7.2: Communication & Friends

Learning Objectives

- Compare and contrast different types of friendships.
- Describe the cycle of friendship from formation to maintenance to dissolution/deterioration.
- Discuss how friendships change across the life span, from adolescence to later life.
- Explain how culture and gender influence friendships.

Do you consider all the people you are “friends” with on Facebook to be friends? What’s the difference, if any, between a “Facebook friend” and a real-world friend? Friendships, like other relationship forms, can be divided into categories. What’s the difference between a best friend, a good friend, and an old friend? What about work friends, school friends, and friends of the family? It’s likely that each of you reading this book has a different way of perceiving and categorizing your friendships. In this section, we will learn about the various ways we classify friends, the life cycle of friendships, and how gender affects friendships.
Defining and Classifying Friends

Friendships are voluntary interpersonal relationships between two people who are usually equals and who mutually influence one another.[1] Friendships are distinct from romantic relationships, family relationships, and acquaintances and are often described as more vulnerable relationships than others due to their voluntary nature, the availability of other friends, and the fact that they lack the social and institutional support of other relationships. The lack of official support for friendships is not universal, though. In rural parts of Thailand, for example, special friendships are recognized by a ceremony in which both parties swear devotion and loyalty to each other.[2] Even though we do not have a formal ritual to recognize friendship in the United States, in general, research shows that people have three main expectations for close friendships. A friend is someone you can talk to, someone you can depend on for help and emotional support, and someone you can participate in activities and have fun with.[3]

Although friendships vary across the life span, three types of friendships are common in adulthood: reciprocal, associative, and receptive.[4] Reciprocal friendships are solid interpersonal relationships between people who are equals with a shared sense of loyalty and commitment. These friendships are likely to develop over time and can withstand external changes such as geographic separation or fluctuations in other commitments such as work and childcare. Reciprocal friendships are what most people would consider the ideal for best friends. Associative friendships are mutually pleasurable relationships between acquaintances or associates that, although positive, lack the commitment of reciprocal friendships. These friendships are likely to be maintained out of convenience or to meet instrumental goals.

For example, a friendship may develop between two people who work out at the same gym. They may spend time with each other in this setting a few days a week for months or years, but their friendship might end if the gym closes or one person’s schedule changes. Receptive friendships include a status differential that makes the relationship asymmetrical. Unlike the other friendship types that are between peers, this relationship is more like that of a supervisor-subordinate or clergy-parishioner. In some cases, like a mentoring relationship, both parties can benefit from the relationship. In other cases, the relationship could quickly sour if the person with more authority begins to abuse it.

A relatively new type of friendship, at least in label, is the “friends with benefits” relationship. Friends with benefits (FWB) relationships have the closeness of a friendship and the sexual activity of a romantic partnership without the expectations of romantic commitment or labels.[5] FWB relationships are hybrids that combine characteristics of romantic and friend pairings, which produces some unique dynamics. In my conversations with students over the years, we have talked through some of the differences between friends, FWB, and hook-up partners, or what we termed “just benefits.” Hook-up or “just benefits” relationships do not carry the emotional connection typical in a friendship, may occur as one-night-stands or be regular things, and exist solely for the gratification and/or convenience of sexual activity. So why might people choose to have or avoid FWB relationships?

Various research studies have shown that half of the college students who participated have engaged in heterosexual FWB relationships.[6] Many who engage in FWB relationships have particular views on love and sex—namely, that sex can occur independently of love. Conversely, those who report no FWB relationships often cite religious, moral, or personal reasons for not doing so. Some who have reported FWB relationships note that they value the sexual activity with their friend, and many feel that it actually brings the relationship closer. Despite valuing the sexual activity, they also report fears that it will lead to hurt feelings or the dissolution of a friendship.[7] We must also consider gender differences
and communication challenges in FWB relationships.

Gender biases must be considered when discussing heterosexual FWB relationships, given that women in most societies are judged more harshly than men for engaging in casual sex. But aside from dealing with the double standard that women face regarding their sexual activity, there aren’t many gender differences in how men and women engage in and perceive FWB relationships. So what communicative patterns are unique to the FWB relationship? Those who engage in FWB relationships have some unique communication challenges. For example, they may have difficulty with labels as they figure out whether they are friends, close friends, a little more than friends, and so on. Research participants currently involved in such a relationship reported that they have more commitment to the friendship than the sexual relationship. But does that mean they would give up the sexual aspect of the relationship to save the friendship? The answer is “no” according to the research study. Most participants reported that they would like the relationship to stay the same, followed closely by the hope that it would turn into a full romantic relationship. Just from this study, we can see that there is often a tension between action and labels. In addition, those in a FWB relationship often have to engage in privacy management as they decide who to tell and who not to tell about their relationship, given that some mutual friends are likely to find out and some may be critical of the relationship. Last, they may have to establish ground rules or guidelines for the relationship. Since many FWB relationships are not exclusive, meaning partners are open to having sex with other people, ground rules or guidelines may include discussions of safer-sex practices, disclosure of sexual partners, or periodic testing for sexually transmitted infections.

