



Pick Your Path to Health

Friends: The Family We Choose

The new talk show with Iyanla Vanzant has been described as "sitting down with some good girlfriends for a gabfest." However, before you sit in front of the TV to enjoy a new virtual friend, think about how long it's been since you truly enjoyed your friends.

Dr. Joyce Morley-Ball, a family therapist in Atlanta, has observed that African American women have a harder time developing friendships than African American men. The reason, she believes, could be based on distrust of each other or fear of rejection.

That's what Dr. Tracey Holoman, a professor of chemical engineering at the University of Maryland-College Park, found when she moved to the Washington, DC, area in 1991 to work on her master's and doctoral degrees.

"I feel like I have to make so much more of an effort with women to be their friend than I do with other people," says the 31-year-old married mother of one. "Maybe it's the fact that other people have so many of their own issues that they can't put forth the effort needed to maintain a friendship."

But having good friends provides a valuable network to lean on.

"My friends and I have chosen each other to be extended family," says Holoman. "They are true to me and to themselves, and they are concerned about me and see the same concern in me, I hope."

This is the level of friendship that Dr. Morley-Ball says is missing among younger people.

Although friendships evolve through the years, one constant is that your friends are the extended family *you choose*. Healthy friendships take work, but they are worthwhile and can help you lead a healthier life.

"Friendships of the past were based on a support system and kinship," says Dr. Morley-Ball. "You don't find that these days, because people are more transient and aren't emotionally stable. We are a lot more reluctant to give ourselves because we don't want to be damaged."

One thing Dr. Morley-Ball has seen during her more than 20 years of practice is that people tend to give up their friends when they get married. However, what people fail to realize, she says, is that they need other people at some time in their lives.

Friends are the people we take into our confidence and with whom we share some of ourselves with, Dr. Morley-Ball explains. These are the people we can count on and who will not judge us, she adds.

There are many ways to strengthen existing friendships, build new ones, and extend your sense of family along the way. Many African-American women are also forming "sister circles" by sharing their friends with others in small groups. Sister circles can be purely get-togethers, support groups, on-line buddies or small gatherings that form around a common purpose or interest. Some sister circles read books together, do each other's hair, deal with stress, talk about relationships or simply have a good time. Being part of a sister circle is a wonderful way for African American women to make lasting friends and build an invaluable network of sister-friends.

Here are some characteristics Dr. Morley-Ball says are present in true friendships:

- The ability to assess yourself. This characteristic gives a person the opportunity to see what they want in a friendship and what they are willing to give.
- Levels of respect. This doesn't mean that you agree with everything your friend does or says, she explains. You just respect their position.
- Honesty. It is just as important to be honest with yourself as it is to be honest with a friend.
- Loyalty. While this trait speaks for itself, it is one of the key components of a lasting, true friendship.
- Caring. This means that you will go out of your way, that you will inconvenience yourself, to help your friend and to show your support.
- Trust. You feel like you can confide in this person and not have the person use the information to hurt you.
- Levels of understanding. You accept your friends and understand that their personalities (the way they act or how they feel) are not the same as yours.

Focusing on your power to establish healthy relationships with friends will lead you down a path to better communication with the family *you* choose, your friends.

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health education campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign, please call 1-800-994-WOMAN or 1-888-220-5446 (TDD), or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov/> To request weekly health tips by e-mail, click on the box that says, "Click Here for weekly health tips by e-mail."