of Ruth tells the story of a woman who has lost everything.

Naomi and her family left Israel because of famine and had tried to make a life in Moab. But things did not run smoothly. First and probably disappointingly, her two boys grew up and married women who were not Israelites. Next and tragically, Naomi's husband died. The final horror came with the death of both her sons; the sting in the tail was that both of them had failed to have any children.

Naomi was left with no means of support and no hopes for a family to continue into the future. She had nothing in the present and nothing to look forward to. She returned to Israel low, bitter and more than likely depressed.

But for all her losses, she did have something and that something was a friend. Naomi's daughter-in-law Ruth came back to Israel with her.

I've sometimes wondered if Ruth stuck with Naomi only out of loyalty to the in-law relationship they both had. I wondered if she felt she was doing a duty by the older woman. I think this may have been the case at the beginning, when both daughters-in-law began to start home with Naomi. However, Naomi released them of whatever duty they had when she tried to send them home.

"I can't give you anything," she said. "Go back to your homes and families."

Having been freed of her responsibility, Ruth was then free to choose to go with Naomi. She stuck with her mother-in-law by choice. And a beautiful friendship grew from that free choice.



Ruth was very good for her older friend. Her presence meant that Naomi was not alone in the shame of returning home in failure and tragedy. Ruth was the one who went out to work and provided for them both. Their lives were tied up together.

Ruth was different from Naomi – in language, age, culture and understanding. She was probably not the ideal friend that Naomi would have envisaged for herself if she had thought about it. Naomi would probably have chosen someone who was of the same background, or who spoke the same language fluently. She probably would have wanted someone closer in age to herself, or who had experienced famine and the same things she had gone through. Yet Ruth loved both God and Naomi and she had chosen to be there. That was enough for the relationship to go ahead on.

As Ruth looked after Naomi and supported her, Naomi started to feel a little better. Better enough anyway, to start to have Ruth's own interests at heart.

Naomi saw that Ruth who had been so good to her really could do with a bit of a life. She saw an opportunity to provide for her and she took steps and solved one of their biggest problems by getting Boaz to marry Ruth.

It's almost as if Naomi went from saying "I'm completely empty and God is completely against me" to being able to recognize the things God had given her in Ruth and the opportunities God was providing in Boaz.

By the end of the story, Naomi was no longer empty, bitter and tragic. She was a different woman, and it was because of what God gave her in her friend Ruth.

God gives us people who are good for us, even if they aren't the people we would choose. He often shows his love for us and his blessings through the love of other people,

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and he can turn around tragic situations through the friendship and support of our friends.

## David and Jonathan

The most famous friendship of the Bible has to be that of David and Jonathan. The close, intense relationship between the shepherd boy turned warrior/anointed king-in-waiting and the reigning king's son has inspired art and literature throughout history.

But I think they should be known as Jonathan and David, because Jonathan did most of the initiating and maintaining of the friendship—at least in the beginning.

The Bible says that Jonathan took a real liking to David. He made a covenant with him. He loved him as himself. He gave him presents and provided for him. He warned David about plots against him by his father, he spoke out for him to his father and he used his influence to keep him safe.

It's not surprising that Jonathan was the main player in the relationship at first, because as the son of the king, he was the one with the power in this relationship. But it is a power that he used for the good of his friend – and at a cost to himself in the end. Every time he kept David safe or promoted his interests, he was destroying his own chances of inheriting his father's throne. Jonathan's friendship with David was at the cost of his own career and reputation.

Jonathan was a friend with some pretty impressive qualities. His loyalty to David and courage in the face of political pressure, and an angry, murderous father was unquestioned. He had the humility to say openly that he would never be king. He followed up his commitments, he was generous and he did it all 'before the Lord'. He showed genuine affection, loyalty and openness. He was the friend everyone would love to have.

But David was not just a passive 'taker' in all of this either. As time went on their friendship grew so that by the end it was definitely a two-way relationship between equals. When the pair had to part, the story says that David 'wept the most'.

One of the particularly beautiful aspects of this friendship was the way David and Jonathan covenanted to do good to each other's family and descendents. They knew that as technical rivals to the same throne, it was more than likely that their families and heirs could grow to hate each other and try to eliminate their opponents. They took steps to stop the cycle of rivalry and hate.

Jonathan and David's friendship has a lot to teach us about power, self-sacrifice and loyalty. Most of us today are unlikely to be in a situation where we become best friends with our greatest rivals but we

may stand to lose status, money or power because of a friendship. Are we willing to put our friends first?

## Philemon and Onesimus

Of all the stories of friendship in the Bible, I love Onesimus and Philemon most. Philemon is a book that must shake us to our core if and change our relationships and social life if we take it seriously.

It centres, appropriately enough, around Philemon, a wealthy man of good social standing, who becomes a Christian possibly through Paul's ministry, and his rebellious, runaway slave, Onesimus.

In those days, masters owned slaves. It was not an equal relationship by any means. In ordinary circumstances, Philemon and Onesimus were certainly not relating to each other as people, peers or equals. They would not have been friends.

Onesimus stole money from Philemon and ran away. We're not told more than that except that in some extraordinary way, he ended up with Paul in Rome and became a Christian. He could have stayed there and begun a new life, but Paul was keen to see Philemon and Onesimus reconciled—and in a bigger way than just a master and slave.

Paul writes his short letter to Philemon and asks him to accept Onesimus back – as a brother. Not as a slave, but as a child of God like himself; in fact, a friend.

This is huge.

Accepting Onesimus back as a slave would be a scandal, even if he was given a suitable punishment. But to welcome him into his house as an equal and friend and valued human being would really turn things upside down. Philemon would probably find himself on the outside amongst his peers.

This is Christianity that really makes waves. To go against social norms, class and race lines or socio-economic status and make friends with people who are considered 'lesser' is a very courageous thing to do. Philemon is being asked to do it and to demonstrate the character of God in a way that is very costly to himself.

This is what God's saving love brings us to do – to break down the man-made barriers of hatred and difference that we create and maintain.

Christian friendship goes across wealth, status, and social acceptance. Christian friendship is radical and beautifully scandalous. Are we prepared to let God change us?

## To think about

Have you ever had a friend like Ruth who has stuck by you in difficult circumstances? What are the qualities of friendship that Ruth showed?

Read 1 Samuel 20. In the end Jonathan did not follow David in getting away from Saul. Why not? Was it a failure in their friendship? Would he have shown more loyalty by going with him?

Flip through Paul's letters in the New Testament and find the parts where Paul refers to people whom he knows personally (these are usually at the ends.) Why are these parts of the letters included in the Bible? What can you learn from the glimpses of relationships that you see here?

## This is where your questions get answered

Everyone has questions about their friendships.

This part of the book is where I take some of the most common questions we all ask and try to come up with some answers that make sense and are realistic and practical.

For example: Does loving everyone mean that I have to *like* everyone too? How do I deal with the really difficult people? What if I have a friend who's clinging on to me and won't let go? Why did my friendship fall apart, and how can I get it back together?

How do I actually talk to people? What will happen to me if I walk into a room full of people I don't know?

What if someone I like doesn't want to be my friend? What's so bad about gossip anyway? And how can I help my friend when she has a problem?

If you're reading this book with a group, the 'to think about' questions are right at the end of the whole section, rather than after every chapter.





## What if I don't want to make friends?

**Occasionally I get asked** to speak at camps for teenagers. It's fun to hang out with young people and pretend that I'm closer to 18 than I really am. On a recent camp, the activities were great but tiring, so I decided I would stay away from the evening's bush dance and instead headed into the campsite lounge. There, on his own was Mike, also avoiding the bush dance and reading his book. I asked if I could sit in with him, and we got chatting.