The Life Span of Friendships

Friendships, like most relationships, have a life span ranging from formation to maintenance to deterioration/dissolution. Friendships have various turning points that affect their trajectory. While there are developmental stages in friendships, they may not be experienced linearly, as friends can cycle through formation, maintenance, and deterioration/dissolution together or separately and may experience stages multiple times. Friendships are also diverse, in that not all friendships develop the same level of closeness, and the level of closeness can fluctuate over the course of a friendship. Changes in closeness can be an expected and accepted part of the cycle of friendships, and less closeness doesn’t necessarily lead to less satisfaction.

The formation process of friendship development involves two people moving from strangers toward acquaintances and potentially friends. Several factors influence the formation of friendships, including environmental, situational, individual, and interactional factors. Environmental factors lead us to have more day-to-day contact with some people over others. For example, residential proximity and sharing a workplace are catalysts for friendship formation. Thinking back to your childhood, you may have had early friendships with people on your block because they were close by and you could spend time together easily without needing transportation. A similar situation may have occurred later if you moved away from home for college and lived in a residence hall.

You may have formed early relationships, perhaps even before classes started, with hall-mates or dorm-mates. I’ve noticed that many students will continue to associate and maybe even attempt to live close to friends they made in their first residence hall throughout their college years, even as they move residence halls or off campus. We also find friends through the social networks of existing friends and family. Although these people may not live close to us, they are brought into proximity through people we know, which facilitates our ability to spend time with them. Encountering
someone due to environmental factors may lead to a friendship if the situational factors are favorable.

The main situational factor that may facilitate or impede friendship formation is availability. Initially, we are more likely to be interested in a friendship if we anticipate that we’ll be able to interact with the other person again in the future without expending more effort than our schedule and other obligations will allow. In order for a friendship to take off, both parties need resources such as time and energy to put into it. Hectic work schedules, family obligations, or personal stresses such as financial problems or family or relational conflict may impair someone’s ability to nurture a friendship.

The number of friends we have at any given point is a situational factor that also affects whether or not we are actually looking to add new friends. I have experienced this fluctuation. Since I stayed in the same city for my bachelor’s and master’s degrees, I had forged many important friendships over those seven years. In the last year of my master’s program, I was immersed in my own classes and jobs as a residence hall director and teaching assistant. I was also preparing to move within the year to pursue my doctorate. I recall telling a friend of many years that I was no longer “accepting applications” for new friends. Although I was half-joking, this example illustrates the importance of environmental and situational factors. Not only was I busier than I had ever been; I was planning on moving and therefore knew it wouldn’t be easy to continue investing in any friendships I made in my final year. Instead, I focused on the friendships I already had and attended to my other personal obligations. Of course, when I moved to a new city a few months later, I was once again “accepting applications,” because I had lost the important physical proximity to all my previous friends. Environmental and situational factors that relate to friendship formation point to the fact that convenience plays a large role in determining whether a relationship will progress or not.

While contact and availability may initiate communication with a potential friend, individual and interactional factors are also important. We are more likely to develop friendships with individuals we deem physically attractive, socially competent, and responsive to our needs. Specifically, we are more attracted to people we deem similar to or slightly above us in terms of attractiveness and competence. Although physical attractiveness is more important in romantic relationships, research shows that we evaluate attractive people more positively, which may influence our willingness to invest more in a friendship. Friendships also tend to form between people with similar demographic characteristics such as race, gender, age, and class, and similar personal characteristics like interests and values. Being socially competent and responsive in terms of empathy, emotion management, conflict management, and self-disclosure also contribute to the likelihood of friendship development.

If a friendship is established in the formation phase, then the new friends will need to maintain their relationship. The maintenance phase includes the most variation in terms of the processes that take place, the commitment to maintenance from each party, and the length of time of the phase. In short, some friendships require more maintenance in terms of shared time together and emotional support than other friendships that can be maintained with only occasional contact. Maintenance is important, because friendships provide important opportunities for social support that take the place of or supplement family and romantic relationships. Sometimes, we may feel more comfortable being open with a friend about something than we would with a family member or romantic partner. Most people expect that friends will be there for them when needed, which is the basis of friendship maintenance. As with other relationships, tasks that help maintain friendships range from being there in a crisis to seemingly mundane day-to-day activities and interactions.

