



# FRIENTIMACY

[fren-teh-muh-see]

1. the experience of a meaningful friendship; a heartfelt, supportive closeness among friends

HOW TO DEEPEN FRIENDSHIPS  
FOR LIFELONG HEALTH AND HAPPINESS

*Shasta Nelson*

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## Advance praise for *Frientimacy*

“Every woman can relate to the feeling of having plenty of Facebook ‘friends’ or contacts to scroll through in her phone but still longing for the intimate connections she had with childhood friends, back when her BFF was her everything. I know I can. As I read through Nelson’s description of why women experience loneliness—because we lack close connections, not because we don’t know enough people—I found myself wondering how she got in my head. Anyone who has admired intimate friendships in pop culture and wondered *Why don’t I have that?* will want to pick up this book.”

—Rachel Bertsche, bestselling author  
*MWF Seeking BFF: My Yearlong Search for a New Best Friend*

“Shasta Nelson has put her finger on the pulse of our cultural malaise: We need good friends to have a happy life, but we are disconnected from one another. Repair takes, insight, courage, and strength, and Shasta provides outstanding encouragement for us to get up, snap ourselves out of our self-defeating patterns, and create the friendships that our souls are longing for. *Frientimacy* has already changed my life, and it will change yours.”

—Marilyn Paul, bestselling author  
*It’s Hard to Make a Difference When You Can’t Find Your K*

“If you desire friends you can count on and grow with, who will support and see you, who make your life more full and fun, then you’ve got to read *Frientimacy*. Shasta Nelson has taken a bold stand to end loneliness and replace it with the deep and nourishing bonds of sisterhood we all need and crave.”

—Christine Arylo, bestselling author  
*Madly in Love with ME and Reform Your Inner Mean G*

“I used to get a terrible sinking feeling in my stomach when I read articles about how women with a close circle of friends live longer. I had such a hard time developing satisfying friendships after a certain age. I was lonely! But not anymore, and I attribute part of that ability to connect to Shasta Nelson wisdom. If you want—and need!—deeper friendships, then please read this wise and useful book.”

—Jennifer Loudon, bestselling author  
*The Woman’s Comfort Book and The Life Organiza*

“Compassionate and encouraging, Shasta Nelson teaches how to not only make friends but create deep connections and avoid ‘expectation hangovers’ in our friendships. I am so grateful for this book, and all the loving, connected, and lasting friendships it will create.”

—Christine Hassler, bestselling author  
*20 Something, 20 Everything*

“The best friendships never have been simple. . . . Lo and behold, Shasta Nelson’s gentle urgings toward self-improvement result in vastly more satisfying friendships.”

—Theresa Donovan Brown, co-author  
*The Social Sex: A History of Female Friendsh*

“Even women with large numbers of friends yearn for close, intimate friendships: Relationships that are easy and forgiving, and that allow friends to communicate in shorthand yet feel understood. In *Frientimacy*, Shasta Nelson offers practical advice to help women hone the skills and mindsets that are fundamental to the development of healthier, more satisfying friendships.”

—Irene S. Levine, author  
*Best Friends Forever: Surviving a Breakup with Your Best Frie*

“Many women feel they have enough friends but are stuck feeling unsatisfied . . . *Frientimacy* is a thorough and indispensable guide to help understand what’s missing, and learn how to take the next steps to connect in the most fulfilling ways possible.”

—Andrea Bonior, PhD, author

*The Friendship Fix* and the Washington Post Express column “Baggage Check

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# FRIENTIMACY

How to Deepen Friendships for Lifelong  
Health and Happiness

*Shasta Nelson*



**SEAL**

Seal Press

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*To the community of women in [GirlFriendCircles.com](http://GirlFriendCircles.com): Thank you for heeding the call of your heart to be more connected to others; may you be blessed with courage as you build your friendship, and may you rest in trust that you are gifting the world with more love.*



*And to my husband, Greg, whose long walks and endless talks with me not only helped me articulate what I felt called to say in this book but also whose love gave me the courage to say it.*

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# Contents

*Introduction*

## **Part One: The Intimacy Gap**

1. Acknowledging Our Intimacy Gaps
2. Committing to Closing Our Intimacy Gaps

## **Part Two: The Frientimacy Triangle**

3. The Way to Intimacy: The Frientimacy Triangle
4. Identifying the 5 Intimacy Gaps
5. Positivity: Giving *and* Receiving
6. Consistency: Building Trust
7. Vulnerability: Deepening Meaning

## **Part Three: Obstacles to Intimacy**

8. Leaning In to Intimacy
9. Obstacle to Intimacy #1: Doubting Our Self-Worth
10. Obstacle to Intimacy #2: The Fear of Rejection
11. Obstacle to Intimacy #3: The Toxic Friend Trend
12. Obstacle to Intimacy #4: Jealousy and Envy
13. Obstacle to Intimacy #5: Holding Ourselves Back

*Conclusion: Three Ways to Measure Our Growth*

*Epilogue: Friendships Can Save the World*

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*Before you start, we have a gift for you!*

*Frientimacy Gift Pack*

Includes:

- The Frientimacy Workbook: to help you reflect on and practice the concepts in this book.
- The Frientimacy Quiz: which you can take both before and after reading the book. Find out how much your frientimacy increases!
- Two different book club guides: Frientimacy 1X (for groups meeting once) or Frientimacy 4X (for groups meeting just once four times).