From watching his body language as he hung off the edges of groups or stood on his own, I had had a hunch that he was new at the camp. It turned out that his parents had suggested he come, because they thought he should make some more friends. He came, but he was a bit reluctant.

"I don't feel like making friends much," he said. "In the past, sometimes I've wished I could just disappear. Just be completely invisible."

Mike is not the first person to ever feel this way. Many of us don't want to relate to others, for a lot of different reasons. Here are some of them.

### Reason I. We want to be a 'solitary hero'

I went to uni with a guy called Mark. He had a few friends, but it was almost impossible to get to know him. One day he would be sunny and wonderful. The next day he would be moody and rude. He was often prickly and could turn on you suddenly. It came out that he had seen his father die in a terrible accident when he was about 10. We all offered sympathy and a listening ear, but he rejected it. "You can't possibly understand how I feel," he said.

To a certain extent Mark was right. We who still had our fathers could only imagine the horror he had been through at such a young age. Unfortunately though, Mark was cutting himself off from all future good relationships because he wouldn't accept that anyone else could understand him.

The solitary hero is the guy who cuts himself off and continually feels misunderstood. He is actually celebrated in our culture. Very few action movies show a group of people getting the bad guys as they



work together in a team. A sure-fire hit involves a flawed, lone-wolf type. He usually lives alone and has no interests or relationships apart from his work. He does what it takes to kill the baddies, even if it means working apart from his colleagues. He might appease his loneliness by falling for the love-interest lady in the movie, but in the sequel, he'll have moved on to a different woman. His relationships don't last.

## Elijah knew how you feel

The Bible has a story of a solitary hero in 1 Kings 19. Elijah is the only one of God's prophets left in the land now that the king and the Israelites have turned to other Gods. He opposes the king and says that God will bring a drought on the land, and then goes into hiding. After three years, he reappears, proves in a mighty demonstration to all the people that God, and not Baal, has the power, and then declares rain. It's a triumph.

Everything goes downhill from that point, however. Having mustered up all his courage to speak God's words, and under threat of his life, Elijah then runs into hiding and has a bit of a whinge to God.

Here's what he says:

*'I have zealously served the LORD God Almighty. But the people of Israel have broken their covenant with you, torn down your altars, and killed every one of your prophets. I alone am left, and now they are trying to kill me, too.'* (1 Kings 19:10)

Elijah has been through a crisis. He stood up for God but now he feels alone and is dwelling obsessively on his isolation. He's getting into a panic or super-drama and it's all about him. He's really saying, "I'm the only one who has really served

you.”

But don't we say similar things sometimes? "I'm the only one who really knows what is going on, who really understands the situation, who really feels this bad, who's really suffered, who really...." You fill in the blank. It's so easy to often find ourselves the hero of an exaggerated super-drama.

But God did not leave Elijah alone. A little later, he tells Elijah that he has reserved 7,000 people for himself in Israel. Elijah is not the only one following God. He is not completely isolated!

Why did Elijah not make an effort to find these other 7,000 who followed God? Why didn't he seek refuge with them?

Maybe it was the fear of being rejected or killed or persecuted. That's a reasonable worry. Perhaps also it was pride. In a dramatic way, it's kind of cool to be the only one left! It can mean that you are important.

It was the grace of God that told Elijah there were 7,000 others who followed him. Not just two or three but 7,000. It meant that Elijah had a future in the community of God from this point.

He had to face his fears, give God his pride and go out and identify with them.

## Reason 2. We don't understand ourselves

Christie was getting bullied at school. She couldn't go anywhere without being taunted. Text messages were being sent around about her. Her bag was stolen and emptied around the school grounds.

Lisa was the main problem. She seemed to have it in for Christie. Was she simply mean and horrible? Where did her aggression come from? Lisa was pulled up to the principal's office and asked her reason for targeting Christie. She mumbled some excuses which meant nothing. To tell the truth she had never really stopped to



think about what she was doing. Inside she knew, without being able to put it into words, that bullying Christie and having control over her made her feel strong and powerful. Lisa didn't understand that the abuse her family suffered from her violent dad led to Lisa feeling worthless. It made her look for ways to feel ok about herself.

Of course, Lisa needs to take responsibility for her own actions. There is never an excuse for bullying. But sometimes, not understanding yourself can lead you to do things that stop you relating to other people.

What about Christie? Lots of people are completely innocent victims of bullying. But in this case Christie was unconsciously letting herself become a target. She didn't have very much confidence to begin with, and had never spoken up for herself without getting into trouble. Christie's body language said, "I'm not sure of myself." The stoop of her shoulders and her furtive movements made her look like a person who would be easy to pick on. If Christie had understood herself more, fixed her body language and been coached in setting some boundaries, she might have been able to avoid the trouble, and relate better to people.

### **Reason 3. Energy**

There are other reasons we might not want to relate to people. Grief is a big one. When I first returned from Pakistan at the age of 16, my nanna was keen that I go to her church's youth group to make some friends. I desperately didn't want to go. I felt so sad from leaving Pakistan that I just didn't have the energy to cope with new people. To her, I looked like I was unfriendly, but that wasn't it.

Or it might just be a personality issue. Mary is an extrovert, married to Jeff who is an introvert. He would prefer to have a quiet night at home, and enjoys occasional dinners with one or two close friends. Mary likes big parties and lots of noise. Sometimes she can't understand Jeff and tells him that he doesn't relate to people enough. If he didn't understand himself, he might think she was right and feel guilty about not liking parties. The reality is that they both relate well – just in different ways.

### **Reason 4. Faulty connections**

Anne's aunty is generous, kind and caring. But it's pretty hard to relate to her. When she rings Anne for a regular chat, she says one word: "Hello!" From there, it's up to Anne to ask the questions and carry



on the conversation. Her aunt doesn't get the hint when it's time to hang up. Phone calls with her can last up to an hour and a half unless Anne is rude and ends the call abruptly.

If her aunty does talk without being asked questions, she tells Anne long and complicated stories about her work life, assuming that Anne knows exactly who and what she is talking about.

Nick met up with his cousin Josh after a few years apart. They were happy to see each other. Nick asked his cousin about everything he'd been up to and sat down to see his photos. Thinking back later, he realised that Josh had not asked him one question about his own life in the two hours they had been together. Nick considered it a bit rude to talk about himself without being asked, so didn't offer too much information. The meeting ended up being one-sided and frustrating for Nick.

Anne's aunt and Nick's cousin are hard to relate to because they don't follow the normal rules of conversation. We all know someone a little bit like this. Or perhaps we have a sneaking suspicion that

we are a little bit like this ourselves!

The brain is an incredibly beautiful and complex instrument. And just like some people have great eyesight and others can't see anything that's not fuzzy, brain connections can vary from person to person.

Perhaps Shelley's aunt and Nick's cousin have trouble with relationships because they are wired differently. They might go through life trying their hardest to be friendly, but continually finding themselves on the outer. They might attempt to make friends, but find that others either ignore or get frustrated at them.

If this is you, you might be tempted to withdraw and isolate yourself. Don't give up just yet. If you think you do have some troubles 'getting' the rules and making connections, you can get help. Professional psychologists can help you work out where you're going wrong. Or if you don't want to see anyone for whatever reason, ask someone you trust to give you a hand. There are ways to improve your relationship skills and make sure you don't go through life lonely and frustrated.

## People, not invisibility

Let's go back to the camp lounge room, where Mike and I were taking shelter from the evening bush dance. He mentioned that he had wanted to become invisible and just disappear. But here he was at the camp, visible to all!

What made the difference?

"I knew that there were people who loved me, and whom I loved. I just couldn't do that to them," he said.

People are the answer to our isolation. We might be tempted into not relating to people, but the benefits and joys of love and friendship and connection are so strong.

