



# Riegler, Shienvold & Associates

## Mental Health Quick Notes

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## Women and Friendship

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Years ago, I had the privilege to serve as a member of a good friend's hospice team as she was dying from cancer. On the days when I would be working my shift, I was amazed to meet many of her friends that knew her from different stages of her life. They flew in to see her from all over the country, bringing with them a multitude of stories and experiences to share with their friend in her final days. I was in awe as I observed laughter and tears, singing and storytelling, all in an effort to let my friend know how much she was loved.

This story is not an uncommon one. I have heard many accounts of meaningful experiences women have had with their friends. Regardless of whether women are married or single, working outside the home or not, they manage to find the time for, not one, but a variety of friends. What women may not realize is that forming and maintaining friendships contributes greatly to both their physical and emotional well-being.

A strong support system can greatly contribute to positive physical outcomes, such as improved immune systems and lower blood pressure, heart rate, and cholesterol. Since stress is known to contribute to these conditions, research conducted at UCLA suggests that women who reach out to their friends for support are, in fact, reducing their stress and, therefore, improving their overall health. (Berkowitz, 2002) The study concluded that women best handle their stress through nurturing their children and seeking out their friends for connection and empathy, rather than responding through fight or flight. Additionally, friends are often observant of health changes in an individual and will likely urge that person to either seek medical attention or change unhealthy habits contributing to illness.

Through women's life spans, friendships play an important role in their life experiences.

As girls, they have their first experiences with friendships. Within these, they learn about loyalty, trust, compassion, and collaboration. They have their first experiences with reciprocity, or "give and take," as well as belongingness. The emotional support gained in friendships helps girls to broaden their life experiences, increase their sense of adventure, develop their social networks, and create their problem-solving abilities. Additionally, the fun and laughter experienced among friends teaches them some of their first lessons in stress reduction. Mentoring occurs even in childhood, as girls introduce their friends to many new ideas and activities. Even when they are young, girls rely on their friends for emotional support when their lives are challenging, whether due to parents' divorces, family illnesses, deaths, or other life events.

Elderly women rely heavily on their friends to decrease the sense of isolation associated with old age. They face many challenges, however, in maintaining their friendships. Not only are their friends dying, but they, themselves, may be moving away from their friends because of their own health care needs. Since loneliness is a risk factor for both physical and emotional health, friendships often serve as life preservers for many elderly women.

Between childhood and old age, women have many years when they develop and maintain friendships. Unlike previous generations when women were mostly dedicated to their spouses and families, many of today's women balance a variety of different friendships, in addition to family and professional commitments, as a means of feeling connected. Additionally, their friendships often vary in intimacy, trust, and utility. Below are some examples of different types of friendships, each of which adds something unique to women's life experiences.

**Convenient friends:** These friends are generally not the most intimate, but women see them often because they work with them every day or may even live next door to them. These are the friends who might take in mail or cover work responsibilities when women are absent or on vacation. The reliability of these friends makes up for the lack of intimacy.

**Fun friends:** Again, intimacy may be limited with these friends, but they make up for it with their liveliness and frivolity. These are the friends with whom women love to socialize because they make them laugh and are often encouraging them to do things they would never have considered on their own.

**Mentors:** These friends often possess wisdom and talent that impress women, enough that they want to learn from them. Whether it is learning bridge, flower-arranging, or parenting techniques, these friends have demonstrated success in the activity.

**Old friends:** These friendships, in many cases, began when women were children. Often, they remember all of those secrets women tried to forget from early years. Years can go by without contact with these friends, and yet when they do connect, they pick up where they left off. Intimacy is often higher with these friendships because of the longevity of the relationships.

**True-blue friends:** These are the friends that are nearest and dearest to women's hearts. They can share their most intimate thoughts and feelings, with the assurance that they will care about and protect one another. These friends are there when needed the most, through good times and bad.

## Women and Friendship (cont'd)

So, what are some of the meaningful experiences women are having in their circles of friends? Women enjoy celebrating with their friends during important life-cycle events, such as getting married and having children, by attending showers, where they offer support through sharing their experiences. Likewise, when women are experiencing painful events, such as job loss, divorce, illness, or deaths of loved ones, their women friends are by their sides, offering them wisdom and comfort. Celebrations of special accomplishments such as spouses' promotions, children's achievements, and birthdays are even greater when surrounded by friends.

Women generally don't need a special occasion in order to connect with each other. Their lists of possible activities together are endless. Many women enjoy getting together with their friends for "Girls Night Out," during which they share the stresses and joys of their lives on a routine basis. Some may have game nights, through which the distraction from everyday stress is easily accomplished. For some, creating book groups, bible studies, or other intellectual exercises is equally valuable in reducing stress. Speaking of exercise, walking and working out with friends are other ways women are spending quality time in their relationships while doing something healthy for themselves. Some women enjoy participating together in voluntary activities that positively impact their communities while, at the same time, bringing them closer together. Whatever the activity, the

connection women achieve with each other is priceless!

Resources:

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*From all of us at RSA:*

***HAVE A SAFE AND HEALTHY HOLIDAY SEASON!!***

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