Download your free copy at [Frientimacy.com](https://frientimacy.com).

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*It seems impossible to love people who hurt and disappoint us, yet there are no other kinds of people.*

—Frank Andrews, author of *The Art and Practice of Loving*

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## Introduction

Chances are high that you have an intimacy gap in your life.

I'm not referring to the intimacy of a romantic relationship, but rather the lack of depth many of us feel in our friendship intimacy, or "frientimacy." That is, a gap between the kind of friendships you *want* to have and the ones you *do* have. This isn't to say your friends aren't great people, or that you're not a great friend. This is to say that, if you're like most people, something you *knows* that you have the capacity to both give and receive far more support, love, and intimacy than you currently enjoy.

This is because we're social beings. We don't just thrive on *feeling* emotionally connected to others; research shows that we're *wired* to connect with others—that we actually function best when we feel we are woven tightly into relationships. Unfortunately, too often in this day and age we feel less connected than we'd like—no matter how many social media friends or connections we have.

Here are some ways that many women have expressed this desire:

- I am over being networked; I just want a few close friends.
- I am ready for comfortable.
- I have a social life, but that's different than feeling really connected.
- I just want to feel like I belong.
- I long for more relaxed time to connect with the people I love.
- I prefer deep.
- I want friends I believe in and admire.
- I want to feel accepted.
- I want to know that someone is there for me.
- I want to laugh and tell secrets with someone I trust.
- I wish I had a tribe.
- I'd give anything to be surrounded by friends—really, really good friends.

If just one of the lines above speaks to you, then know that what you want is very human. It's the bravest, healthiest, and most loving among us who will admit our desire for greater frientimacy. Know, too, that you're not alone. I believe we live in a world where the need is nearly universal. Our sense of disconnection is far more cultural than it is circumstantial, more widespread than it is personal.

The good news is we can work to close this gap. In so doing we will not only invite more intimacy into our lives—we will actually deepen our lives. This is because healthy, vibrant relationships help us to develop and actualize the joy, meaning, and peace that we crave.

The chapters to follow will walk you through all this and more.

- In Part 1: The Intimacy Gap, we'll discuss what it means to acknowledge and own our intimacy gaps.
- In Part 2: The Frientimacy Triangle, we'll discuss the tri-fold approach to embracing and deepening frientimacy: by enhancing the positivity, consistency, and vulnerability in all our friendships.
- In Part 3: Obstacles to Intimacy, we'll discuss the various stumbling blocks that can trip up our path to frientimacy.

- Then, in the conclusion, we'll cover how we can measure how far we've come by tracking relationship growth, courage growth, and love growth.
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If you have fewer confidantes than you'd like, and less support than you need, then I welcome you to join me in learning how you can close your intimacy gap and deepen your frientimacy. In so doing, you can improve your health and longevity, increase the joy you experience, add meaning to your life, and feel more loved.

But you'll be doing even more than that. I think the world is dying without the intimacy it needs. In improving your own relationships, you can also help to heal the world. Every person who feels connected and valued is more likely to share the love—and the more love in the world, the happier we all will be. Join me!

With huge love,

*© 2023*

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# PART 1

## *The Intimacy Gap*

Though many of us have friends and friendships we care about, we don't necessarily feel the depth of intimacy we'd like to feel. That yearning indicates we have an intimacy gap—which, in these times of high productivity and low free time, can result from any number of factors. In chapter 1, we'll learn the ins and outs of Acknowledging Our Intimacy Gaps for what they are—and what they aren't.

The discussion continues in chapter 2, where we'll learn about Committing to Closing Our Intimacy Gaps, including any uncomfortable feelings that can emerge from self-exploration. We do this because we know that intimacy doesn't just happen; we have to work at it. But we can also be gentle and patient with ourselves as we practice personal growth, acknowledging it will take time, just as will intimacy itself.

Let's get started!

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# 1

## *Acknowledging Our Intimacy Gaps*

I was about to come face-to-face with one of my intimacy gaps.

Arriving at the café to meet up with my girlfriends, all I felt was excitement. We hadn't kept up with our weekly Tuesday girls' nights over the holiday season, so we hugged like long-lost friends with a lot of catching up to do.

In an attempt to encourage more intentional sharing and deeper connection, I suggested we go around the circle, saying one thing that we appreciate about our group friendship and one thing we want more of from the group. Since two of the most important actions in strengthening friendships are to affirm what we value and to let others know what kind of support would be meaningful to us, I thought this could be a perfect way to open our New Year together.

