

Information Sheet:

“Friends” Versus “Friendly”

This is a condensed version of an article by Donna Williams about friendship. The full text of the article can be found at www.donnawilliams.net. Donna Williams has published ten books about autism and has a blog to which she posts informative commentary about life on the autism spectrum.

Some autistic people find friendships challenging. They might believe anyone who is friendly to them is a friend. This information sheet has been written to help autistic people understand more about friendships.

What does it take to make someone who is friendly your friend?

When someone you meet is friendly towards you, it may mean they like you, but it doesn't mean you can be friends right away. When a person likes you, but is not yet your friend, they are called an “acquaintance”. (To acquaint means to get to know.)

Deciding you like someone can happen quickly. It takes a bit of time for most people to consider an acquaintance a friend. Most people need a few weeks or months before they consider you a friend. When you see an acquaintance frequently over a period of time, you have a chance to get to know each other. If this goes well, you may become friends. A thing you need to make a new acquaintance into a friend is: Time.

Having a friend should feel good

Once you have made a friend, it should feel better to have them as a friend than not having them as a friend.

Friendships can change over time. Sometimes, you may see a friend often. Other times you might see them less. There can be lots of different kinds of friends and friendships. Some friends meet up to do things together, while others write letters or only talk online. Some friends need to talk and some friends can sit together silently. It's okay to have different kinds of friendships: a non-verbal relationship with one person, a typing online friendship with another, and a talking friendship with someone else.

Friendships can be difficult sometimes, but overall it should feel good to be friends with someone. A friend should not make you feel bad about yourself. If someone wants to be your friend, but you notice you always feel bad when you are with them, they may not be a good friend.

You don't pay for friendship

No friend should expect you to pay them for friendship. A friend won't expect money, gifts, touching, or sex. If they pressure you for things like these, they are not a friend.

There are some people who are professionals like carers or therapists who you do pay for. These people are like friends, but they are paid for the time they spend with you. It is okay to like them and they may like you, but they are not the same as friends who see you in their free time. If you don't have friends, a professional can be a good replacement.

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Some acquaintances won't become friends

Some acquaintances might not become friends. This may be because their lives are too busy, they may need a different kind of friendship than the kind you can offer, or because they may not get as much from your connection with them as you do. It might be they want a friend who is more talkative or less talkative, a friend who has more time to spend with them or who wants to spend less time, or they may want a friend with the same interest as them or similar life experiences as they have.

It can be disappointing when you think you're making a friend and it doesn't work out. That could happen to anyone. It's okay to feel sad or frustrated. Hopefully, you will have better luck next time.

To have a friend, you need to be a friend

If you want friends, you can start by being a friend to yourself. You can practice the things friends can do for each other on yourself by being kind to yourself, cheering yourself up, calming yourself down, and thinking of reasons to like yourself.

When other people see you are happy and you like yourself, they will be more likely to want to be friends with you.

Letting go of a friendship

Sometimes one of the people in a friendship might feel better letting go of a friend and that is normal. If you are not well or don't feel it's a good time to have a friend, it's okay to let a friend know that you need a break. Some friends might offer to help, but it's up to you to decide if that is what you want. If you are a person who sorts things out better on your own, it is okay to say so.

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