

Maintaining Messy Relationships

By: Laura Zeisel

There's no question about it: Relationships are messy. Marriage is messy and parenting is messy—but I think friendships are especially messy. With friendships there is little structure, unspoken expectations and minimum commitment. That's a hotbed for drama. But friendship can also be a breeding ground for truth and grace.

It's time to have an honest conversation about when to fight for a friendship and when to let some distance enter in. Undoubtedly, you've faced circumstances—betrayal, distance, differences of belief—that made you question the value of a bond and how much you should work to protect it. The answers aren't the same for everyone, and are rarely clear, but here are a few thoughts to keep in mind as you maintain the relationships in your life.

Respect and give weight to your friends with sacred history.

In Sacred Marriage, Gary Thomas discusses respecting the "sacred history" you have with your spouse. Likewise, friends can have sacred histories, too. Not all friendships do, but if a friend walked with you through an especially joyful, sorrowful or memorable time of life, you probably have some sacred history with that friend.

I talked to my childhood best friend, Lauren, for an hour the other day. Very few people, usually only siblings, understand what it was like for you to grow up where you did, when you did, with the family you did. But Lauren knows these things about me, and I about her, so our sacred history keeps us bonded as friends. She has probably been in every circle of intimacy possible at some point during my life, and that is OK. Despite our transitions in friendship, we share a commitment to one another because of this sacred history.

Committing to a friend despite frustration or geographical distance is character-building.

God-honoring friendships don't come naturally to most of us—not like sin does. Just like in marriage and parenting, intimacy in friendship is built upon commitment. You don't have to vow to your friend that you'll be available to her forever, but you can speak commitment through your actions: show up at his party; answer her call when you want to screen it; give him permission to speak into your life. In friendship, it's often easy to cut bait and find new seas to fish in. It takes patience, persistence and selflessness to keep some friendships healthy.

If most of your friendships are falling apart or rife with tension, perhaps it's time to look in the mirror. As someone who can come off as cold, especially if I feel pressured in a relationship, I have to continually learn to be a better friend by thinking about what I am nonverbally communicating. Friendships are often God's tool for conviction, but many of us distance ourselves from the reality checks that true friendships bring. If a friendship has suddenly become more difficult, I challenge you to press deeper into the friendship, at least for a season.

Decreasing intimacy in a friendship can be indicative of a shaky foundation.

Sometimes obstacles to intimacy reveal that a relationship was a friendship of convenience, not of communion. True friendships are built on shared values and visions: faith, an idea for your community or a cause, deep convictions about politics or a certain lifestyle, etc. A once-close friendship of convenience might evolve into a more distant friendship at a speed bump, and that might be OK if the friendship is built on little else. For instance, if you move to a new city or start a new job or have a baby around the same time as someone else, you are likely to bond quickly with someone in the same boat. But as time passes, you might realize the friendship was fairly one-dimensional. In those situations, perhaps it's OK to let distance enter in.

However, if one person in the friendship is distressed by a change in the friendship, things might not be so clear. Perhaps God brought that person into your life intentionally, not just to provide you with comfort. Giving sacrificially of your love, support and time despite a lack of shared values might be what God is calling you to do.

Resist distance rooted in self-protection or insecurity.

Fight the urge to pull away. One of my current best friends is about 10 weeks pregnant. She has been my main confidant during my own efforts to have a child this year, including my welcome pregnancy and unwelcome miscarriage. Because I am now not pregnant and walking with her through her own pregnancy, I sometimes feel the urge to pull away simply because it can be hard to be around other pregnant women. But I know the urge to pull away is merely an attempt to protect myself from pain; a move that might seem respectable but is fundamentally selfish. Our friendship is not about my comfort or happiness, so I fight through those urges to distance myself.

I have found that distance in a friendship can grow because of any of a number of fulfilled or unfulfilled dreams being lived out by one person in the friendship. When a friendship crosses natural boundaries created by money, love, popularity or hardship, we are quietly living out the peace Jesus bled and died for us to have.

Every friend helps—or hinders—your efforts to love the Lord and love your neighbor.

It's tough to admit, but some of your friends are probably not good for you. This doesn't mean you should cut these people out of your life altogether, but it does mean you need to take a fresh look at the purpose of the friendship. Often when a friendship isn't good for you, the friendship isn't good for anyone. If this situation is occurring, seek help as friends from an outside source (pastor or therapist). If time, prayer and counsel cannot help, it may be time to dissolve the friendship.

For desirable friendships that are hard to maintain, create some sort of structure or regular commitment.

Many of us will always be close with high school buddies or college roommates because we saw them hundreds of days a year. When you do not have an inherent structure to a friendship, sometimes you just have to create one. Talk as

friends about the things you would love to do side-by-side. Even if you are busy, you might be surprised at what you can do with someone: grocery shop, get your hair cut, go for weekly walks, pray on Skype, vacation together. Building in a little structure might be exactly what is needed to keep a friendship strong.