Everyone eagerly answered the question, and the sharing felt really meaningful. I was touched to hear each person share what she'd like more of from the group, including: continued understanding of my situation, repeatedly talking about the same problem, asking for more encouragement during a particularly rough patch, even getting together *more often* than we already did.

As they talked, I was thinking ahead to what I would say. I decided to be truly honest and share that it would feel good to have them initiate asking about my life a bit more. I often did that for them but didn't feel they asked about me quite as frequently—to the extent that I sometimes left our evenings feeling we'd spent more individual time on everyone else's life than on mine.

But my turn to share never came! It was *almost* comical—right before my turn everyone got absorbed in stories prompted by the last answer. Like kids distracted by candy, the conversation ended up veering in another direction. I kept waiting for one of them to ask me to share. No one did.

On the way home I flip-flopped between licking my wounds and pretending I didn't really care. But there was no denying that I felt pity for myself, frustration toward them, and disappointment at how suddenly these friendships felt far from fulfilling.

I blamed them. *They* were clearly selfish, caught up in their own lives, and unable to fulfill my needs. A few other memories popped up with confirmation to support that I was always the one who gives, who asks, who glues us together. *I* was the amazing friend and they were the problem. The verdict felt good, so I pushed down the little voice of wisdom and responsibility that was gearing up to tone down my pity-party. She would undoubtedly speak up soon, but I wasn't ready for her yet. Instead, I just sat in the disillusionment of the intimacy gap in which I found myself. What I wanted was the gut-warming feeling of being with amazing people who loved me; what I had was that gut-wrenching feeling of being neglected.

There was a gap between the friendships I wanted and the friendships I had.

# What We Have: Dissatisfaction in Our Relationships

It's not lost on me that, though I felt disappointed in my friends, in some ways I was living my dream being with a group of local and very close friends in a café. In my first book, *Friendships Don't Just Happen*, I described standing on a sidewalk looking at a group of women laughing and talking inside a café. I had recently moved away from my good friends, so I felt like the puppy in the window hoping to be adopted, wanting to be chosen, wishing I had friends I met with regularly for meaningful sharing.

That loneliness whispering her wisdom to me on that sidewalk prompted me to start the process of making new friends in a new city. But since making close friends isn't a fast or automatic process, it would be at least a year before I could say I had friends; it took another year or two before I trusted them, confided in them, and relied on them. Most of us need six to eight times together before we start feeling a rhythm of being together—a comfortable familiarity—but it can take years before we feel we have the frientimacy—friendship intimacy—we crave.

Friendships between women get a lot of hype—from inspirational stories of people donating a kidney to a friend to the pink sparkly folklore of girls nights out and girlfriend vacations. So it's easy to think most women have an amazing tribe rich with laughter, secrets, chick flicks, and pots of proverbial soup. But the truth is that between two-thirds and three-fourths of Americans believe there is more loneliness in today's society than there used to be, report dissatisfaction in their current friendships, and feel they have fewer meaningful relationships than they did five years ago. Another statistic comes from a study, published in *American Sociological Review* that looked at two decades of social isolation in the United States. To the question of how many confidantes one has, in 1994 the common answer was two to three confidantes; as of 2004 the answer was closer to zero. I think it's safe to say that the way we're currently doing friendship isn't working for the vast majority of us.

But what about your experience? Feel free to answer the questions below. (Or you can download a copy of *The Frientimacy Workbook*, which includes all the exercises in this book. Visit [www.Frientimacy.com](http://www.Frientimacy.com).)

Friendship Intimacy Satisfaction Scale									
How satisfied are you with your current level of frientimacy (friendship intimacy)? On a scale of 1–10, with ten representing the ideal level of frientimacy, what number would you give your current experience?									
NO FULFILLMENT					IDEAL FULFILLMENT				
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
What one thing comes to mind that could increase that number for you?									

In of 2015, I conducted a Frientimacy Survey in which twelve hundred women rated their frientimacy satisfaction; here are their results:

10	5.7%
9	4.48%
8	10.99%
7	12.75%
6	13.16%
5	11.13%
4	8.28%
3	11.94%
2	10.45%
1	11.13%

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I'm thrilled that 20 percent reported an 8 or higher. But note that most women are twice as likely to score a 1 or 2 than a 9 or 10; and that over 50 percent are at 5 or below.

And it's not just women. I believe wholeheartedly that men crave more intimacy in their relationships, too, so I strongly advocate more fulfilling relationships for both genders. Although the book was crafted to speak to women in particular, the truth is that, regardless of our gender, there is a gap between the frientimacy we have and the frientimacy we want.

## Resisting Our Gaps: Unacknowledged Loneliness

But first we need to be able to identify our experience, to realize just what it is we want. And that can be hard. For example, when I'm in front of an audience, I often ask, "How many of you are lonely?" As you might imagine, the inclusion of the dreaded L word means very few hands go up, though I do see a few heads nod.