Failure to perform or respond to friendship-maintenance tasks can lead to the deterioration and eventual dissolution of friendships. Causes of dissolution may be voluntary (termination due to conflict), involuntary (death of friendship
partner), external (increased family or work commitments), or internal (decreased liking due to perceived lack of support).[14] While there are often multiple, interconnecting causes that result in friendship dissolution, there are three primary sources of conflict in a friendship that stem from internal/interpersonal causes and may lead to voluntary dissolution: sexual interference, failure to support, and betrayal of trust.[15] Sexual interference generally involves a friend engaging with another friend’s romantic partner or romantic interest and can lead to feelings of betrayal, jealousy, and anger. Failure to support may entail a friend not coming to another’s aid or defense when criticized. Betrayal of trust can stem from failure to secure private information by telling a secret or disclosing personal information without permission. While these three internal factors may initiate conflict in a friendship, discovery of unfavorable personal traits can also lead to problems.

Have you ever started investing in a friendship only to find out later that the person has some character flaws that you didn’t notice before? As was mentioned earlier, we are more likely to befriend someone whose personal qualities we find attractive. However, we may not get to experience the person in a variety of contexts and circumstances before we invest in the friendship. We may later find out that our easygoing friend becomes really possessive once we start a romantic relationship and spend less time with him. Or we may find that our happy-go-lucky friend gets moody and irritable when she doesn’t get her way. These individual factors become interactional when our newly realized dissimilarity affects our communication. It is logical that as our liking decreases, as a result of personal reassessment of the friendship, we will engage in less friendship-maintenance tasks such as self-disclosure and supportive communication. In fact, research shows that the main termination strategy employed to end a friendship is avoidance. As we withdraw from the relationship, the friendship fades away and may eventually disappear, which is distinct from romantic relationships, which usually have an official “breakup.” Aside from changes based on personal characteristics discovered through communication, changes in the external factors that help form friendships can also lead to their dissolution.

The main change in environmental factors that can lead to friendship dissolution is a loss of proximity, which may entail a large or small geographic move or school or job change. The two main situational changes that affect friendships are schedule changes and changes in romantic relationships. Even without a change in environment, someone’s job or family responsibilities may increase, limiting the amount of time one has to invest in friendships. Additionally, becoming invested in a romantic relationship may take away from time previously allocated to friends. For environmental and situational changes, the friendship itself is not the cause of the dissolution. These external factors are sometimes difficult if not impossible to control, and lost or faded friendships are a big part of everyone’s relational history.

Friendships across the Life Span

As we transition between life stages such as adolescence, young adulthood, emerging adulthood, middle age, and later life, our friendships change in many ways.[16] Our relationships begin to deepen in adolescence as we negotiate the confusion of puberty. Then, in early adulthood, many people get to explore their identities and diversify their friendship circle. Later, our lives stabilize and we begin to rely more on friendships with a romantic partner and continue to nurture the friendships that have lasted. Let’s now learn more about the characteristics of friendships across the life span.

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Adolescence

Adolescence begins with the onset of puberty and lasts through the teen years. We typically make our first voluntary close social relationships during adolescence as cognitive and emotional skills develop. At this time, our friendships are usually with others of the same age/grade in school, gender, and race, and friends typically have similar attitudes about academics and similar values. These early friendships allow us to test our interpersonal skills, which affects the relationships we will have later in life. For example, emotional processing, empathy, self-disclosure, and conflict become features of adolescent friendships in new ways and must be managed.

Adolescents begin to see friends rather than parents as providers of social support, as friends help negotiate the various emotional problems often experienced for the first time. This new dependence on friendships can also create problems. For example, as adolescents progress through puberty and forward on their identity search, they may experience some jealousy and possessiveness in their friendships as they attempt to balance the tensions between their dependence on and independence from friends. Additionally, as adolescents articulate their identities, they look for acceptance and validation of self in their friends, especially given the increase in self-consciousness experienced by most adolescents. Those who do not form satisfying relationships during this time may miss out on opportunities for developing communication competence, leading to lower performance at work or school and higher rates of depression. The transition to college marks a move from adolescence to early adulthood and opens new opportunities for friendship and challenges in dealing with the separation from hometown friends.