If you think you're alone, you're probably not. We would have to go far to be completely isolated. There is always someone to stand with. Ask God to show you who those people are, and ask him to help you get over whatever barrier you have to relating to them. Then go out and connect.

## 12

## Why are my friendships falling apart?

"Friends are friends forever, if the Lord is the Lord of them  
And a friend will not say never, cause the welcome will not end  
Though it's hard to let you go  
In the Father's hands I know  
That a lifetime's not too long... to live as friends."

-Michael W Smith –

**This song was sung** at my brother's high school graduation by a heartfelt and sincere choir. Everyone hugged each other, cried and swore lifelong friendship. It seemed impossible that we would ever lose touch. We would make sure that our friendships made the distance. But 17 years on, I am only regularly in touch with one of my school friends.

Recently I found a bag of letters I had received in the two years after I came back from Pakistan – aged 16 to 18. I had probably 100 letters from one friend (ironically the girl who gave me such a hard time at boarding school in my first year) in that period. They were full of her deepest feelings, worries and crushes. I have no doubt I wrote equivalent letters back to her. We were as close as you could be, on two different continents. But I haven't spoken to her now in more than 12 years. And we haven't



written personal letters to each other in more than 10. What went wrong?

Friendships fail for a number of different reasons. Here are some of them.

## Natural changes

My good friend and I did not have a fight. We did not have a disagreement. We didn't particularly change our personalities and reject each other. What happened was we grew up. We gained other responsibilities and our lives shifted to new priorities. It happened naturally.

It wasn't a bad thing. I'm talking about getting married. Finding a job. Having babies. Where I used to have an hour to write to her, now I spend that hour talking to my husband, playing with my children, folding the washing, or tidying up toys, or (very occasionally) chilling out.

And as our responsibilities and priorities have changed, so have our relationships. She used to be in my intimate space. Now my husband and my children are.

Time and energy means people who are closer in distance to me fill my personal space now. She's shifted outwards. If we were ever living in the same town, we'd probably pick up our relationship again, but in a different way. It would never be like it was because we both have other people in that intimate space now.

Almost no relationship stays in one space for the entire life of the relationship. It can move from one to the other. Often, it has to. It's unrealistic for most people to expect to have one best friend for the whole of their life. It's a nice idea, but the reality is different. A typical teenage pattern is you have a best friend who you do everything with. That person finds a girlfriend or boyfriend before you do, and all of a sudden they don't have time for you anymore! That's hard to take but it's a natural shift.

These natural shifts can hurt a lot. Just because they are natural doesn't mean you might not feel it strongly. But understanding the four spaces can help us see that a friendship might not be dissolving – rather, just moving to a more appropriate space for now.

If you can give your friend the permission to do that and if you can enjoy the new status of the relationship, you will both be happier.

## Hurts and non-forgiveness

In eighth grade, I was good friends with a girl named Grace at my boarding school. We were in class

## Personality differences

One of the sad things of my life in recent years was the steady disintegration of a friendship with one of my favourite ever people.

I met Becky at uni. We clicked immediately and our friendship sailed high for about four years. She said I was her best friend. She loved me and I loved her. Everything started out beautiful and lovely. But over time, she didn't return calls. I was chasing her to see her all the time. She

would accept an invitation but then not turn up because she had too much work. Our contact became less and the joy seemed more forced.

It took me many years to understand the problem and what went wrong. I think in the end it came down to a misunderstood personality difference. I value being on time, spending time and being available. She valued gifts, verbal expressions of friendship and understanding. Her personality allows her to adore the people she is with at the time. My personality prefers loyalty to old friends and keeping commitments.

What can you do if you bump into a personality issue with your friend? Accept that these things happen. And it's hard. My challenge has been to understand Becky and myself and to let her go. I expected her to be like me and she wasn't. Now I feel bad about the expectations I placed on her and I hope I understand her far more.

If it happens that we get back in touch, that would be nice, but in the meantime, there are so many other great people out there. I've got a whole world of friends to make.



together and shared a bedroom with a few other girls.

One day, she just took a huge dislike to me but never told me why. She refused to speak to me or look at me, ignoring me completely at meals, in our dorm room and in class. It was as if I didn't exist any longer in her world. For a few weeks, I was distraught. Being ignored is a horrible feeling. I tried to get her to talk to me and tell me if I had done something to upset her, but she steadfastly refused to hear or acknowledge me.

After a while, I decided that she could be as ridiculous as she liked, but that I would still be pleasant to her. So every time I passed her in the hall, I said 'hi Grace'. I smiled at her pleasantly. I asked her to pass things at meals, and I was as conciliatory as I could be, without being cloying or over the top.

She ignored me successfully for about a month. And then one afternoon, she found her way down to the little piano practice room that I used, knocked on the door and said, "Can I talk to you?"

She had something to say. "I'm really sorry. I just decided I didn't like you one day and I was unfair and mean to you. But you kept being nice to me, even when I was being horrible. And I feel bad and I need to apologise."

We were friends again. We were never best friends again after that, but at least we had a pleasant if mildly distant relationship. (And I felt secretly pleased that my Christian behaviour had worked.)

Sometimes close relationships fall apart because of hurts, wrongs done, and misunderstandings. Good communication is your first starting point. There are plenty of good books and wise advice on communication and resolving conflict.

You may find yourself however, in a position where you are having conflict all the time either with friends or family!

Some families have almost permanent splits in them. Family occasions either don't happen, or are fraught with arguments, or else everyone sits there pretending everything's fine when it's not.

Many people decide in this situation that they just can't be bothered fixing the relationship. They've tried but the other person isn't helping. Rather than *repair* the relationship, they *replace* it by dropping the friendship, breaking up, divorcing or by avoiding their family for the rest of their lives.

Please, please take a long-term view. Unless you are in a situation of abuse and mistreatment where it is not safe for you to be in the relationship, repairing and reconciling has to be the more Christian way.

Have you asked for other people's help in resolving the issues? Are you part of the problem? Are you trying new things and giving them a chance to work? Are you exercising the fruits of the Spirit being patient and long-suffering? There is no doubt that change and reconciliation are the harder options but they are the godly options. We should pursue them.



## People change

You hear people say this a lot: “Real friends don’t judge. They are happy for whatever makes the other person happy.” That’s true – but only to a certain extent. Friends are friends because they have something in common. But if one person changes or follows a different route in life, or makes a decision the other one doesn’t agree with, it is hard for a friendship to continue in the same way as before. Maybe you know of friends who are changing and making decisions that you don’t think are right: sleeping around, drinking a whole lot, smoking pot or doing other drugs. Or gossiping a lot. Or going out with someone you really think is bad news.

This is an area for wisdom and prayer. You can’t control your friends. You can’t make them do what you would do.

However, try not to give up on people. If Perhaps you could have a different type of

friendship. I wish I had not been so judgmental of my friends in younger days. Love and truth combined are better than judgment.

If you change, you may expect your friendships to change too, even if you change in good ways, not bad. People who break alcoholic or drug addictions often say that their friendships change because they no longer do what they did before.

What can you do? Understand that people do change. And relationships will often change too. You can’t expect someone to stay the same all their lives. Support people as far as you can, don’t try to

control them. But if it's impossible for you to stay in the same type of friendship with them, it's ok to move the friendship to another space.

Of course, sometimes you do need to stick it out. A friend who goes through a trauma, or who has depression, or who has long-standing emotional difficulties is going to need a lot of long term support, even and especially if they do some unwise things that you don't like.

It takes a lot of wisdom to be a friend when things are not easy. Friendship is not always straightforward because people are not always straightforward.