But when I ask, "Do you wish you had more deep and meaningful friendships?" nearly every hand rises.

Though we may know a lot of people, that doesn't mean we feel we have meaningful connections. But if we don't acknowledge our need—and admit that we lack meaningful connections, that we feel disconnected—we limit our chances of getting our needs met. In other words, if we don't identify the problem, we can't do anything about it. Many of us don't acknowledge our need for intimacy because we don't want to acknowledge a simple fact: that feeling disconnected is a form of loneliness.

Some would say only recluses and "loners" are truly lonely—and most people are neither. But to limit the classification of loneliness to only those whom professionals might consider chronically lonely (or even depressed) is like using the word "hungry" to describe only those dying of starvation with no access to food. Just because I'm not malnourished doesn't mean that I don't regularly feel hunger—and that certainly doesn't mean I don't need to respond to my hunger. Likewise with loneliness: Just because we aren't extremely lonely doesn't mean we don't experience loneliness. We do, and we need to respond to it, because the reality is that many of us are far more disconnected from

intimacy than we want to be.

But there's a second obstacle to address: not *wanting* to admit we're lonely. When I ask my audiences to call out what comes to their minds when they hear the word *lonely*, common responses include: *depressed, sad, isolated, and bitter*. Given those replies, it's no wonder we're so afraid to concede to feeling lonely. To utter the word "lonely" might reveal that something is wrong with us, that no one likes us, that we have no friends.

We're fine, we tell ourselves. We know people we *could* call. We talk to people every day, sometimes all day long! Our friends really *would* be there for us if we needed them. In fact, we're actually too busy to stay in touch more than we do now, right? We already feel guilty for not being better friends, parents, daughters, and partners. Truthfully, we have so many responsibilities that we really don't even have the time or energy to do much more than we're already doing. In fact, if given the choice between a quiet night in the bathtub with a favorite magazine versus an evening of going out, we'd prefer that quiet night—so doesn't that prove we're not lonely? Put simply, we are so resistant to the possibility that we feel lonely we can talk ourselves out of any hint of the truth.

In the wonderfully titled book *Alone Together*, author Sherry Turkle warns: "Networked, we are together, but so lessened are our expectations of each other that we can feel utterly alone. And there is the risk that we come to see each other as objects to be accessed—and only for the parts we find useful, comforting, or amusing."

Note that she said, "*feel* utterly alone."

Loneliness is subjective, and it's not the same as being alone. One can be alone and not feel lonely; we can also be surrounded by people and still feel lonely. Indeed, many of us aren't lonely because we don't know people; we're lonely because the vast majority of those relationships lack the depth and ease and intimacy that we crave. For many of us, it's not that we need to meet new people; it's that we need to know how to go deeper with the people we already know.

So I'd like to clarify what I do and don't mean when I say we're lonely.

WE'RE NOT LONELY because we don't have any friends; we're lonely because those friends don't always leave us feeling better for having spent time with them. Like me driving away from the car that day, my loneliness wasn't from lack of relationships, but from lack of feeling the attention I wanted from those relationships.

WE'RE NOT LONELY because we have nothing in our lives that matters; we're lonely because we want to share the things that matter to us with people who care about us.

WE'RE NOT LONELY because we aren't lovable; we're lonely *because* we're so lovable. We simply have room for far more affirmation, laughter, and honest conversation than we're actually getting.

WE'RE NOT LONELY from a lack of networking; we're lonely because online profiles and Facebook check-ins don't provide the deep satisfaction that we crave.

WE'RE LONELY because we want more meaningful and healthy relationships with people who love us well—what I call Commitment Friends. (For more information, see "The 5 Types of Friends" in *The Frientimacy Workbook* so you can both assess your current friendships and better understand which ones you want.)

John T. Cacioppo and William Patrick, authors of the book *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection*, sum it up well: "The problems arise simply when there is a mismatch between the level of social connection desired and the level the environment provides." In other words, the sensation of loneliness is simply information that you are ready to feel more connected to others.

By my definition, the sensation of loneliness is simply information that you're ready to feel more connected to others.

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## How Did We Get Here?

So if we know there's a gap between the intimacy we have and the intimacy we wish we had, what's stopping us from doing something about it? Here are a few answers I've heard to this question:

- "It's because we live in a culture where no one has the time to get together anymore."
- "It's our world of social media and the impact of technology in our society."
- "It's because we live in a world where everyone is a consumer, a taker, someone who only wants friendship when it's convenient. Everyone is so toxic and narcissistic."

Answers like these suggest we're not likely to agree on what the root problem is. And though the sociologists studying shifts in relationships offer more nuanced hypotheses, they're certainly not in agreement. What is clear is that this gap is a cultural problem.

