

Excerpted from *When Friendship Hurts: How to Deal With Friends Who Betray, Abandon, or Wound You* by Jan Yager, Ph.D. (Simon & Schuster, Inc./Touchstone, 2002) All rights reserved.

Introduction

When Friendship Turns Unfriendly

For some, “Friends for life” seems to have replaced the ideal of a lifelong marital relationship. Of course, there are positive, wonderful friendships that are mutually beneficial to both friends that *should* last a lifetime. But there are other friendships that are negative, destructive, or unhealthy that should end. There may also be friendships that you thought were going well but, alas, all of a sudden, your friend stops returning your phone calls and won’t answer your letters, and the friendship ends. Years later you still don’t know what happened, and it haunts you.

In the two decades during which I have been researching and writing about friendship, I have seen the interest in learning about friendship soar. From a topic that was addressed infrequently by psychologists, psychiatrists, and sociologists (who tended to focus on parent–child or husband–wife relationships), articles about friendship are now a staple in popular magazines and daily newspapers, and also on web sites; and there are many books about this glorious relationship between peers that we call friendship. Friendship has certainly been “discovered.” Its benefits have been extolled by numerous researchers through anecdotes and examples, as well as through quantitative (or qualitative) studies by epidemiologists, sociologists, and psychologists, who have found a correlation between having even one close friend and an increased life expectancy, as well as better mental health and a greater chance of surviving breast cancer or a heart attack. ¹

So why is there a need for a book like *When Friendship Hurts*? Because in all the excitement about getting the word out about the importance of friendship in our lives, too little attention has been paid to the notion that negative friendships can wreak havoc. Another reason is to have a forum to explore the possible causes of

finding yourself in such a relationship, and how to best rid yourself of a noxious friend. Furthermore, if your friendships are consistently less than what you had hoped they would be, a BandAid approach to changing that situation is doomed to long-term failure. You need to look at the underlying causes of the negative friendships in your life; you need to go back to their roots in your parent–child and sibling relationships.

This book offers help and hope in understanding the complexities of friendships, as well as advice on how you can turn around your life – not just your friendships – by understanding why you have negative friendship and by finding and cultivating positive friendships. Having positive friendships – and that may not mean finding new friends, just interacting differently with the ones that you already have – can help turn around your career. For example, not only do friends help friends get jobs, but once you land a job, how quickly you rise at a company or in a career could depend as much on who your friends are at work and in your professional field as on your talents. By the same token, a friend can derail your career or get you fired. That’s what happened with Marjorie (not her real name), a 32-year-old single female working as a teachers’ assistant. Marjorie explains:

My best friend told my boss that she feared for her life after we got into an argument and I wrote her a nasty note, even though we had been friends for six years and she knew I would never hurt her. Because she went to my boss, I was fired after working there for a year and a half. She [my best friend] even went to the police but was told that nothing in the note was threatening. The reason for all of this had to do with the fact that she was highly competitive and felt this was a way of winning.

Unfortunately Marjorie’s experience is more typical than you’d think. A 45-year-old married speechwriter at an Illinois corporation was fired because a single female friend at work, fearing that she herself might be fired after a poor performance review, blamed her unsatisfactory behavior on her boss, the head speechwriter, who was also her friend, alleging that his sexual attraction to her, which she called sexual harassment, made it difficult for her to concentrate. (Her claims were unsubstantiated but her best friend was fired

anyway for failing to properly supervise his friend/employee.) Carol, a 39-year-old married woman, after finally landing her dream job as a florist, was betrayed so badly at work by three casual friends that she “had to take a three-week medical leave.”

Losing a job or having a reputation damaged beyond repair is bad enough, but friendship has been partly to blame for even darker situations. An infamous example is the friendship of the two teenagers who perpetrated the horrific murders of 12 of their classmates and one teacher, and injured 20 more, at Columbine High School in Columbine, Colorado, in April 1999, before committing suicide. Those boys, allegedly bullied and not part of the “in” crowd, seemed to act together, getting the strength to commit mass murder and suicide *from* their friendship. ²

Then in March 2001 it happened again. A 15-year-old boy in Santee, California, again the alleged victim of bullies, supposedly shared with four friends and one adult that he planned to shoot his classmates, but then reassured them that he was only kidding. The next day he *did* carry out his threats when he allegedly shot and killed two classmates. Three families were destroyed, a school was branded, and a community was shocked and grief-stricken. The boy’s friends, believing him when he guaranteed that he was just kidding, were transferred to other schools. The authorities feared retaliation by their classmates for failing to report their friend’s macabre bragging to the proper authorities. ³

But we don’t need tales of murder and mayhem to find value in examining negative friendships and the consequences of betrayal. Over the two decades I have been researching friendship and friendship patterns, I have interviewed people who were betrayed when a “friend” seduced their romantic partner. Others ended a friendship because of a betrayal that, at the very least, stopped a pivotal work project in its tracks. I’ve interviewed men and women who told me that a friend had derailed their career by sharing privileged information that was supposed to be just “between friends.” Others reported that a friend had stolen money from them. Here are other examples of betrayal that I have observed or heard about through interviews in the course of my friendship research:

