

Creating a Happiness Circle of Friends

We are both influenced by and a reflective part of our closest friends. How can we use our friendships to help create happiness in our lives?

NEWPORT BEACH, CALIFORNIA, USA, August 24, 2020 /EINPresswire.com/ -- There's an old saying that comes to mind when considering this week's topic, and it is this: "When you run with the dogs, you start to smell like them."

You may have heard a slightly different version of this bit of folk wisdom: "When you lie down with dogs, you wake up with fleas." It's the same concept, though an infestation of actual living critters seems more ominous than a simple odor. Or maybe that depends on the odor in question?

These old expressions tend to stick with us best when they have the ring of truth to them, and particularly if that truth is timeless. This is a good example of a timeless truth, and we might reword it this way: The people we spend time with have an influence on us.

The best example of this phenomenon among humans is seen in teenagers. Teens who hang out together often coordinate the outfits they wear; they might share musical tastes and pastimes. They often talk similarly, with similar expressions and inflections.

In primary school, around ages 6-12, students in the U.S. receive quite a bit of education about the dangers of drugs and alcohol. During what's known as Red Ribbon Week, millions upon millions of dollars are spent to teach them about the ways that substances can ruin or end their lives.



When these children become teenagers and enter junior high and high school, they tend to focus more on the habits and attitudes of their friends, and less on the messages schools and families try to convey. Teens are likely to encounter drugs in their lives, and their reactions to them can impact their whole lives. Some may become addicted. Some may die. Some never try drugs. Still others experiment a little with drugs, but then they never do it again.

When we reflect on the decisions teens make, there is a tendency to scoff. Why do they dress like that? How can they listen to that? Why do they experiment with that?

The answer is that teens, more than anyone, emulate the people they hang out with. They want to be like their friends, whether those friends are total prohibitionists or they end up doing drugs many times a day. Friends, after all, are like-minded people, and they are drawn to one another, especially at this early age, because of their shared values.

What's left unstated in the saying I started out with is that we also have an influence on those who encounter and spend time with us. It's not necessary to be a recognized thought leader—say, the most popular kid at school—to change the thinking of those around us. If we're a teen, our good grades may give our friends something to strive for ("If she can do it, maybe I can, too!"). Maybe our fashion decisions spark our friends' creativity so that they want to take our choices even farther. This phenomenon is by no means a bad thing—but it is a thing. We all influence each other, just by our presence or our proximity.

Do we change markedly after our teen years? I'm not so sure we do. To return to the example of substance use, if we don't break the cycle of drugs and alcohol, we might keep doing them past



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our teens and into our twenties, thirties, forties ... and beyond. A lot of that has to do with the company we keep. After all, we tend to surround ourselves with people who do the same sorts of things we do and who share some of the same thought processes. We then would make the decision to continue drinking, and to hang out with people who spend time at bars, rather than meditation centers or churches (though there is sometimes overlap).

As a teen, we often believe that whatever we do, however we think, is how everyone else does it, too, so if we're drinking and doing drugs, we believe that most other teens are doing the same, or that they would like to. Likewise, people who spend their time drinking together at bars might think that everyone else is drinking, too—perhaps quietly at home while being secretive about it.

In my practice, I have worked with men and women who have had affairs, and I have noticed a common thread among them. They usually have a genuine belief that everyone cheats, and if they don't, then they wish they could, because cheating, they think, is natural. They often find themselves in the company of other people who cheat because of this tendency to prefer the company of people who are of like mind.

Again, like finding and preferring the company of like is common. It's what we usually do. At some point, though, we need to ask ourselves whether going with the flow is the best choice for us.

If you are reading this, you are someone who cares about your own [happiness](#). You probably came here to consider ways that you yourself could live a happier life. I would like to suggest that you begin to consider your associations—your friendships—and ask yourself if they are contributing to your happiness and your overall quality of life.

It's difficult to consider friendships in this light—to think of the people we spend time with and wonder whether their influence on us is positive. We might also wonder whether our influence is helpful to them. If we can be a light in someone else's life, shouldn't we?

This is a fair question, but we should consider the fact that the answer might be a decisive no. If we provide positivity to others, that's great, but only if they feed us positivity in return. We shouldn't be expected to be the sole source of light and happiness for others. If they can't fill our tank to the extent that we fill theirs, we could be left broken down by the side of the highway with no one to call for a refill or a jump.

Looking at how our lives work, we tend to be shaped by who we hang out with. If the people we spend time with are doing certain things, there is a likelihood that we are going to influence each other, and this back-and-forth is going to reinforce our tendency to see the world in a certain way. What is important to our friends becomes important to us, and we are going to see the world through these filters.

Our friends are a big influence on us. The people we spend time with are a reflection of who we are and how our lives are going to go, at least in terms of our approach to life. We hang out with people who share our values.