Early Adulthood

Early adulthood encompasses the time from around eighteen to twenty-nine years of age, and although not every person in this age group goes to college, most of the research on early adult friendships focuses on college students. Those who have the opportunity to head to college will likely find a canvas for exploration and experimentation with various life and relational choices relatively free from the emotional, time, and financial constraints of starting their own family that may come later in life.

As we transition from adolescence to early adulthood, we are still formulating our understanding of relational processes, but people report that their friendships are more intimate than the ones they had in adolescence. During this time, friends provide important feedback on self-concept, careers, romantic and/or sexual relationships, and civic, social, political, and extracurricular activities. It is inevitable that young adults will lose some ties to their friends from adolescence during this transition, which has positive and negative consequences. Investment in friendships from adolescence provides a sense of continuity during the often rough transition to college. These friendships may also help set standards for future friendships, meaning the old friendships are a base for comparison for new friends. Obviously this is a beneficial situation relative to the quality of the old friendship. If the old friendship was not a healthy one, using it as the standard for new friendships is a bad idea. Additionally, nurturing older friendships at the expense of meeting new people and experiencing new social situations may impede personal growth during this period.
Adulthood

Adult friendships span a larger period of time than the previous life stages discussed, as adulthood encompasses the period from thirty to sixty-five years old.\(^{23}\) The exploration that occurs for most middle-class people in early adulthood gives way to less opportunity for friendships in adulthood, as many in this period settle into careers, nourish long-term relationships, and have children of their own. These new aspects of life bring more time constraints and interpersonal and task obligations, and with these obligations comes an increased desire for stability and continuity. Adult friendships tend to occur between people who are similar in terms of career position, race, age, partner status, class, and education level. This is partly due to the narrowed social networks people join as they become more educated and attain higher career positions. Therefore, finding friends through religious affiliation, neighborhood, work, or civic engagement is likely to result in similarity between friends.\(^{24}\)

Even as social networks narrow, adults are also more likely than young adults to rely on their friends to help them process thoughts and emotions related to their partnerships or other interpersonal relationships.\(^{25}\) For example, a person may rely on a romantic partner to help process through work relationships and close coworkers to help process through family relationships. Work life and home life become connected in important ways, as career (money making) intersects with and supports the desires for stability (home making).\(^{26}\) Since home and career are primary focuses, socializing outside of those areas may be limited to interactions with family (parents, siblings, and in-laws) if they are geographically close. In situations where family isn’t close by, adults’ close or best friends may adopt kinship roles, and a child may call a parent’s close friend “Uncle Andy” even if they are not related. Spouses or partners are expected to be friends; it is often expressed that the best partner is one who can also serve as best friend, and having a partner as a best friend can be convenient if time outside the home is limited by parental responsibilities. There is not much research on friendships in late middle age (ages fifty to sixty-five), but it has been noted that relationships with partners may become even more important during this time, as parenting responsibilities diminish with grown children and careers and finances stabilize. Partners who have successfully navigated their middle age may feel a bonding sense of accomplishment with each other and with any close friends with whom they shared these experiences.\(^{27}\)

Later Life

Friendships in later-life adulthood, which begins in one’s sixties, are often remnants of previous friends and friendship patterns. Those who have typically had a gregarious social life will continue to associate with friends if physically and mentally able, and those who relied primarily on a partner, family, or limited close friends will have more limited, but perhaps equally rewarding, interactions. Friendships that have extended from adulthood or earlier are often “old” or “best” friendships that offer a look into a dyad’s shared past. Given that geographic relocation is common in early adulthood, these friends may be physically distant, but if investment in occasional contact or visits preserved the friendship, these friends are likely able to pick up where they left off.\(^{28}\) However, biological aging and the social stereotypes and stigma associated with later life and aging begin to affect communication patterns.

Obviously, our physical and mental abilities affect our socializing and activities and vary widely from person to person and age to age. Mobility may be limited due to declining health, and retiring limits the social interactions one had at work and work-related events.\(^{29}\) People may continue to work and lead physically and socially active lives decades past the marker of later life, which occurs around age sixty-five. Regardless of when these changes begin, it is common and
normal for our opportunities to interact with wide friendship circles to diminish as our abilities decline. Early later life may be marked by a transition to partial or full retirement if a person is socioeconomically privileged enough to do so. For some, retirement is a time to settle into a quiet routine in the same geographic place, perhaps becoming even more involved in hobbies and civic organizations, which may increase social interaction and the potential for friendships. Others may move to a more desirable place or climate and go through the process of starting over with new friends. For health or personal reasons, some in later life live in assisted-living facilities. Later-life adults in these facilities may make friends based primarily on proximity, just as many college students in early adulthood do in the similarly age-segregated environment of a residence hall.[30]