- “One of my best friends romantically pursued every woman in which I expressed interest.” (24-year-old single male)
- “She told me she was sleeping with my boyfriend and tried to convince me we should ‘share.’” (37-year-old divorced mother)
- “[My close friend at work] went to our mutual boss and described something we were either both working on or that I had taken the initiative to set up and talked about how he had handled it.” (55-year-old, twicedivorced woman)
- “A close female friend is jealous of me being married.” (44-year-old married man)
- “A best friend I grew up with attacked me [physically] for no reason.” (23-year-old married female) □ “A casual friend started a rumour about me at work.” (50-year-old divorced mother)
- “My maid of honour stole money from me on the night of my bachelorette party.” (30-year-old married teacher)
- “I’m not as open as I had been, [I’m] more reserved, because of what happened.” [She was devastated when her best friend referred to her by a derogatory name when they were both 11.] (32-year-old married mother)

Jealousy can hurt someone’s self-esteem and may also end a friendship, as Brenda, a 40-year-old homemaker and musician from Michigan, found out. “I used to weigh two hundred pounds,” she notes. “I now weigh one hundred and twenty-five pounds. My friend was two hundred and fifty pounds. When I lost the first few pounds, she backed as far away as possible.”

Cheating with a romantic partner or spouse may end a friendship. A 31-year-old art instructor let her “really close friend” and co-worker live with her and her husband when her friend couldn’t find an apartment. During that time, the friend “flirted or even had a

relationship” with her husband. The friend also undermined her at work, spreading untrue rumours that she was being physically abusive to her art students. The marriage is on the rocks, and the friendship is over.

But some potentially destructive or harmful friendships may be difficult to spot. That’s because when a friendship is forming, during the “courtship” phase, your friend may be charming, polite, and completely appropriate. Once your friendship is well underway, a friend may change. The very act of becoming friends may send someone with intimacy problems into an emotional tailspin, changing those involved as well as their behavior toward each other. As friends become closer and more intimate, expectations also may rise so that disappointments become more likely, and painful, than during the early stage of the evolving friendship.

Furthermore, as a friendship that formed within a certain context, such as at school or at work expands to include a multiplicity of situation and even other relationships, conflicts may arise that may derail the friendship. In addition, the longer you remain friends, the greater your investment in maintaining the friendship; you are more likely to ignore or try to explain away negative behaviors. But you (or your friend) will be able to put up with only so much, and the friendship may last only until such an act of betrayal occurs that the situation has to be addressed and resolved or the friendship will end.

Friendships can certainly change in the level of intimacy, and expectations can be lowered about a friend, even if the friendship does not end completely, over betrayals, disappointments, or unmet expectations. That’s what a 43-year-old market researcher found out when he gave a friend \$150 to conduct interviews for a project on the researcher’s behalf. Instead his best friend pocketed the money and never made good on his promise to do the work. Although the friendship hasn’t ended, one wonders how close it is if they haven’t seen each other “in many years.”

Betrayal by a friend can even lead to the ultimate betrayal: murder. Twenty-six-year-old Don is married and a father. He is also serving 15 years to life for killing his best friend in an argument over Don’s wife. “He had been dating my wife while I was out of town, and finally she ran away with him,” Don notes.

Although not as drastic as murder, feeling miffed by a friend, even if it is a misunderstanding, can lead to extreme and even criminal acts. That's what seems to have happened to a 38-year-old married nurse whose friend at work "stabbed me in the back by spreading a false rumour about me, which ingratiated her to the head nurse and which caused the head nurse to dislike me." Or the 49-year-old single woman whose jealous and angry friend "stole my jewellery." Because of my extensive friendship research, writings, and expertise, as well as the workshops I facilitate and the lectures I deliver on friendship, I am often asked to appear on talk shows to discuss friendship. Journalists who are writing about the topic frequently interview me, and their many questions about recognising, and coping with, negative friendships helped me to realise there was a need for this book. But I wanted to go even further: I wanted to help people to understand *why* they might select friends who eventually betray them, to reverse that pattern, and to address social trends that could be behind the fact that friendship betrayal seems to be more widespread than ever before.

I also wrote this book to help dispel the embarrassment and shame that too often accompany failed friendships. For some, admitting to a broken friendship has become like admitting to a failed marriage. It seems that, inspired by the very "pro-friendship" tone in writings and discussions about the topic over the last two decades, a myth of lifelong friendship has emerged, even as the ideal of a lifelong marriage has, sadly, become an unrealistic reality for many people.