Again, spending time with like-minded people is not a bad thing—far from it. If we meet up with buddies at the gym every day, we are much more likely to get in shape, stay in shape, and live a healthy life. I know that two of my best friends came into my life through healthy practices I had cultivated: one is someone I met in a hiking club, and another is a friend from a meditation group. I've been friends with both of these people throughout my life.

One example of an association that people pursue deliberately to achieve a positive result is Alcoholics Anonymous. In AA, members attend a 12-step group in order to get a handle on their drinking problem, and part of the success of the program can be attributed to the new relationships members form with one another.

Prior to joining AA, many members had social circles that were based in drinking establishments, where drinking, possibly to excess, was normalized. People who have drinking problems can convince themselves that their lifestyle is normal, and nothing about their associations suggests that this is not the case. But there are other lives a person might pursue, and the majority of these have nothing to do with alcohol. What's more, in AA, members form close relationships with sponsors—mentors who can help them to see a better way, a new idea of normal.

Many years ago, I worked with a young man—a teen—who was hanging out with people who really liked to party. However, this person was coming to the understanding that the party life was destroying him. Part of my advice to him was to try to find a different group of people to spend time with.

This young man loved being in nature, and in time, he was able to find other people who loved nature as much as he did. He began to spend time with them as they enjoyed the beauty, majesty, and wonder of the natural world, and of course this was a powerful substitute to his one-time life focus on drinking. He came to enjoy spending time with his new associates as they recognized the physical, spiritual, and mental health benefits of hiking, particularly with other like-minded people.

There are people who want to be positive, encouraging, loving presences in the lives of others, and this young man was fortunate to find some of them. To be happy, we need to seek out and find such people.

Perhaps we feel that we don't know anybody who is consistently positive, but we should put forth the effort to do the things that will bring us joy, and then we can look around and see who else is involved in similar pursuits. If we put ourselves in positive situations, we are much more likely to find positive people there, and these people can become our friends and our encouragers, if we give them the chance.

The poet Emily Dickinson famously wrote, “The Soul selects her own Society— / Then —shuts the Door.” It’s a poem we’re exposed to in school, but it may not be one that we immediately understand, but Dickinson is saying that we find the people, or person, who resonate with us, and then we shut the rest of the world out, whether that includes chariots passing by our gate or an emperor kneeling on our mat. We find our people, and those are the ones we choose to give all of our attention to.

And perhaps Dickinson is correct—we do shut the door on people who are not within the lines of our laser focus. But the good thing about doors is that they are built to open and close. (I recently saw an internet meme that began, “If one door closes ...,” but instead of the familiar ending to that saying, “another door opens,” it said this: “If one door closes, open it. That’s how doors work.” Perhaps no one told Emily, but this door does not have to remain closed. We can open it to usher people out or to invite people in. That’s how doors work.

There is a phenomenon that happens every summer in Sturgis, South Dakota. This town has a population of just under 7,000, but every August, its numbers swell to more than half a million people—and in a recent year, 700,000 people descended on the quiet Western town.

Who are these hundreds of thousands of visitors? They are people who love motorcycles, and they get together annually to celebrate the freedom of the road. These people are an example of those who enjoy spending time with others who share their interest, and they illustrate our tendency to find people who do as we do. The love of motorcycles brings these people together.

This is not a bad thing. Joining up with like-minded people can be a very positive thing to do. But we need to understand that the people we spend time with reinforce aspects of our lives. They help to direct our thoughts toward our shared interests, and they help to shape our opinions and beliefs. If our friends contribute to habits of body and mind that are bad for us—like recreational drugs—they are not serving our best interests. In fact, they may be causing us serious harm.

Do you know people who bring out the best in you? How does it feel to spend time with them? Do they make you see the world through a positive lens? Do they contribute to your enjoyment of your activities? Do they make you feel good about yourself? And if so, why do you not choose to spend your time with them? Why do you not seek out others like them, so that you can always have that access to a wave of positivity and happiness?

It’s possible that we feel we have an obligation to the relationships that pull us down to a place where we don’t want to be. This sense of obligation can keep us returning to the same mindsets, the same habits, and the same pervasive situations that lodge us in the gears of our unhappiness.

But happiness is our birthright. It’s why we are here, living our lives now, on this planet. We came

into our bodies to embrace happiness, and we owe it to ourselves not to let others drag us down to the dark, murky places where they choose to dwell. Maybe the best thing we can do for those we love is to choose a better path and to shine our light from it.

If we are trapped in a cave, a tiny pinprick of light may be enough to help us find an opening to get ourselves out. Living our happiest, most fulsome lives may offer a burning match to help others find their way (though that is not our job—we are all equipped with an inner map and compass to guide us).

Just imagine the glow cast when two people put their matches together—or when a whole host of living, gentle, happy people join forces to illuminate the way. When our match flickers out, there are sources of light all around us, and it is easy to catch that spark and keep the fire going.

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