

LEARN TO BE YOUR OWN FRIEND

By

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Your friend comes to see you and tells you she has made a mistake and said something she thinks was not appropriate. She fears that others will think badly of her. She is really upset and keeps on telling you how stupid she is and how bad she feels. As her friend, what do you do? Do you tell her she should feel bad or do you find yourself listening sympathetically? Do you tell her how stupid she has been or do you help her to see her situation more realistically? Do you tell her she is a bad person or do you help her think of things she can do to make things better? Even if you think your friend has made an error you can help her realise that people make mistakes and that beating herself up is a really counterproductive exercise.

Now, if the situation was reversed and you were in the same situation, how would you treat yourself? Would you have a kind voice in your head talking to you in the way you spoke to your friend or would you spend your time beating yourself up? The truth is that no amount of

being unkind to yourself makes any positive difference – all being aggressive to yourself does is to make you feel bad.

If you want to live a successful life then one of the biggest lessons you need to learn is to befriend yourself. Befriending is not an easy option, it does not mean you can get away with murder and then simply forget what you have done but it does mean you learn to do what is in yours and everyone else's best interest. Befriending yourself has many parts to it since to be a good befriender you have to understand yourself and others, be emotionally and physically balanced and be open to the world around you.

If you want to become your own friend then the following tips will help you.

Step One – Don't neglect yourself

Before you can care for others you need to learn how to care for yourself.

If you allow yourself to believe that other people are more important than you then you are storing up trouble. When you are tired or are so busy looking after others that you forget your own needs you are more likely to

make mistakes and to feel put upon or frustrated. These feelings will not help you to be a better human being, friend, partner, mother or employee.

One of my clients seemed to spend much of her time trying to juggle a demanding career and the needs of her loved ones. She would continually forget to have breakfast, fail to go to the gym or make a dentist's appointment because as she put it "*it seems selfish to put myself first.*" This is the worst type of self-neglect – as the major breadwinner her behaviour meant she was more prone to overwork and illness that, in turn, meant she would lose income when unwell and then she would get anxious about paying the bills. After being trained to look after herself she was able not only to improve her own health and sense of well being but also to increase her income by reducing her periods of ill health. Looking after yourself makes good economic sense.

Step Two - Cut out the Self-fulfilling Prophecies

Imagine that your dream job has been advertised – it's the type of job you have always wanted. You apply and get an interview and on the day of the interview do you:

- Imagine what it will be like when you have the job
- See yourself handling the interview well
- Tell yourself that you have just as much chance as anyone else of getting the job
- Imagine all the things that can go wrong
- Tell yourself that you cannot be this lucky
- See yourself handling the interview badly

Psychologists have a term called a “self-fulfilling prophecy” which, put simply, means if you imagine yourself doing something badly and you tell yourself it will go wrong then you are likely to make the thing you fear actually happen. What has always surprised me is if you can imagine yourself failing at something why not use the same set of skills to imagine yourself succeeding. A number of studies have shown that if you can imagine yourself doing well you can increase your chances of doing so. Therefore, the next time you want something to happen, see yourself being successful, imagine what you would say, how you would look and – hey presto – you have turned a negative self-fulfilling prophecy into a positive self-enhancing image. Very often all you have to do is use exactly the same skill but in a different way to get a positive

outcome. After all, a positive self-fulfilling prophecy is more likely to get you what you want.

Step Three – Improve your relationships

All the available research demonstrates that you will get the most from life if you develop a supportive network of friends and contacts. You do not have to make everyone your best friend but you do need to make people a part of your life. There is a technique called the “circle of friendship” which comprises 5 circles, one within the other. The outer ring of the circle is where you put all the people you class as acquaintances. The next layer goes to people you know well enough for a coffee now and again. The next circle is for all the people you go out with, have round to dinner and maybe share group activities. The next is for good friends. Your final circle, the bulls eye so to speak, is for those who are closest to you.

Think about your friends and decide which circle they belong to. Perhaps you do not have as many people in your life as you would like. If this is the case then make new friends. Get out there, join groups, find activities and like-minded people and remember that the more social contact you have the more people there are in your life to be supportive when you

need them and to help you keep a balanced perspective on what is going on.

Step Four – learn some common sense psychology

Understanding yourself and why you do what you do and how you can change your feelings, thoughts and behaviours is within everyone's capability. The more you understand yourself and others the more control you have over your world. Become curious – when you read something about someone's behaviour don't just judge them train yourself to ask questions like "*what would make someone do that?*"

Think about all the things that shape people and the things that have shaped you. Talk to family, friends and colleagues and get as many opinions as you can. Join discussion groups on the web. Not only are they great fun but you really get to see a whole range of views. While you are communicating about your favourite movie star you can also be looking at what people are saying and how they say it. Try and imagine what might motivate them. Even talking about your favourite soap with a friend or the characters in a film you have seen is expanding your ability to understand people's motivation.

Try to see things from other people's perspectives – remember you do not have to agree with someone to see his or her point of view. Read articles and self-help books on a range of subjects. Bibliotherapy is the term used to describe personal development through reading – yes, trust the psychology world to have a term for everything!

You may think nothing of going to the gym three times a week so how about developing a workout for your mind and emotions. Befriending yourself means you need to understand what is happening and be able to develop the ability to stand back a little.

Recommended Reading

How to be your own Best Friend, Dr Paul Hauck, Sheldon Press, £5.99

Life Makeovers, Cheryl Richardson, Bantam Doubleday, £7.99

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