Over the last several decades there has been a steady decline in nearly all the traditional organizations that brought people together, groups like religious bodies, civic organizations, poker leagues, neighborhood associations, and bridge clubs. In the now landmark book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Robert D. Putnam tries to understand the curious fact that, even though more people go bowling today than they did in the 1950s and 1960s, there are fewer bowling leagues today. He highlights how

for the first two-thirds of the twentieth century a powerful tide bore Americans into ever deeper engagement in the lives of their communities, but a few decades ago—silently, without warning—the tide reversed and we were overtaken by a treacherous rip current. Without at first noticing, we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities over the last third of the century.

One could argue that there are many new ways of connecting that are exciting, meaningful, and rewarding. But it'd be hard to make a case that most of us feel more supported than ever. Connected perhaps, but not sustained. We feel like we have threads reaching out to many people, but that those very strands aren't woven together to create a net that will hold us.

Putnam reiterates that all the research reveals that

virtually no corner of American society has been immune to the anticivic contagion. It has affected men and women; central cities, suburbs, and small towns; the wealthy, the poor, and the middle class; blacks, whites, and other ethnic groups; people who work and those who don't; married couples and swinging singles; North, South, both coasts, and the heartland.

My personal experience backs up his findings: The disconnection we feel with our neighbors, our cities, our families, and our circles of friends is widespread—and the causes are hard to pin down. For every person who tells me their children are the reason they don't have friends, another will tell me they've found it easier to make friends now that they have kids. People from every city and town try

convince me *theirs* is the most challenging—in one locale, the rain is to blame for a dissatisfactory social life; in another, the gorgeous weather is at fault, since it encourages weekend exodus. Some areas, apparently, are just “one-mind” towns, where everyone is “too” focused on the same thing, like politics or the movie industry; while in another area, everyone is “too” different from each other to find someone with whom to connect.

And nor can we blame our personal temperament. Even the most extraverted and outgoing among us know the pain of wishing we had closer friends. Research suggests that most of us replace half of our closest friends every seven years; at that rate, basically anyone experiencing life change will experience some friendship losses and transitions, many times over.

Fortunately, Robert Putnam also argues that, though history does demonstrate an overall decline in our civic engagement and social capital development over the centuries, it also demonstrates there are ebbs and flows to society’s ability to connect and engage. As such, we could be on the verge of another cycle of deep and wide connecting.

## The Damage of Disconnection

George Monbiot, an investigative reporter and cultural commentator, wrote in his column in *The Guardian* that loneliness is killing us. He labels this era—much as we did with the Stone Age, Iron Age, Space Age, and Information Age—the “Age of Loneliness.” Research shows that feeling disconnected can be as detrimental to our bodies as addictions to alcohol or cigarettes. Much like lungs that have gone from healthy pink to eerie black, feeling like we aren’t supported, known, or loved leaves its mark, too.

Physiologically, loneliness or disconnection depletes our immune systems, which in turn saps our energy. Psychologically, loneliness weakens our confidence, lowers our happiness, and nags us with anxiety. Even more unfortunate is the fact that we can live with these symptoms so regularly we come to see them as normal. But though the preceding concerns, while unpleasant, may sound survivable, think again. Rates of dementia, addiction, accidents, depression, anxiety, suicide, murder, and paranoia all can increase when emotional connections are decreased.

One study powerfully illustrated the effects of disconnection on our bodies by scanning the brain processes of women under stress. The study tracked the brain activity of women intermittently receiving mild electric shocks that stimulated (or even simulated) the stress so many of us live with every day, the stress of always anticipating life with a sense of uncertainty. The results demonstrated that the brains of women allowed to hold the hand of a friend during the procedure processed significantly lower stress levels. In other words, the parts of our brains that sense danger are much less active when we feel like we’re not in it alone.

According to Dr. James Coan, the lead researcher in this study and a neuroscientist at the University of Virginia, “The burden of coping with life’s many stressors . . . when you have to deal with them all by yourself not only feels more exhausting, it literally creates more wear on your body.”

Of course, having friends doesn’t prevent the various shocks we experience in life—life stressors happens—but the emotional support of intimate relationships definitively protects our bodies from the harmful results of stressful events. Our relationships thus buffer hardship, both limiting the damaging effects of those stressors and protecting us from absorbing the impact.

In research revealed in *Chasing the Scream: The First and Last Days of the War on Drugs*, Johann Hari revealed what might be one of the most shocking effects of not having a community. One study

demonstrated that a caged rat, when given the choice between a bottle of water and a bottle of water laced with cocaine or heroin, always returned to the drug—until it died. This isn't too surprising; most of us believe that certain drugs are addictive. But what happened when they tested a rat that was given delicious rat food, fun toys, and plenty of friends? Not one "happy environment" rat opted for the laced bottle.

In his attempt to find out what, if anything, could really help heal an addiction, Hari concludes, "The opposite of addiction is not sobriety. It is human connection."