The romanticised ideal that friendships should not end or fail may create unnecessary distress in those who should end a friendship but hold on, no matter what. They are clinging to the myth rather than understanding the relationship. But if neither all friendships nor all marriages last a lifetime, what's left to believe in that does? The goal of *When Friendship Hurts* is to give you the tools to detect, and cope with, friendships that are destructive or harmful. I hope that reading it will give you greater insight into why friendships, especially your own or those of people close to you, may have ended or should have ended, and how to cope with these endings. Furthermore, if you have a habit of forming negative friendships, this book will help you to start choosing positive and healthy friends

who will enrich your personal life and help you succeed faster and go further in your career.

There may even be current or past friendships in which, unwittingly or on purpose, you betrayed a friend. Understanding the impact of betrayal on the one who betrays, as well as on the one who is betrayed, can free up important emotional energy that otherwise may be drained by feelings of guilt, remorse, sadness, or associated emotions related to the betrayal. You can learn to forgive yourself, if you betrayed a friend; or if you were the betrayed one, you might consider how forgiving your betrayer might help you.

Most of us are blessed with supportive, caring, trustworthy friends. There are plenty of books available today that describe the process of forming and maintaining positive friendships, as well as extolling the benefits of friendship, including my own popular book, which takes an interdisciplinary approach that draws from sociology and psychology, *Friendshifts®: The Power of Friendship and How It Shapes Our Lives*.

But where can you turn for help if you feel a friend has betrayed you? Betrayal is when a friend, whom you counted on for support, love, affection, trust, loyalty, camaraderie, or respect, has somehow destroyed your trust. She may have violated a confidence or told a lie about you, harmed your other personal relationships, or even cost you your job. He may have failed to come through for you in your hour of emotional need, taken your money, stolen the affections of your romantic partner or your spouse, or, in the worst-case scenario, physically harmed you or even caused someone's death. Were these "friends" ever really friends? How could a "friend" commit such treacherous acts? Did this friendship start out as a destructive or harmful one, or become that way over time? Where did it take a wrong turn, and what do you do to end it, if ending is the best way of coping? If it started out that way, how can you learn to be a better judge of character early on so that you avoid befriending those who end up harming or betraying you?

In addition to answering those questions, another goal of this book is to help you to start asking your own questions about these issues, and finding your own answers. Some of you may be able to make this journey completely on your own; others may wish to get help

along the way. If you do wish to seek outside help, in addition to asking others for referrals to professionals for one-on-one counseling or to self-help or professionally led groups, you can consult the Resources section in the back of this book which provides a list of associations that offer referrals to local organisations or affiliated professionals.

Betrayal in friendship is a subject few people want to talk about openly, but one to which all of us can relate. But by offering anonymity and confidentiality, if necessary, I found men and women, boys and girls, who not only wanted to talk about betrayal but actually *needed* to talk about it as a necessary catharsis. In my most recent friendship survey, of the 171 people (out of 180) who responded to the question “Has a casual, close, or best friend ever betrayed you?” 116 (68 percent) answered “yes” and only 55 (32 percent) replied “no.”

Betrayal can be defined as when a friend lets you down and is not there for you emotionally, or even literally: when a friend ends your friendship but you still want it to continue (and you sometimes may never find out why it ended). That is what happened to a young married woman from Colorado who wrote to me soon after watching an interview with me about friendship on a network morning talk show. I was discussing how friendships sometimes end, and that it’s okay and normal for some friendships to end, especially if it’s through no fault of your own. She was so moved that she sent me a “Thank you” card, saying how much the point of view I had shared on the show had meant to her. She had been haunted by a friendship that ended although she never knew why. It actually kept her up at night.

If a friend ends a friendship and you are obsessed with not knowing why, you will probably have to deal with the reason for your obsession. In other words, you may never know the answer. (There is a discussion later in the book about how to get over obsessing about a failed friendship.)

But if it is you who decides to end a friendship, even a negative one, you should be careful to avoid possible vendettas. Remember that *how* you end a friendship may be as important as your decision to end it. That person who used to be your friend may at some point be

in the position of deciding whether you get a raise, a major contract for your company, or a promotion at work.

Certainly, over the years, I have experienced the ending of several friendships that were extremely close. If I was the one to end it, I wondered if there was another way of handling the situation. If I was not, I felt confused, angry, and betrayed. So I have wanted to find answers to my own questions about betrayal in friendship, as well as evaluating the preferred way to deal with negative friendships that should end, if there is one.

I researched and wrote this book to answer my own questions as well as the ones that I am so frequently asked, through letters, email, and even in the question-and-answer sessions following the talks I give on friendship: Why do friends do hurtful things to their friends? Why do friends betray each other? Why would someone get into a negative friendship? How do you get out of a destructive friendship? How do you find and cultivate positive friendships in your personal life and career?

How I attained my own metamorphosis to becoming a better friend, as well as all the original research and observations I have done over the last two decades, form the basis of this book. Just as my life – including my career, and all the relationships in my life, including friendship – has been enriched by what I have learned along the way about friendship, I hope to help you to reap the joys that healthy friendships will bring you. As you will see in reading *When Friendship Hurts*, sometimes the changes must start within us before we can expect anyone else, or our friendships, to change.

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