



Influence of Friendships

When looking to improve our general health and wellbeing, the first areas we look to change are often our diets, exercise routines, sleep hygiene, or just kicking unhealthy habits. But there is another crucial area that needs attention outside of things we do, and that is the people we choose to surround ourselves with.

Forming and sustaining positive and healthy friendships throughout life ranks as highly as exercise and healthy eating when it comes to overall health and wellbeing. Spending quality time with friends is not just fun, but is also known to produce an array of long-term physical and emotional benefits.

In contrast, there is also a noticeable impact as a result of being in unhealthy relationships. Just like we can make poor choices on diet and exercise that negatively impact our lives, the same can also be said for the unhealthy friendships we choose to maintain.

Negative Influences of Friendships

At a conscious level, factors such as peer pressure or peer influence can impact an individual. This can lead them to alter their behaviour in a way that they do not overly align with but have decided to do to fit in with the group.

This pressure to fit in is driven by a deep human desire to be included in groups. This thinking stems from a developmental survival technique with the belief that if you fit in with the group, you stay in the group, and if you stay in the group, you are safe from the dangers of the world.

Fast forward to modern times and these same mechanisms can even be operating on a more subconscious level that the individual may not be fully aware of. The human brain is constantly picking up on the behaviours and cues of those around us and using that information to influence behaviour to fit in.

Even when not directly around friends, individuals are often still seen to uphold the social norms of their group. Social norms are described as the commonly understood acceptable behaviours of the group. Social norms are not always clearly written rules and can exist as more informally held attitudes, ideas, and values which significantly impact human behaviour.

It is understood that the more an individual identifies with their friendship circle, the more likely they are to uphold such norms across all areas of life. When accounting for this information, it is clear to see how the people we choose to surround ourselves with can impact our lives both positively and negatively.



Physical Influences of Friendships

Making the choice to surround oneself with a positive network of friends is a significant step towards improving overall health. Healthy friendships can increase happiness and reduce stress, improve a sense of self-worth and confidence, assist in navigating significant life events, and encourage positive lifestyle habits. Positive relationships can also reduce the risk of high blood pressure, depression, and an unhealthy BMI.

Determining Healthy Friendships

We are often required to adjust our relationships with people to maintain them. When we do this, it can be challenging to determine if they are still healthy or not.

Below are some questions you can ask yourself to review your friendships and consider if they are healthy. When focusing on these questions, keep in mind an overarching question: are your friendships causing you more harm?

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- Do your friends acknowledge you as their equal, respecting you for who you are?
- Do they support and champion your personal and professional growth?
- Do they celebrate your success and support your lows?
- Do they respect your boundaries, choices, and actions, and are they trustworthy individuals?

If you answered yes to the above, it's likely your friendships are healthy.

Last Words

You are not alone in this process – Acacia is always here to assist in any way we can. Our EAP Professionals can help you better understand and unpack the friendships you have formed, identify your values or your relationship needs to help you may make positive relationships, and develop skills and strategies for navigating difficult conversations. Wherever you are, we are here to support you 24/7.