In other words, whenever we deny our need for deep and meaningful connection we are in truth refusing the medicine that can save us.

## Worth Remembering

- Though many of us have friends and friendships we care about, we don't necessarily feel the depth of intimacy we'd like to feel.
- Most of us need six to eight times together before we start feeling a rhythm of being together and reach a comfortable familiarity. But it can take years before we might feel we have the intimacy—friendship intimacy—that we crave.
- To realize we'd like more intimacy than we have is to acknowledge we have an intimacy gap.
- We didn't get to this point in a vacuum; there are lots of reasons why many of us feel less connected than we'd like.
- It's important to acknowledge that maintaining intimacy gaps—in essence, sustaining our sense of disconnection—damages in the long run. One of the best things we can do for ourselves is to deepen the intimacy in our lives.

To follow we'll discuss the next step in closing our intimacy gaps: owning our gaps.

## *Committing to Closing Our Intimacy Gaps*

While driving home from the afternoon where my friends neglected to ask me to share, the last thing I wanted was an invitation to admit my need and take responsibility. I had no desire to be the one to accept growth. On the contrary, what I wanted was someone to tell *them* to grow up!

But that was the problem. Standing on the edge of our gap, hoping to move toward greater intimacy, is akin to standing on a diving board for the first time. Even if we know how to swim, the leap of even one foot may as well be a black hole.

By and large, we aren't big fans of gaps. If the gap we experience is a life transition, many of us rush toward a new beginning to help get over an ending. If the gap is between our teeth, we're inclined to wire them together. If the gap is in a conversation, we find words to fill the silence. When a question is asked, we expect an answer to follow. Even the definition of a gap—a space that is unfilled—describes what is lacking rather than what is. Our brains often want to close gaps to avoid the dissonance of something feeling incomplete.

It's crucial to realize that whispering our hunger for greater connection doesn't *create* the gap. The gap is already there; we're simply now choosing the sting of honesty over the dull ache of avoidance. But the sting of honesty, while seemingly sharper, can be also short-lived because it can encourage us to take actions to transform our lives—whereas the dull ache of denial can plague us indefinitely.

Maturity, measured in part by our Emotional Intelligence (EQ), is the ability to manage our emotions in healthy ways. To transform our feelings, we have to first step out of denial and admit what they are.

### The Glaring Gap Between the Friends We Have and The Friends We Want

Here is many women's fantasy of the perfect friend: she'd know exactly how to respond when we tell her a code word; she'd show up with a pot of soup when she heard we were sick; she'd never complain about our ranting about X, *again*; she'd include us in everything; she'd share secrets she tells no one else; and she'd want to be with us when we want to be with her—no more, no less.

When we feel that nagging angst of loneliness, it's for *that friend* that we hanker. The fantasy best friend: the one who is the Thelma to our Louise, the laughter to our jokes, and the remedy to just about everything. She would be the finisher of our sentences, the reader of our minds, and the affirmer of our hearts. Our time together would be effortless, easy, safe, and comfortable.

Far too many of us ache for her, hoping we'll happen upon her while doing little to actually seek her out. Some of us go one step further and decide to put at least *some* energy toward the search—v

join sites like [www.GirlFriendCircles.com](http://www.GirlFriendCircles.com), sign up for workshops and classes, and attend the parties of our established friends with a willingness to make new friends. We go out looking for her as though we're casting agents hosting an audition.

But then, much to our dismay, we discover that the difference between what we *want* and what we *get* is vastly huge.

Because what we get in a new friend, 90 percent of the time, is a stranger we don't yet know as our best friend, so we don't yet love her. So we feel discouraged when she takes three weeks to schedule a date, we feel skeptical when she seems to have other friends, we feel doubtful when we see our two lives aren't as similar as we'd hoped, and we feel judgmental when we see her choose differently than we would have. She's not quite as vulnerable as we prefer, the conversation doesn't go as deep as we wish, and we're not laughing quite as much as we think we should be.

Ultimately, we meet a bunch of "candidates" who aren't quite good enough to fit our BFF opening, so we quietly reject them and keep looking, albeit while feeling somewhat disillusioned.

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*We don't need better friends; we need better friendships.*

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All of this is to say there's a myth that needs busting: that there is a "right" person to be one's BFF. Many women remain lonely because they think having close friends is a product of *discovering* the right people. But the truth is that meaningful friendship is actually the product of *developing* the right friendships. I'll repeat this because this is a truth that needs embracing: Friendships don't start with frientimacy; they are developed.

Pretend you meet me and decide you'd love to be my BFF. You'd likely have a fantasy of what I would be like to be my friend, and then as you reach out to me you'd start judging my responses against that ideal picture. You might think: "*Ugh, she already has her good friends, I doubt she has time for me . . . Plus she's so busy and I want someone who could meet up with me tonight if I wanted . . . And when I see her she just doesn't open up about her life that much . . . And I invited her last time and she hasn't reciprocated yet . . . Besides, her life really is too different from mine.*" All these sorts of interpretations of my behaviors might tempt your brain into ruling me out.

