

# Biblical Friendships Provide These Incredible Benefits for Your Mental Health

What does the word “friend” bring to your mind? Someone specific? A shared joke? Happy memories of good times together? Proverbs 18:24 says, “A man who has friends must show himself friendly, and there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.”

Our friends are often our closest or most intimate confidants—those people to whom we can entrust our deepest secrets. It is possible to be friends with your relatives by blood or marriage, though your closest friends may be outside your family circle.

One mark of mental health is to have at least one close or intimate friend, according to the *American Journal of Epidemiology* and the *Journal of Nervous & Mental Disease*. God was right when He said that it is not good for humans to be alone. Having such a friend could even save your life. In one study of persons who had been diagnosed with coronary artery disease, unmarried people who lacked a confidant were 50 percent less likely to survive during a five-year period than those with a confidant.

Of all the biblical examples of friendship, the story of David and Jonathan (1 Sam. 19-20) is perhaps the most moving due to the interpersonal dynamics involved. David, the shepherd boy who had killed 9-foot-tall Goliath with his sling, would play his harp for King Saul, Jonathan’s father, to calm Saul when he was troubled. Over time, David and Jonathan became best friends. Jonathan bestowed on David very special gifts, and they kept each other’s secrets. But when Saul became bent on killing David, the two young friends parted in tears and with

an oath that they would always be friends. Later, after the deaths of Saul and Jonathan, David, who had become king, took Jonathan's lame son into the palace as his own.

A genuine or close friendship:

- Involves affectionate companionship.
- Often shares interests, pursuits and passionate commitment to a cause.
- Involves a shared sense of caring and concern, a desire to see mutual growth and development and a hope that the friend succeeds at life.
- Often involves doing something for the other, expecting nothing in return.
- Often involves sharing private thoughts and feelings without fear of judgment or critique, confident that the other will keep what is shared confidential.
- Takes time—learning about each other, making memories, helping each other grow.
- Includes encouragement, grace and forgiveness.
- Involves trust, accountability, faithfulness, dependability, loyalty and the acceptance of unconditional love.
- Often includes a commitment to the other's interests, even after death.

Friends are burden-bearers, secret-keepers, fun-sharers and emotional supporters. Friends weep with you and rejoice with you. They are there during crisis or temptation. Friends counter isolation and loneliness. As no other kind of relationships, friendships make life bearable and doable.

Having a friend keeps us sane, makes us laugh and allows us to be who we really are. I (Dave) have a sign I hang on my tent in the Rockies during elk season: "Here I am my real self." I want my friends to know that whoever shares that camp with me can relax and be real too.

To have friends, you must be a friend. True friendship involves reciprocity, give and take, without either party keeping score. True friendship involves transparency and vulnerability, which develop over time as trust is established. Most of the time, most people hide behind masks out of fear of what others will think of them—except when they're with a true friend.

Being transparent and vulnerable is scary and risky because it leaves us open to hurt, possible criticism, rejection and even betrayal, since another human being knows our secrets. But in light of the physical, emotional, sociological and spiritual benefits that come from having a friend and being a friend, the risk is worth taking.

For Christians, transparency with a trusting God is the foundation for interpersonal transparency. When we have learned to be open and trusting with God, whom we cannot see, it becomes easier to have these qualities in a relationship with a person we've come to know and trust. {eo}

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