Friendships in later life provide emotional support that is often only applicable during this life stage. For example, given the general stigma against aging and illness, friends may be able to shield each other from negative judgments from others and help each other maintain a positive self-concept.[31] Friends can also be instrumental in providing support after the death of a partner. Men, especially, may need this type of support, as men are more likely than women to consider their spouse their sole confidante, which means the death of the wife may end a later-life man's most important friendship. Women who lose a partner also go through considerable life changes, and in general more women are left single after the death of a spouse than men due to men's shorter life span and the tendency for men to be a few years older than their wives. Given this fact, it is not surprising that widows in particular may turn to other single women for support. Overall, providing support in later life is important given the likelihood of declining health. In the case of declining health, some may turn to family instead of friends for support to avoid overburdening friends with requests for assistance. However, turning to a friend for support is not completely burdensome, as research shows that feeling needed helps older people maintain a positive well-being.[32]

### Gender and Friendship

Gender influences our friendships and has received much attention, as people try to figure out how different men and women's friendships are. There is a conception that men's friendships are less intimate than women's based on the stereotype that men do not express emotions. In fact, men report a similar amount of intimacy in their friendships as women but are less likely than women to explicitly express affection verbally (e.g., saying "I love you") and nonverbally (e.g., through touching or embracing) toward their same-gender friends.[33] This is not surprising, given the societal taboos against same-gender expressions of affection, especially between men, even though an increasing number of men are more comfortable expressing affection toward other men and women. However, researchers have wondered if men communicate affection in more implicit ways that are still understood by the other friend. Men may use shared activities as a way to express closeness—for example, by doing favors for each other, engaging in friendly competition, joking, sharing resources, or teaching each other new skills.[34] Some scholars have argued that there is a bias toward viewing intimacy as feminine, which may have skewed research on men's friendships. While verbal expressions of intimacy through self-disclosure have been noted as important features of women's friendships, activity sharing has been the focus in men's friendships. This research doesn't argue that one gender's friendships are better than the other's, and it concludes that the differences shown in the research regarding expressions of intimacy are not large enough to impact the actual practice of friendships.[35]

Cross-gender friendships are friendships between a male and a female. These friendships diminish in late childhood and early adolescence as boys and girls segregate into separate groups for many activities and socializing, reemerge as
possibilities in late adolescence, and reach a peak potential in the college years of early adulthood. Later, adults with spouses or partners are less likely to have cross-sex friendships than single people. In any case, research studies have identified several positive outcomes of cross-gender friendships. Men and women report that they get a richer understanding of how the other gender thinks and feels. It seems these friendships fulfill interaction needs not as commonly met in same-gender friendships. For example, men reported more than women that they rely on their cross-gender friendships for emotional support. Similarly, women reported that they enjoyed the activity-oriented friendships they had with men.

As discussed earlier regarding friends-with-benefits relationships, sexual attraction presents a challenge in cross-gender heterosexual friendships. Even if the friendship does not include sexual feelings or actions, outsiders may view the relationship as sexual or even encourage the friends to become “more than friends.” Aside from the pressures that come with sexual involvement or tension, the exaggerated perceptions of differences between men and women can hinder cross-gender friendships. However, if it were true that men and women are too different to understand each other or be friends, then how could any long-term partnership such as husband/wife, mother/son, father/daughter, or brother/sister be successful or enjoyable?

Key Takeaways

- Friendships are voluntary interpersonal relationships between two people who are usually equals and who mutually influence one another.
- Friendship formation, maintenance, and deterioration/dissolution are influenced by environmental, situational, and interpersonal factors.
- Friendships change throughout our lives as we transition from adolescence to adulthood to later life.
- Cross-gender friendships may offer perspective into gender relationships that same-gender friendships do not, as both men and women report that they get support or enjoyment from their cross-gender friendships. However, there is a potential for sexual tension that complicates these relationships.

Exercises

1. Have you ever been in a situation where you didn’t feel like you could “accept applications” for new friends or were more eager than normal to “accept applications” for new friends? What were the environmental or situational factors that led to this situation?

2. Getting integrated: Review the types of friendships (reciprocal, associative, and receptive). Which of these types of friendships do you have more of in academic contexts and why? Answer the same question for professional contexts and personal contexts.

3. Of the life stages discussed in this chapter, which one are you currently in? How do your friendships match up with the book’s description of friendships at this stage? From your experience, do friendships change between stages the way the book says they do? Why or why not?