## 13

## What about the difficult people?

**There are different** types of difficult people.

One kind is the difficult character, the ‘person-I-just-dont-get-on-with’. You might simply have a personality clash and see things very differently. Or they might unconsciously remind you of someone you’ve had a run-in with in the past. Check that the problem doesn’t lie with yourself first!

If you are sure you’ve pulled all logs out of your eye, try seeing them in a different light.

They have probably had various problems in their lives which have been really hard to live with. Sympathy is not necessarily required, but understanding may be.

If they are Christians, they are in process of being changed. If they are not, God wants to save them. You don’t have to be their best friend, but don’t give up on them, and show those fruits of the Spirit in all your dealings with them.

See if you can find their good points – everyone has them. Thank God for their gifts and ask him to help you love them despite the things you find annoying. He will.

### More complicated

The other kind of difficult people are the people who lack social awareness, or are a little bit weird, or are intellectually disabled and hard to understand... or whatever.

I have a particular sensitivity to these people because I have an autistic son, who will more than likely grow up to be



a person who is not socially aware, and who will not relate easily. I love my son desperately, but I often feel intense frustration with him when he finds it difficult to do things that seem so obvious to me.

Why are these people not easy to relate to?

It's because of something called 'regulation', which is the give and take, pull and push energy required to make a social exchange.

## Back and forth

Imagine it like playing tennis. Two people stand on opposite ends of the court. They hit the ball back and forth. To make it a game worth playing, they should both be able to hit back and forth pretty evenly. They must be able to regulate to each other's ability.

Having a conversation with a difficult person is kind of like me playing tennis with the current Wimbledon tennis champion. I can't hit quick shots. I can't serve decently. To make the game work, they would have to change their game seriously and bring it down to my level.

There are always two players in any conversation. But if one player keeps dropping the ball, or doesn't get what's going on, the other must take on more responsibility to make sure the exchange doesn't fail. If you take on more, you are 'regulating' for the other person.

Imagine a conversation with a typical three year old. You can have some meaning, but you have to change the way you relate pretty drastically. You are regulating. A child is an obvious example, but you may also have to regulate subtly if the other person is: new, older, younger, not socially capable, not in your peer group, shy or awkward, has language difficulties or culture differences, has different interests or a different background from you.

Regulating is not relaxing or easy. It's quite hard to change the way you naturally relate to others. But it will be rewarding. There are definite Biblical principles in regulating – being kind, seeing others as better than yourselves, being part of a body, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

The more you have to regulate when you don't expect to have to regulate, the less comfortable the encounter or friendship. So if a person looks like she should be able to relate on a peer level, but you find that it's not quite working and you have to change your game, it becomes awkward and difficult and you often want to leave or avoid that person forever.

You may never become personal friends with that person. Personal friendship can exist across steps of regulation, but it's a lot easier if it requires less. However, you may choose (and I think it requires

choice) to ask God to help you work with that person and actually be a friend to them.

## In our lives for a reason

I believe God gives us these people because we need to learn how to truly love. If we think about God's love for us: he regulated so much that he gave his son to die on the cross to fix up our relationship with him.

God's love for us was painful and costly and unconditional. If you take it back to the tennis analogy, it's almost as if he plays one shot and then zips around to the other side of the court to hold our hand to hit the ball back again. He regulates for us in grace to keep our relationship going.

Loving difficult people can be painful and costly. It should be unconditional. You may not feel any benefits immediately. But you will learn to love the way God loves.

Before my son was diagnosed with autism, I had a very real experience with God. I was praying, asking for the gift of knowledge so that I could have a great ministry. I felt him say, "What do you want that for?" I answered: "well, hmmm, I'm saying it's for you, but it's really for me. Alright, what do you want me to ask for?" He said, "I want you to learn to love."

I've got a son who lives with autism. It's certainly the hardest thing I've ever had to deal with. But I'm learning to love him selflessly and happily and unconditionally and see the beautiful person that he is. Please consider learning to love the difficult people too.



I have to love  
everyone...  
but do I have to  
*like* everyone?

**Sometimes this question** means: do I have to treat everyone like my best friend?

Well, no.

Understanding the four spaces means understanding that different people will fall into different spaces. Some people who you're very happy to have in your social space may stay there. Others may enter your personal space. Some may continue in your life in the public space.

I have lots of friends. Some I like more than others. There are some people I naturally click with and I love to spend time with them. There are others I like quite a lot, but if we spent too much time together, I think we would get

on each other's nerves and say something rude eventually.

It's interesting that when Jesus was asked the question 'what is the greatest commandment' he answered by quoting from the Old Testament, 'love God and love your neighbour as yourself'. That could sound like having a lot of best friends. It seems a little exhausting.

I think that's what the people around him thought, because they seemed very keen to clear up exactly what he meant. The very next question was, "Who is my neighbour?"

In answering this question Jesus told the very famous Good Samaritan story. But think back and identify what space that story happened in?

The man is found on the road and the religious people pass by – that's public space.

The Samaritan stops to help him – that's public and social.

Then there's a certain amount of care in the personal space because he's so sick and can't look after himself, but the Samaritan left at that point.

Loving his neighbour didn't include forcing his way in to the man's life and becoming his best friend.

Loving your neighbour doesn't necessarily mean being personally or intimately close to everyone you come across. But it does mean treating everyone with respect, generosity and love appropriate to the space you find yourself in.

You may not like someone but that's no excuse for being cruel or rude, or ignoring them, or avoiding them, or paying them out, or gossiping about them. And if you find yourself in a position to help that person that you don't like, loving your neighbour requires that you do just that! That may mean standing up for them against teasing or being polite when your peers are being rude, or giving someone a chance.

So the answer is: no, you don't have to like everybody. But you do have to love them.

And there is a difference.



## 15

### What if I get dumped?

**It's bad enough** to break up with a boyfriend but breaking up with your group of girlfriends can be devastating. It's even worse if you get dumped and nobody tells you why.

Often getting dumped is a by-product of gossip. People are saying things about you which you don't know. You have no chance to defend yourself or tell the truth and your life in the group is finished.

If this happens to you, commiserations. Your experience is not unique. Others have struggled through this too. Of course that doesn't make it any easier.

Think of it as a great opportunity to learn how to conduct yourself with dignity. Avoid vengeance, avoid crawling and pray for love and forgiveness. It will be really hard for a while but if you can let go and move on you have extra experience which will help you find better friends in the future. It will also give you first-hand experience off how other people feel and you will have special empathy for those who are suffering. Rise above it.

But make sure you can find some other friends in other places. Perhaps you may have to be solo at school for a while but it's good to have support elsewhere—perhaps at youth group, work, camp or even home. This might be a good opportunity to join an interest group and follow a passion of yours.

You *can* survive this and you *will* come out stronger on the other side.

## 16

## Why is a bit of gossip so wrong?

**When I started a new** high school at the age of 16, the thing I was most concerned about was finding myself a group to be in. That was the only way I thought I could get through school socially.

The trouble is that groups of girls in high school are notorious for having difficult dynamics. If you get through high school unscathed by your friends, congratulations. However, many people do not have such good experiences!

Here are some of the things that cause problems in groups of girls.

### Gossip

In my early teens a group of us at boarding school decided that gossip was 'unrighteous'. However we did still want to talk about each other, so we invented a new way of having a conversation. We called it 'sharing our thoughts' or 'sotting' for short.

Of course, it was the same thing. By 'sharing our thoughts' we could rip each other to shreds just as easily as if we had called it gossip.

Gossip is everywhere and incredibly difficult to avoid. How do you know if your group is gossiping about you? Quite simple. If you've heard things about others in your group, you can expect to be talked about in your turn.