But here's the genius: As long as I'm friendly toward you—then I should meet the standards for being your new friend.

For the truth is that, if you and I barely know each other, then you shouldn't really be trying to figure out whether I could be your BFF. Instead, be excited that we're new friends! Everything named above as reasons you might rule me out are actually appropriate and healthy actions—for the beginning level of friendship. I really shouldn't be expected to open up with you yet, to drop everything for you, or to feel pressured to invite you out in order to keep our friendship "equal." Besides, it isn't fair to judge me or guess what I'll be like as a BFF by how I treat you as a new friend. The truth is that I, appropriately, give different levels of myself to people based on the friendship that has been *developed* between us.

In other words, don't use the standards you'd have for a best friend for a new friend! For a new friendship, lower your standards appropriately.

"Lower my standards?" you might reply, panic rising in your voice.

Yes, lower your standards. Release your expectations. Stop trying to pick and choose so early!

the game. As long as there are no red flags—like abusive behavior, lying, being mean-spirited—the be open to being surprised by who might develop into a meaningful friend. Basically, I can let nearly *anyone* into my “new friends” circle. As long as you’re not biting me or screaming at me—then, nice to meet you!

We’d be wise to recognize that all levels of friendship are important, as well as to acknowledge that we don’t always know which women will be the ones we grow closer to. Truthfully, my best friends aren’t necessarily the women I liked more than anyone else I knew at the time—they are simply the ones with whom the relationship continued to develop.

Friendimacy takes time.

## The Truth About Gaps

To follow are two truths I’ve learned over the years as I’ve lived through my own gaps: It’s in gaps where we grow, and closing gaps can be scary.

### *Growth Begins in the Gaps*

We experience cognitive dissonance, the recognition that something feels unresolved or out of alignment, during the intervals of life where we’d rather be *in* something than left in limbo. It’s the land of the in-between, and many of us resist it if we can.

But it’s in realizing that we don’t have what we want—or that we don’t want something we have—that encourages us to seek out what we *do* want. No one starts a diet, quits a job, or takes a risk of any kind without first feeling the gap between the current and preferred scenario. If we are willing to admit feeling hungry for greater connection, then we’re better able to choose the actions that will lead to more meaningful friendships. So, ultimately and ideally, our gaps invite our growth.

Fortunately, simply acknowledging we have a gap can generate the energy needed to effect change. Sometimes just the act of admitting we want more intimacy can bring us the impetus to carve a new path—giving us, for example, the eyes to see opportunities we never noticed before, the courage to say “yes” instead of going home as usual, or the conviction to have the awkward conversation we normally put off. And that new energy is essential: If we don’t want to live our whole lives feeling disconnected, we have to be willing to show up with a new approach. And in order to do that, we have to visualize our goal.

Brain imaging studies have repeatedly demonstrated how the same parts of the brain fire whether we’re only imagining an activity or actually doing it. That’s why scary movies can be so exhilarating and how athletes can improve their performance as much from imaginary practice sessions as from actual practice. And that’s why setting goals matters: If we can imagine it, then the chances that we can, in fact, do it go up exponentially. Thinking, writing, or speaking about what we want stimulates the brain activity that gives us the energy and motivation to move forward.

### *Closing the Gap Will Trigger Insecurity—and That’s Okay*

The trick is, change can be scary. So it’s important to remind ourselves that 1) it’s normal to feel uncertain about effecting change, and 2) we can’t let our fears hinder our progress.

Why? Because we can’t remain in the gap indefinitely; it’s too demoralizing to not see the distance between here and there eventually closing. So there are only two paths out of the dissonance:

—changing our lives, or changing our desires—and eventually we must choose. If we keep saying something is important to us but then do nothing about it, we will ultimately lose both our trust in ourselves and our sense of integrity, not to mention that we’ll never get to our preferred future.

But to get from Point A to Point B we have to take the first step. Point B isn’t coming to us. Intimacy won’t come knocking on our door, gifting itself with a red bow. So, to get started, let’s imagine different scenarios of steps we might take—and, most important, imagine surviving the results:

- We will take a tentative step forward. It’ll be disorienting, not because it’s wrong or bad, but just because it’s new. We’ll initiate with someone and feel scared. That fear doesn’t mean we shouldn’t have initiated—it only means we’re not used to it.
- We’ll share openly but then feel like we have a vulnerability hangover the next day. That’s okay. It doesn’t mean we should never share again—it just means we need to pace ourselves.
- Someone asks us to forgive and we freak out, every fiber of our bodies crying out for revenge. That panic doesn’t signal that forgiveness is the wrong path—it just signals that your forgiveness muscle is underpracticed.
- We’re offered a compliment that we’re tempted to brush off, but instead we stammer a “thank-you,” trusting that over time it will get easier to receive what right now can feel uncomfortable.
- We feel envy when someone gets what we want, but we congratulate her anyway, remembering that begrudging someone else has never brought us peace.

