

Subtitles Video 4: Close Relationships.

Let's talk about the first habit of happy people, building close relationships.

If some of the wisest people in the world, and the scientific studies, are both in agreement about something, we can be pretty sure that it is worth thinking about, and the topic of friendship is a great example. In the very opening passage of the Analects, the sayings of Confucius, he says "isn't it a joyful thing if a friend from far away comes to pay us a visit?" And, of course, in those days travelling wasn't easy, so it was a big deal.

Strangely enough, on the opposite side of the world, and at roughly the same time, the famous Greek thinker, Aristotle, was saying the same thing. He thought that virtuous friendship was the biggest key to happiness, and now science is telling us the same thing. So we know that something is going on.

The most famous scientific exploration of happiness and human relationships was a very long term study called the **Harvard Study of Adult Development**. Scientists followed two groups of people over a period of nearly 80 years. They tracked 456 people from Boston's inner-city neighborhoods and 260 graduates from Harvard University.

They gave questionnaires, interviewed their relatives, as well as giving them brain scans. The conclusion of the study, which was spearheaded by Robert Waldinger, was actually very straightforward: human relationships are a huge key to our well-being, more than money, IQ, or genetics. The surprising thing that they discovered was that relationships don't only influence our psychological well-being but also physical well-being. They actually impact our cardiovascular system and lifespan itself.

The problem is, as most of us have discovered, making friends, and keeping friends, is not easy. Aristotle is famous for saying, "Wishing to be friends is quick work, but friendship is a slow ripening fruit."

Superficial kinds of friendship are very quick to achieve but the more deeper forms of friendship take a lot of time and effort. A lot of us have difficulty making friends. I'm no exception. As soon as I talk philosophy people run away.

It's not easy to build deep, enduring friendships. Loneliness is on the rise not only in America but around the world. The situation in the UK is so serious that we now have a Minister of Loneliness. That's such a British thing to do. I think the United Arab Emirates had a better idea when they appointed a Minister of Happiness.

At any rate, loneliness is serious business. But the great news is that we don't need a lot of friends. If we are lonely, if we do have difficulty finding satisfying relationships, we can actually greatly benefit from only one relationship. It can be a relative or a next-door neighbor. It could be your mom. Quantity doesn't seem to matter. It's the quality.

So how do we improve the quality of our relationships?

One practical way is through sharing activities. So, for example, we could be talking about something while we're doing something together. It could be fishing, it could be washing the dishes, but what galvanizes friendship is pursuing similar interests or activities.

The second very effective activity is what we call “active constructive responding.” This is one of the most valuable secrets of close relationships. This method is very well structured so that we can practice it easily and figure out how to implement it in our relationships.

Active Constructive Responding has two main components, which you can tell from the title.

The word “active” means to focus carefully on what other people are saying to us. By actively listening, by giving someone our complete attention, we show that we care, that we value what they’re saying.

So what about the “constructive” component? After carefully listening, we basically bounce what they've said back to them, emphasizing the valuable stuff that they’ve said.

This seems very easy, but many people like me find it difficult to practice.

I think I'm pretty skillful at constructively responding, but I am really bad with the active listening stuff. Talkativeness runs in my family, we are so busy talking that we don't listen. But I have a close friend who does the opposite. He listens very carefully to me but he often pops my balloon by criticizing what I say. This is one of the biggest causes of what we call “toxic workplaces.” We call it active destructive responding. But if you combine the two, listening actively and responding constructively, you can change the world.

The third component of close relationships is the ability to express our hearts. Obviously, it doesn't mean that you need to disclose everything about your personal life to someone you just met on the street. It means that we should try to talk not only about external things, like sports or politics, but about our own emotional world, about how we feel.

Essentially, self-disclosure is the ability to express one’s innermost feelings about our dreams as well as our struggles. Counselors and psychoanalysts know that secret very well. That’s why one of their main goals is it to get the patient to talk. Talking about one’s emotional struggles is a great strategy to prevent depression. It’s like taking fish oil to ward off high blood pressure. It tastes pretty bad, but you can avoid something much more serious.

But it’s not easy to share our innermost feelings, especially when we get depressed, and that's why the two habits we’ve described, doing activities together, and active constructive responding, are so effective. They make it much easier for us to express our feelings in a natural, focused way.

Finally, Aristotle, who pioneered the study of well-being, had some profound insights into the nature of friendship. He thought that there were three kinds of friendship, or perhaps three stages of friendship. The friendship of utility, the friendship of pleasure, and the friendship of virtue. Each one of these is deeper and happier than the one that comes before. So what’s the first stage, the friendship of utility? Well it’s basically about “you scratch my back I'll scratch yours.” So for example, if you are a student, your friend could give you a ride to work, or a ride to campus, and then maybe in exchange, if your friend is from a foreign country and English is not their mother tongue, you could assist them with their assignment. That’s an example of friendship based on utility.

Friendship based on pleasure takes us a little closer to each other and makes us a little happier. Your friend might be really good at telling jokes and you might enjoy their company because of their great sense of humor. On the other hand, your friend may like you because you're full of ideas, You may be creative and adventurous, and do a great job of dispelling their boredom. That's friendship based on pleasure.

But then we have friendship based on virtue, and this is something that Aristotle really emphasized as a secret to happiness. He thought that virtue was the heart of well-being and that if we were not virtuous, we couldn't find the deeper form of happiness. In Greek he called that Eudaimonia. So what does he mean by the virtuous friendship? For example, in this kind of friendship your relationship becomes so close that if your friend is in trouble, you get so entirely involved in their situation, that without thinking you drop everything you are doing and rush to assist them. You get so involved in your friend's situation that you forget about your troubles.

The example that Martin Seligman uses is the kind of friend who can call you up at 3:00 o'clock in the morning if they are in some kind of trouble. Personally, I hate people waking me up at three in the morning. Unless they were in danger, of course, I would probably shout at them and put the phone down, but I think you get the point.

In conclusion, relationships are extremely important to physical and psychiatric wellbeing, as illustrated by mountains of scientific studies, including Waldinger's famous Harvard Study of Adult Relationships. We can experience some of the most profound kinds of happiness with our friends and relatives. But in order to create those relationships we can do at least three things:

We should share activities, practical activities or favorite pastimes, that can bring us closer together.

Secondly, we should try to practice active constructive listening.

And in the third place, we shouldn't forget the power of self-disclosure, the ability to express our heart. It's not easy to express our feelings if we are feeling down, but it works like powerful medicine. And if we are in a serious situation, self-disclosure can be life-changing.

Finally, to use Aristotle's language, there are three kinds of friendship, the friendship of utility, which is useful but a little shallow, the friendship of pleasure, which is more fun, but not so deep, and the friendship of virtue, which enables us to transcend ourselves, to merge into a relationship and discover a deeper kind of happiness.