Why is gossip so bad? If your friend doesn't know that you were talking about her behind her back how can it hurt her? Firstly, gossip is not based on love. It's based on public humiliation. Secondly, someone will tell her. Gossip doesn't stay a secret for long. And once she knows, she feels the public humiliation. It's like taking a knife and ripping your friend's clothes to shreds and then standing back and saying 'no, you look fine. Really.'

The least you can do in a gossiping group is to shut your mouth and say nothing. The best you can do is to say something nice about the subject of the gossip. Don't repeat gossip. Don't add to it. Don't make it a drama. Correct untruths. And go on the offensive by always having something good to say about everyone.



Two of the most wonderful women I've ever met are Deb and Eunice. Being with them for an hour leaves me feeling fresh, loved and positive. The reason? They have something positive to say about everyone. Negative words just do not come out of their mouths. The effect on other people is amazing.

Does this mean we can never say anything negative about anyone? Sometimes you just have to get things off your chest. If you must share things you are having trouble with, make sure it is with one trustworthy person. And think about why you are saying this. Is it because you are bitter? Are you trying to justify yourself? Or are you genuinely looking for a solution and trying to love the other person?

### No offense, but...

Almost worse is the conversation that begins, 'let's be really honest and tell everyone here what we really think of each other...' Or 'I don't want you to take this the wrong way but...' Or 'no offense, but...'

It's so easy to say these things but be under no illusions. Your friend *will* take it the wrong way and there *will* be offense. I still think my bottom sticks out too much because my friend April told me so in a fit of honesty when I was 14. I'm sure I have told people things 'for their own good' but actually I think I told them because it felt cool to do it at the time. It gave me some power over them and allowed me to insult them while pretending it was honest and therefore righteous.

My mother's wisdom has been proven right again and again as I have taken the three rules she gave me to heart. Before you say anything ask yourself these three questions: *is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary?* Two out of three is not good enough. Make it three out of three and you will keep your friends.

## What about a TBH?

'To Be Honest' posts are pretty standard on Facebook and the other social chat sites. People ask you to rate them and assess them and it's easy to do. But here's a warning. Stay positive.

I'll say it again. Stay Positive.

Whenever you do a TBH, say nice things and only nice things about people.

Believe me. The second you start to justify to yourself that 'she wants me to be honest' and say what you really think of someone – that is the exact second your relationships are going to start to blow up around your ears.

## What about cliques?

I was on a beach mission team when I was 18. It was a really nice team, with some really nice people on it. Four people in particular, two guys and two girls, were really nice. I liked each of them very much.

The trouble was, when the four of them were together, they didn't talk to anyone else. Trying to join the conversation was impossible. They had so many in-jokes that they were always laughing at something private. The four of them looked so popular, so beautiful and so happy. I wanted to get to know them, but they weren't interested in inviting me in to their group.

In their own minds, I think they just saw themselves as four people who got along very well, who had a lot in common, and who laughed a lot. Unfortunately everyone around saw them as a clique!

Should they have given up their friendship? Of course not. However they needed to know that the way they were expressing it was inappropriate at the time.

### That's fine, but do it in your own space

The closeness of personal space friendship needs to be expressed in personal space.

The four people in my beach mission team had every right to be so friendly to each other. They were invited into each other's personal space. However what they didn't realise was that mealtimes and social times with the whole beach mission team took place in social space. They were behaving in ways that were appropriate to the personal space *within* the social space. If they had known how they came across to others, they would have still shared their close friendship, but they would have been more aware of others and more welcoming to outsiders as is appropriate in a social space.

The danger of being exclusive applies to couples as well. When my brother turned 21, he celebrated with about 50 or 60 people at a fancy dress party. I can hardly recall anyone who came except for one particular couple who were memorable only because they were so unfriendly.

Their unfriendliness wasn't expressed through rude expressions or terse words. It was simply that they weren't interested in talking to anyone else at the party. They spent the entire time smooching and dancing up close with each other. They were acting intimately in a social space, and it was disturbing because it excluded everyone else.



Cliques can happen in any group. Christian groups are no exception.

Cliques happen because people do not have an attitude of love for others that is appropriate in a social space. They are more interested in carrying on their personal relationships in a public and social space. That's enjoyable, and probably fun for them. But it is not fun for everyone else. It excludes.

If you're in a clique, it's so easy to forget other people. You hardly even see them. But love *is* seeing the people around you. Loving is including people. Loving is acting appropriately so that everyone is respected and given the honour due to them as God's creation.

I had a great friend at uni. We lived at a university college together and went to the college church. But we had an unspoken agreement that we would never talk to each other after church. Instead we would try to meet new people and talk to people we didn't know. We had plenty of time to see each other later. We didn't want to be seen as a clique.

If you've been part of any group for a while and you feel comfortable in it, you have the power to make your group either into something exclusive where those who are not 'in' feel uncomfortable and small, or into something welcoming and loving. You don't have to give up your friends or your fun. All you have to do is recognise the space you are operating in and act appropriately to the people around you.

## What if my friend is on a power trip?

**My dad was shopping** in Pakistan several years ago. He needed a tin of milk powder and headed to a little food store in the local market place. Behind the counter, the shop owner was sitting on a stool, fanning himself from the heat. They exchanged greetings and the man asked my father what he would like to buy. Dad pointed to the tins of milk powder, high on the top shelf out of reach.

“I need one of those,” he said.

“Ah, yes, certainly Sir. But let me offer you a cup of tea and some refreshments. It would be an honour,” the man replied, and proceeded to give my father a chair while he yelled out the back for his offsider to make a cup of tea.

Dad was mildly puzzled by this as he could see a ladder standing against the shelves. Surely the owner could just use it to get down the milk powder and he could be gone, but he accepted the tea and chatted with his host. In a few minutes, a boy about 12 or so arrived at the shop.

“Good. You’re back,” said the shop owner, clearly his employer. “Your next job is to get down that tin of milk powder for the gentleman here.”

The little boy zoomed up the ladder, reached the tin, brought it down and gave it to the shop owner, who then placed it magnanimously before my father.

“Here Sir. Your milk powder.” Dad thanked him, paid and left.

### It’s all about power

At this point, you may be scratching your head. Why wouldn’t the shop owner get up the ladder to get the milk powder? Or even if he couldn’t do it because he was old or afraid of heights, why couldn’t the guy out the back making the tea do it? The reason is because in Pakistan, power in relationships is all important. Everyone has a pecking order. You know where you fit and you act appropriately. The shop owner was too important to get up the ladder to get the milk powder. He would have compromised his status in front of my father if he had done it. His job was to own the shop and to handle the money. The man out the back was not as important as the shop owner, but he was also definitely above getting



down a tin of milk powder. His job was to make the tea. It fell to the unimportant young boy to do the fetching and carrying, and the others would wait until he was available to do it.

Does it sound ridiculous? You might be surprised to realise that power struggles occur in every single relationship in every single culture. It's easier to see them when we examine other cultures. We accept our own culture's power relationships as part of normal life and hardly notice them.

### Who's got it?

There is power in every relationship. Usually, one person has more of it than the other. Sometimes the power balance is obvious. Doctors have more power than their patients, teachers have more power than their students. The Prime Minister has more power than his staff (although if you watch the classic BBC drama *Yes Minister* you might be surprised...)

Some power relationships are less obvious, but still just as real. Who has the power when a new student relates to someone who has been at the school since kindy? What about a 16 year old talking to a 23 year old? What about a conversation between a boy and a girl of the same age? Or an older girl and a younger boy? A lot of time at the beginning of the relationship is spent consciously or unconsciously working out who has more power.

Does it matter? The short answer is yes. Two people may be relating in the same space, but depending on their power balance they will behave differently. The person with more power does most of the initiating of conversation and invites participation. The person with less power typically responds and reacts. If the more powerful person is not interested in the exchange continuing, the powerless one can do very little about it. The powerful one is able to create frustration and resentment incredibly easily.