In other words, we are going to try new things, and we should expect them to feel disorienting. We understand that to get in emotional shape for intimacy we will have to exercise muscles we didn’t know we had. We’ll be sore. There will be times when we won’t know if it’s working or if we’re doing it right. But we won’t retreat just because it’s new and unfamiliar. In fact, we will *expect* it to be new and unfamiliar—because we can’t get *there* and stay *here* at the same time.

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*When we feel a lack of intimacy, the first thing to explore is ourselves.*

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## Intimacy as Exercise

So, how do we go about bringing our best self to our relationships? We work at it. The trick is to stick with it, with realistic expectations of how our progress will unfold. And one of the best ways to do that is to think of relationship work as just another form of exercise that we do to keep healthy.

Exercise is a good metaphor for intimacy because most of us know that, to become healthier, we will sometimes feel and look worse before we feel and look better. Our muscles have to be stretched and strained a bit before they can become stronger; our skin must sweat out the heat to keep our bodies regulated. We go in expecting exhaustion and discomfort—even wanting it!—as proof of our exertion.

The same is true for relationships. Far too many of us seem to think that intimacy should come without sweat, effort, or ache. When another person disappoints us, we sometimes withdraw emotionally gun-shy. When we feel a pit in our stomachs or an ache in our hearts, we can be quick to toss around labels like “toxic” or “unhealthy,” and can assume that our best option is avoidance.

I invite you to not avoid your emotional sweat, and to not avoid your relational sweat.

To return briefly to the afternoon with my friends at the café where I felt left out: I was definitely tempted to cut my losses. One voice in my head—who fancies herself an idealist, convinced that perfection is out there—wanted me to walk away with my head held high, convinced they weren’t

good enough friends for me. Another voice, let's call her my lazy side, was exhausted by just the idea of starting over with new friends—not to mention the awkwardness of ending these friendships, especially since my lazy side avoids conflict at every possible turn. That side of me moped: “Can you please just put up with it. You enjoy them most of the time. You can't expect everyone to live up to your standards!” So, put all together, the idealist voice insisted that following her path would ensure I was a strong woman, while the lazy voice compelled me to be a compassionate woman. But that wasn't a choice I was willing to make—I wanted to be both.

We might all express those two paths differently based on our temperaments and personalities, but when we're under stress—which disappointment and frustration certainly fall under—our human temptation is to fight or to flee, to go big or to go home. (In fact, this is such a common response that the phenomenon has been phrased in umpteen ways: Bark vs. play dead. Be aggressive vs. acquiesce. Go it alone in independence vs. cling in codependence. Assert vs. withdraw. “Don't settle” vs. “Be Content.” Retaliate vs. swallow it. Make a scene vs. stay silent. Fists up vs. walk away. Hold your ground vs. lie low as a doormat. “It's all *their* fault” vs. “It's all *our* fault.” Puff big vs. shrink small.

Since most of us tend to avoid conflict, especially with our friends, a large majority of us choose a combination of the two. First we put up with it for as long as we can; after that, we make up excuses and slowly drift apart.

Intimacy requires a third path: lean in.

If Ms. Fight rushes in with loud declaration, and Ms. Flight slinks back in resignation, then Ms. Lean In takes one step closer in hopes of mending and improving the connection. Leaning in acknowledges that we're still figuring it out, that we're bound to all behave imperfectly some of the time, and that we can practice love far more easily when we're open and present than when we've turned our backs.

Pay special attention to the phrasing “still figuring it out.” Much the way we can't expect to run a marathon if we haven't been in training, we can't expect to maturely respond in every relationship circumstance if we haven't yet practiced much. Every trade and talent requires practice to improve. Intimacy is no different. We *become* people who foster intimacy—we develop *into* those who choose to engage and connect with others. And we must practice to get there. So if I wanted to be both the strong-woman idealist who is also compassionate, I didn't have to choose one over the other; I just had to practice being both.

## Our Responsibility in the Gap

Once we set out to take those first steps, we need to keep something in mind: When we feel a lack of intimacy, the first thing to explore is ourselves. What do I mean by this?

I'm often approached by women who feel slighted, misunderstood, frustrated, or taken for granted by their friends. One friend doesn't understand what it's like to be a mom, another talks too much about herself; one won't make time to get together for more than a quick lunch here and there, another never reciprocates invitations; one friend is having an affair, and another is jealous of her friend's success.

These are understandable frustrations. It's definitely easier to identify what bothers us about others, and wish they'd change, than it is to consider ourselves, isn't it? But we can explore these feelings, asking ourselves: “*Why* does this bother me? Does it have to? How can I approach this differently? What might I be contributing to the frustration in our friendship?”

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