

## The Gift of Girlfriends

"Friendship," said Christopher Robin, "is a very comforting sort of thing to have."  
(Taken from the classic children's book, Winnie the Pooh by A.A. Milne)

Most women know the value of friendship. The research has concluded that for women, having girlfriends is a crucial component of their development. Psychologist Jean Baker Miller wrote, "Women's sense of self becomes very much organized around being able to make and then to maintain affiliation and relationships." Women tend to look at other women as models whose circumstances are similar. Women observe and listen to other women's experiences in order to define themselves as women and to value themselves as human beings.

Girlfriends can provide empathy and compassion for one another in a way that men cannot do because men have not experienced being a female. Only another woman can share her first experience using a tampon, being pregnant, giving childbirth or raging hormones!

One of the most powerful ways women help define each other is by sharing stories with one another. Carolyn Kizer, an American poet writes, "Women are custodians of the world's best kept secret: Merely the private lives of one-half of humanity." By telling our stories, we learn about who we are and how to live our life. With girlfriends, we can peel back many layers of our personalities. Anyone who has shared their deepest secrets and greatest fears with another woman understands the true gift of a trusted friend.

Friendships with our girlfriends often coincide with our life cycles. Some friendships last a lifetime. Other friendships last for a shorter time period reflecting a particular stage in our life. Regardless of the length of the friendship, bonds to other women provide a source of comfort and wisdom that helps women to evolve and grow.

A girlfriend sent me an email circulating from a lecture at Stanford University on the relationship between stress and disease. Interestingly, the best thing that a man could do for health is to be married to a woman, where as, for a woman, the best thing she can do is to nurture her relationship with her girlfriends.

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In her book, The Tending Instinct, Shelly E. Taylor consolidates a variety of studies covering cultural factors and decades of research. Her findings suggest that the need for community with other women is biological and is part of a woman's DNA. She indicates that spending time with girlfriends increases serotonin in the brain which helps decrease depression and increases a general feeling of well being.

The following are characteristics of a true friendship.

**Humor**: Many friendships develop from a shared sense of humor. When a friend can be empathic and in the right moment find humor, she is a unique treasure. In my closest friendships, I value the times we can share serious and sometimes devastating experiences and find some humor that evokes compassion and laughter. For example, I can call my friend and be in a rage and moments later be laughing!

**Forgiveness**: When we make mistakes, we can trust that our truest friends will be able to not only forgive, but love us even more for our vulnerabilities and limitations.

**Loyalty**: A friend will defend you when you cannot defend yourself. One of my closest friends overheard someone speaking negatively about me and she confronted that person and later told me, "Chris, I have your back."

**Listen**: Deep friendships can sense when something is wrong. The friend may not know what the circumstance is but will be willing to find out and then will be willing to listen without judgment. When I have struggled in hard times, my friend will spend hours just letting me talk and cry. The knowledge that my friend is able to appreciate my feelings and ideas without necessarily agreeing is powerful.

**Honesty**: In order for a relationship to thrive, trust has to be maintained. Often time friendships will fade because honest feelings are not revealed. A true friend is one who will tactfully admit she is upset with you without harping on the situation. Often, friends who have gone through disagreements and cared enough to invest the time to work out their differences, become closer and their bond is strengthened.

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**Encouragement**: A supportive friend will help motivate and encourage you to reach your goals and be all you can be. My friends know I need to go the gym everyday. If I'm not there, they will call me and tell me they are waiting for me.

**Acceptance**: A true friend will accept you for your authenticity. You do not have to be extraordinary, have material wealth or status. She loves the fabric of your unique character.

This holiday season, cherish the gift of your girlfriends by reaching out and giving them the present of your gratitude for their love and friendship.

"What do we live for, if it is not to make life less difficult for each other?"  
George Elliott (c 1850)