## Living with power

A power balance can shift as relationships develop, or depending on the subject or expertise of the people in the relationship.

For example, in our family, I get on well with my sister in law. We have an equal relationship on most levels. However, she defers to me when it comes to extended family matters because I have obviously lived in my extended family longer. In turn, I defer to her in all areas of health. She's a doctor.

I think the Bible is realistic when it talks about power relationships. It recognizes that these relationships exist and doesn't try to deny them. What it does do however, is give us a way to relate within power relationships which is earth-shatteringly different from the norm around us. The powerful are to use their power with love, self-sacrificingly for the good of others just like Jesus did. The powerless are to remember the way Christ gave himself up and did God's will as they operate in the relationships.

If Christians are living according to the Bible, there will effectively be no such thing as a power play because our behaviour will make it redundant.

## Don't be a patronising git

One trap that powerful people often fall into is in assuming that they know what is best for the people around them. It's easy to tell someone what you think they should do. It's much harder to ask

them what they need and then use your power to fulfil those needs. That's putting your power at someone else's disposal and giving up your control of it.

If you are a person with power, such as a youth group leader, a manager at work or simply an older person relating to those who are younger, be very sensitive to those around you. Ask them what they need. Don't patronize them and think you know what's best. Don't forget you simply have power and not necessarily all knowledge, wisdom or mind reading ability! Be open, ask questions and be willing to act in ways which are out of your comfort zone. Be keen to empower others with the power that you have too. There's plenty to go around.

If you're a powerful person, it's important to be very sensitive to social signals around you. I once worked for a man who was wonderful, but he had a tendency to talk and talk and talk without stopping. Everyone around him appeared to be interested but it was a forced interest because he was our boss. We couldn't give him the normal signals to be quiet because it would have appeared rude. Unfortunately he just saw an audience and assumed that because no one was yawning he could continue to talk.

Since then I've observed that people with power often do not know when to stop talking. The important thing is to know that if you have power, the people around you will be more polite and give you more space. You will be doing them a favour if you rein yourself in.

If you are a person without power, it's wise to recognize this and act with appropriate humility. Don't be cowed or scared by power in a relationship. But don't be overconfident either. Have a realistic picture of yourself. Know who you are. Act accordingly. Don't break the social rules if you are new. Hang back and find out what's going on.

And remember that because of the grace of God, you can operate with dignity, self-control and love even if you seem to have none of the power in the relationship.

## What if someone doesn't want to be friends with me?

A **new girl**, Jenny, moved into our community and straight away I knew that this was someone I wanted to be friends with. She was outgoing, fun, interesting and I felt like I had a good connection with her. I invited her over, I did things with her and I tried to be supportive.

However, a few months later a mutual friend of ours said to me, “it’s a shame that Jenny says she feels she has no kindred spirits here and feels so lonely.” I was hurt. What about me? I thought Jenny and I were good friends, but she obviously didn’t think so.

There are times when the person you want to be friends with just doesn’t click with you and isn’t interested. It is hurtful, but unfortunately you cannot make someone be friends with you. Friendship happens spontaneously, often of its own accord and there’s not much you can do about it if the other person isn’t on board.

Clinging to someone in the hopes that they will start to like you is counterproductive. Most people can feel a clinger and they will start to avoid them. If someone is getting too close, the other person will instinctively move away to protect themselves.

My best advice is to have a good cry and move on. There are plenty of people out there to be friends with.

Sometimes the most charismatic people don’t make the best friends anyway. After I got over Jenny I discovered Emma. She was quieter but more considerate and loyal and turned out to be a much better friend.

While in many cases it’s not your fault that someone doesn’t like you, if this happens it is worth having a look at yourself and seeing if there’s something you need to change in your relating habits or in your expectations of a friendship.



Do you understand the four spaces appropriately? Do you need to improve your social skills? Do you understand that friends are not possessions to be controlled? Are you looking to 'hitch your wagon to a star'?

If it's helpful, find someone older and wiser who relates well to people and have a chat.

## What if someone is clinging to me?

**Perhaps you are** a very charismatic person with heaps of charm. You are the popular girl that everyone wants to be friends with. If this is you, you probably have a number of people who hang off you for various reasons.

This puts you in a powerful position. With a word or look, you can ruin somebody's day, week or year. Please be careful. The temptation to be cruel can be overwhelming, especially if there are others standing around who will laugh.

You will need to make decisions about how you relate to people around you. Choosing kindness over cruelty does not mean that you have to be everybody's best friend. You can pull back but in a gentle way.

### When helping isn't healthy

Perhaps, rather than being charismatic, you are capable. You know just what to do and when to do it and how to do it. You have your life in order and you have plenty of compassion for others who don't. You want to serve and you want to help people. Conveniently there always seem to be a lot of people around to help—people who seem to need you and who can't get on without you. They cling like limpets to a rock and you feel responsible.

This is probably not a healthy relationship. As much as it feels good to help people, if you live their lives for them, you are doing them a disservice. You have a responsibility to live your own life first. Everyone else also has that responsibility. By taking on others' loads too heavily and helping too much you are robbing people of the opportunities to grow up and be adults. Of course, there are exceptions. But if someone needs so much help that you do nothing else in your life but help them, they really should be seeing a professional or someone who is more equipped to help them solve their problems.

If you are neither charismatic nor capable but someone is still clinging tightly to you, you may need some help in analysing the situation. Perhaps you are being used or controlled because you are not strong enough to stand up to the other person. It is worth getting some help or talking to someone about it.

## How *can* I help my friend?

Here's a conversation you might one day be part of.

You: "How was your week?"

Friend: "Oh, awful."

You: "Really? Why?"

Friend: "My boyfriend dumped me, I've got four major assignments due tomorrow and I haven't started any of them, my dad keeps harping on at me to clean up my room, I'm really concerned that someone's going to bomb Australia or there'll be a terrorist attack and then my family will die and plus I'm having a very bad hair day!"

You: (*splutter, gasp*) "um..."

What can you do? What will you say? Here are some tips for giving great advice.

### Honour the person

Jumping in too quickly to solve problems sometimes shows that you doubt someone's ability to take responsibility, or that you're not really interested in the person. Successful help is not judged by your brilliant advice, but by the person's growth through the problem.

### Discern the problem

Listening is better than talking. And asking gentle, disinterested questions is better than jumping in with solutions. Try not to offer help until you are really sure what the root problem is.

### Enable, not disable

Problems don't get solved by you telling other people what to think. Validate feelings, ask questions

and see if you can help them to find the answer themselves.

## Truth goes with love

Some people just don't know what to say or are embarrassed about offering help. But sharing godly wisdom glorifies God. We should speak the truth to others because God speaks it to us. Just be careful that in doing so you don't 'silence' them and stop them from saying how they feel.

## Love goes with truth

Who do you most readily take advice from? The people who earnestly love you and whom you trust to do you good. It's a waste of breath giving advice or help to someone who doesn't value the relationship between you. It's insulting to give it if *you* don't value the person either.

## Personal experience

You might get a better hearing if you replace "you should" with "perhaps you could try..." or "this is what I did." No-one minds hearing about your personal experience if you don't try to make it prescriptive for everyone.

## It's not about ending the pain

Christian help is not always about finding the quickest way to end the other person's pain. Rather it is about standing with people as they, with the Holy Spirit, grow through the pain to greater capacity, responsibility and joy.

## Don't get co-dependent

If you find yourself constantly worrying about the other person's problems and obsessing about possible solutions, you may be taking on responsibilities which are not yours. There's a difference

between showing loving concern and co-dependently controlling and living other people's lives for them.

## **Follow your own advice**

There's nothing worse than a person who knows exactly what to do for everyone else's problems, but clearly can't manage her own life effectively. Listen to yourself.

## **Know when to stop**

As with most things, in the case of advice, less is more. Once you see the glazed look in your friend's eyes or her hands starting to twitch, shut your mouth. Saying the same thing five times doesn't make it more effective. Don't worry – she did hear you the first time!

## **Prayer and a hug**

It's a matter of wisdom to know what's appropriate. Just make sure you actually do pray, and follow it up later to find out what's going on.

## **The bottom line**

In these beautiful words from a friend: share God's wisdom, but do it all the time knowing that you, too, need God's mercy.

## I seriously have trouble talking to people. How am I going to do it?

**You're not alone.** A lot of people would rather die than make conversation with people they don't know. It feels daunting to think about learning to make small talk, but that's just a feeling. If you can get over it, you can do it!

So what makes a good 'small talk' conversation?

Good small talk is not fake, rude, confronting or uncomfortable. Avoid topics that are inappropriate (generally money, sex and politics) or expressing your opinions too stridently. Don't criticise the person you are with, either directly or indirectly.

Good small talk is not a monologue where one person talks and the other listens (or pretends to). Nor is it an interrogation where one person drills the other with questions. It is appropriately two-way, with give and take. You begin to realise when your jokes have gone on too long, or when you need to shift the conversation away from yourself onto the other person.

Good small talk needs appropriate body language. The best conversationalist in the world will get cut off by others if they stand too close or have bad breath.



Keep eye contact short but pleasant. Don't touch the other person. Stand the right distance away. (And here's a tip: if you find you continually are chasing people around the room, you are probably standing too close and making others back away. If you find people move away from you quickly, you may be standing too far and unconsciously looking unwelcoming.)

Good small talk follows normal social graces. You know how to say a pleasant hello and goodbye. You use names correctly. You are able to recognise when a social conversation is over and move on graciously.

Things that can muck up a social exchange are if someone uses the wrong body language or doesn't have an ability to read reactions from other people. If you are very nervous about others you may take and give out the wrong messages. If you are not used to it or not good at it you may find social space relationships very tiring.

## Work out what your blocks are

If you avoid making social relationships and dislike small talk, ask yourself why.

Is it because you are shy, angry or tired? I'm introverted and I need my space, but a friend of mine is a complete extrovert. We differ in the amount of time we can spend with others, but we both need – and want— relationships. We just do it slightly differently.

When I'm angry, I often don't feel like making the effort. Sometimes, however, that's when I need others the most, to bring me some perspective, or some solace. There's nothing as good as changing an angry mood as spending time with positive people. Tiredness is another matter. That's when I find it best to get into bed and get a decent night's sleep. I'm far more able to cope with others after my eight hours.

Do you not really like people? Do you fear others? Did you grow up in a family that kept others out or complained about people all the time? Have you been badly hurt by someone? It's well worth exploring any issues there may be in your life, either by yourself or with a trusted friend or counsellor.

Are you too busy? I'm an organised type of person who tends to be 'task-oriented'. I focus on the job I'm doing, often to the exclusion of the people around me. I'll leave a conversation so I can finish what I'm focusing on right then. Because I'm good at doing things, I also usually have about five things to do at once. I often think, "Once I get everything done, I'll sit down and talk."

The trouble is, everything is *never* done. And when it is, I find other things to do. Doing things

makes me feel important and in control. Talking to people means giving up some of my importance and control, so it's threatening. Task-oriented people like me need to find a way to keep people as priority number one.

Do you avoid small talk because you simply lack the skills? Some people did not grow up in families where these things were known or taught. As adults they avoid these kinds of interactions because they just don't know how to do it. If you're no good at small talk, start watching and listening to people who *are* good at it. You could also ask a trustworthy, gentle person to help you.

If all else fails, read the next chapter of this book!

## 23

## How am I going to join a new group?

When my daughter was eight she joined a new children's group and was extremely reluctant about going to the first meeting. I tried to talk it up to her, but she had an answer for everything:

"It'll be fun." "*How do you know that? It might not be!*"

"You'll get to meet new friends." "*I like the three friends I already have.*"

"I want to meet other parents." "*Well, can't you go alone and I'll stay home?*"

We stopped at this point and had a little chat. It turned out that her major fear was of being new. What if no-one talked to her? What if they ignored her? How would she know what to say? What if she did something wrong? What if she didn't find someone to hang out with?

Trying to be a good parent and to promote more rational thinking, I got out a piece of paper and pen and made a list of the positives and negatives. We went through 'the best that could happen is...' and then did the negatives.

It was at this point, perhaps aided along by the lollies we were eating, that things started to get a little bit silly.

On our list of 'the worst things that could happen', we wrote down *explosions, hurricanes* and *people throwing fried eggs at you*. I don't know about my daughter, but whenever I face a new group of people, I'm thinking 'fried eggs' to calm myself down.

I'm over the age of 40 now and I still feel nervous about meeting new people. But take heart – it has gotten easier. As I've learned a few basic conversation techniques and have practiced coping with the fears in a logical fashion, I am able now to walk into any room and strike up a conversation and a relationship with someone.

And you can too!

Step by step, here's a real life account of how I joined the same new group as my daughter. And no, no-one threw fried eggs at us.

### Step 1: Why are you going?

I joined the group because I wanted to be able to connect with like-minded people and bounce ideas



off them, use them as a resource group and maybe go on excursions and trips with our children together. Initially, I was looking for people to share with in the social space, and hopefully in time, to share with on a more personal level. It's good to work out what you want from the groups you join.

Maybe it's just a weekly workout or a game of netball – or you might be looking to make personal friends.

Having a clear purpose in your head makes it easier to stick it out in uncomfortable patches.

## Step 2: Reconnaissance

I was told about the group and invited by a lady I already knew. Helpfully, she was actually in charge of it! I asked her

lots of questions before I came so I wouldn't be caught by surprise. I found out when and where it was held, the format of the group, the style, and the number of people likely to be there. I asked about the background of the people who came, how long it had been going for, how many new people they had, were there any costs, and was there anything else she thought I should know?

In any group, there is usually someone you can meet up with or ring up for information. Use the contact names and numbers that are given. People don't mind filling you in – in fact, most people love to talk about their groups.

## Step 3: Recognise the risks

I've come in new to enough groups of people that I know what usually happens. I also know how bad

I usually feel, and have worked out a way to get over it.

In the first five minutes of being in the room, I felt awful. People didn't swarm around me being welcoming. In fact, no-one actually talked to me at all. A few sort of looked at me quizzically but I knew that this was entirely normal for the time frame, so I just kept appearing confident.

In the second five minutes, I was chatting to my contact person and she was introducing me to a few people. However, I was still an outsider in the conversations. I had to listen politely and contribute only a little bit.

By the time the first half hour had gone by, I was in quite a good conversation with another person, and was feeling a lot more comfortable in the room. I was able to introduce myself to a few others, walk around a little, find the toilets and make myself a cup of tea. Things were progressing as they normally do.

#### **Step 4: Walk in the door**

Having already found out from my contact person that the group operated in a very loose and casual way, I deliberately arrived just a little bit late the first time. As I walked in the door, I prayed and took a deep breath, squared my shoulders, smiled and stepped in with apparent confidence. I didn't necessarily feel confident inside, but I knew that appearing confident and friendly breaks a lot of ice, and I knew I could ride out the bad feelings.

#### **Step 5: Contact person**

The first person I looked for when I entered the room was my friend who had invited me to the group. I didn't see her as I looked around, so I figured that was a good conversation opener with the nearest person standing around.

"Hi, I'm Cecily. I'm new here. I'm looking for Kathy. Do you know if she's here yet?"

Thankfully she took pity on me and went with me to find her. As soon as I saw her, I felt a lot better.

It's always good to have an ally in the room. If you're feeling really lost and alone, you can always go back to them for a little bit of confidence boosting. Watch out that you don't hang off them like a limpet for the entire time though. Think of it as a giant game of tag. To play the game, you've got to

leave 'bar' and run around with everyone else. But when you get too tired or overwhelmed, you can always go back to 'bar' for a rest and refresh before you play again. The ally in the room is your 'bar', but you still have to play the game.

## Step 6: Make a connection

Hopefully you will have been introduced to someone by now, but if that doesn't happen, you'll have to do the hard work of making the initial connection yourself like I had to when I arrived.

The first connection I made (see step five) was an 'information-only' encounter. I looked around the room for someone who looked both available (not engaged in conversation) and knowledgeable (moving around confidently). Then I walked straight up to her, smiled and tried to look as if I needed help. She looked up at me inquiringly and I asked my question. She gave the answer and helped me find my friend. At this point, her obligation to me was finished. Nothing more was required of her.

These sorts of connections are easy to make. Hardly anyone minds having a quick chat to give out information or be helpful. There's no commitment required, and it's easy to leave once the information has been given.

Slightly harder to make are the connections which send the message that you are looking for a conversation. People don't like to commit to the unknown. Who wants to be drawn into a conversation





with a person that they possibly might not like, or can't get out of? We all tread warily into this kind of encounter.

To get this connection going, you need to have open and receptive body language – open arms, a slight forward lean, a smile, confident posture and enough eye contact to sustain a connection, but not so much that it freaks people out!

I tend to stand a little less than a metre away from the person or small group I'm trying to talk to. That sends the message that I'm interested in getting closer, but I don't want to intrude. Then I watch for any glances being sent my way. If I get a glance and it appears friendly, I'll smile and start a conversation.

## Step 7: Finishing up

When I'm in a conversation I'm always aware of looking for body language that tells me the conversation is over and the person wants to move on. They might start fiddling with their hands, shifting in their seat or looking around them. Their verbal responses become shorter, more brisk and less open.

I don't get offended by this at all. There are a whole lot of reasons why someone might want to

leave. Most of the time it's not personal. (However, if it happens all the time and very quickly, you might want to check your breath or work out if you're standing too close. Think about your conversation topics: are you positive, open, general and non-offensive? Do you try to get too personal too quickly? Are you rude or too opinionated? Do you keep a balance of talking and listening? Do you look interested in them? Or are you boring – either by talking on and on, or by saying nothing at all and making the other person do all the work?)

If someone is showing signs of wrapping up, let them go. Don't try to keep people engaged if they don't want to be. They'll just try to avoid you in the future!

If you're getting fidgety or tired, it might be time to move on yourself. Having food or drink in your hand is a useful excuse that lets you walk to another part of the room. "Would you excuse me? I'm going to get another drink/ham roll/piece of chocolate fudge cake."

Time is another one. "Ooh, I'm so sorry. I've got to be going in about ten minutes. I just need to go and chat to that person over there before I leave."

Location can work well too, although taking too many trips to the ladies room can lead people to believe you have incontinence problems!

When I'm leaving a gathering or group, I always try to say goodbye to the key people I've been chatting to as well as my contact person or ally. "Thanks for making me welcome. I'm looking forward to seeing you when I come back next week."

Then I leave, get out the door, take a deep breath, let my shoulders sag a little and o home. Before I completely relax, however, I try to jot down some notes about the people I've been chatting to – names, basic facts and what they look like (so I can put names to faces next time). It helps to make the next visit that much less scary.

## Step 8: Congratulations

I never forget to be nice to myself after a few hours in the company of people I don't know. For me it's hard work, and when I've worked hard, I need to relax and wind down.

# Conversation

Here is Cecily's never-fail recipe for getting a chat going.

Smile and say something positive.

Say something about the situation you're in.

Introduce yourself and be genuine.

Ask easy-to-answer questions about the person that don't just require a yes or no answer.

Offer clues for the other person to follow up.

Listen to the other person and be genuinely interested.

Follow up their clues. Find things in common.

Take equal turns to talk.

Avoid topics such as politics, money and sex, divorce.

Avoid arguing, stereotyping, bragging, talking too much, talking too little, copping out or not having any opinions.



Here's an approximation of one of my first conversations with people in the new group.

Me: Hi. I haven't met you before. I'm Cecily.

*I'm taking the risk and introducing myself.*

Person: Hi. Nice to meet you. I'm Simone.

*Notice the equal length of exchange. As the conversation goes on, we'll continue to mirror each other in length of response. She's not sure whether she wants to chat to me, so she'll let me take the next step.*

Me: Hi Simone. So... are you a regular here? You come every week? This is such a great facility

*I switch into positive mode which sends the message that I'm not a scary person. I ask her a general, non-threatening question that allows her to give more information if she wants to, and focus on the situation we're in because that's what we have in common right now.*

Person: Yes, isn't it! We've very lucky here. We try to come regularly, although we do have our off weeks because of my husband's work. Are you new?

*She's leaving a clue about her husband's work for me to follow up if I want to. She's decided I'm not too scary, so she ends up with another question so that I can continue to talk. I can always go back to the topic of her husband's work later if I'm running out of stuff to say.*

Me: Yes. We've just started coming. In fact, today is our first time here!

*That's my invitation to her to find out why I've started to come and what my background is.*

Person: Oh great. So... which children do you have?

*She's not sure she wants to do that yet, so she's sticking to a more neutral topic which for mothers is always 'tell me about your children'.*

Me: I brought my little girl today – the blond one over there, but I've got two more at home.

Person: Lovely. Are the two at home boys or girls?

*Ok, she's interested. That's good.*

Me: Little boys. They actually go to preschool today. It gives me a bit of a break. How many children do you have?

*She's done enough asking questions for now. She'll start to feel uncomfortable if she has to do all the asking, so I'll turn it around for a bit.*

Person: Oh, those four over there. The oldest is 12 and the youngest is 6. So... are you new to the area? Whereabouts are you living?

*Now that she's sussed me out a little bit, she'll try to find out more about my background and what I'm doing here.*

Me: We live in town, but we're not really that new. We've just decided to come along here since we've had a change in our family circumstances. I'm thinking of bringing my middle child here next year. He's autistic and he doesn't cope with some situations, but I think this might be good for him.

*I understand her question: she's trying to find out what my reason for being here is. So I'll tell her what started me thinking about this group in the first place, which is my little boy and his difficulties.*

Person: Oh really? I've got a niece who's autistic. It's really hard on my sister. How old is your son?

*We have something in common, and she's empathising with me. We're getting somewhere now!*

## To think about

Have you ever felt that you wanted to disappear, or that no-one else understood you at all?

Describe a friendship of yours that has failed. Can you identify the reason? What steps will you take now?

What do you think loving someone unconditionally really means?

“There can be no real communication or feedback with an unequal distribution of power.” *John Holt.*

Do you agree with this quote? Why or why not?

Have you ever been in a clique? Were you aware of it? How did it feel? If you are part of a clique right now, do you think your behaviour to others will change? In what ways?

What do these verses have to say about cliques and power in relationships?

*Philippians 2:3-4 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.*

If you've finished high school, think about how your friendships in this time have affected you in the years since. If you're still there, how do you feel about your current relationships at school?

What is the thing you find hardest about walking in to a new group?

How could you make it easier for a newcomer to join your group? What might stop you doing this?



Got more questions about friendship? Experiences you'd like to share? Write to Cecily through her website.

Or, invite her over. Cecily is available to speak on the topic of friendship to your group, whether it's church, youth group or at school. Get in touch through her website at

[www.cecilypaterson.com](http://www.cecilypaterson.com)

