Making friends when I have low self-esteem

Dear Alice,

Your advice to "Surround yourself with positive, healthy people" is good. But this is part of my insecurities. It seems that everyone will want to surround themselves with positive, healthy people; but if I'm not healthy mentally, why should people want to be around me? I fear I'm excluded because, even when I try to hide my insecurities, they still show and people don't want to be around a "downer." Any advice on this aspect?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Sounds like a Catch-22: how are you supposed to build your self-esteem through social support when other people don't exactly want to befriend someone with low self-esteem? Many people face this dilemma, and some experience more difficulty in the realm of building social support than others. Quality friendships are good for self-esteem and it's also true that some level of positive self-esteem is necessary to establish friendships. Being 100 percent healthy is not required for making friends, though. Do you feel you have enough self-confidence to be able to give, as well as receive, in a friendship? You say you fear people won't want to be around a downer. Do you see yourself as a downer? If so, it may be worth exploring what's behind the feelings of your "downerness." While people aren't encouraged to hide their real selves from friends, sometimes striving to be our best selves in order to be supportive to friends may be good for the friend and for your own feelings of self-worth.

Some tips you may try for maintaining a healthy giving/receiving balance in friendships include:

- Make a short list of people in your life (friends and/or family) who are positive. Include on that list people you'd like to stay in touch with on a regular basis (parents, a childhood friend, a current acquaintance you think may have good friend potential).
- Make at least one intentional connection per day. Call, email, write, text, or get together with at least one of these people per day, but be realistic. If you're too busy to connect with one person per day, try for one person every other day.
- Ask questions and listen well to the answers. Check in on your friend's day. Show them that their emotions, thoughts, opinions, and experiences matter to you.
- Feel free to also state what you need in seeking support from friends, but try to keep it constructive. Constant negativity may be draining, so it may be helpful if you're seeking out ways to improve the things that are bothering you.
• As you begin to step up your communication, don't overwhelm friends with too many calls or emails. Your daily communication to one person may be a few sentences in an email or a brief five minute phone call. If someone voices a boundary, respect it.
• Increase your awareness about how others experience you. Ask a friend, co-worker, or family member whose opinion you value how you come across to others. Seek out information about your strengths as well as areas for improvement.
• Avoid competition with friends. Don't turn a friendship into an unspoken battle over who has the best relationship, the most money, the best grades, etc.

If you're struggling with places or ways to meet people, consider volunteering. How about joining a cause or an organization that matters to you? Perhaps initiating hang out time with co-workers or fellow students whose company you enjoy, or spending time in public reading or studying (porch, coffee shop, parks)? You could also connect with others over hobbies you enjoy. What about a painting, dancing, pottery, or cooking class?

You mentioned trying to hide insecurities, but they show anyway. Is it possible that your focus on hiding may be interfering with your ability to connect with others in a real way? Many people who form authentic and meaningful connections with others possess a quality of curiosity and appreciation for other people's gifts and for their "quirks." Few people are entirely free of insecurities, but when a person has awareness of their own insecurities (what they are, where they come from, how they feel), they may actually become a means of connection. Your feelings of insecurity, for example, may allow you to empathize with others who share an experience of struggling with self-esteem, as many people do.

Insecurities may have roots in past experiences of rejection, for example, or experiences of stereotyping, discrimination, or bullying. Messages received by loved ones that we were deficient or lacking in some way may also reinforce insecurities. They may not be easy to overcome, but consciously working on it while leaving room to be present for another will go a long way to improving the quantity and quality of your relationships.

You may want to consider talking with a therapist or counselor. Therapy may serve as space to air concerns and also a place to "rehearse" for life. While a therapist-client relationship is not a friendship, it's a form of intimate human relationship that may help you learn to build other close relationships. It may only take one or two conversations with a counselor to help you find a comfortable plan of action.

The situation at hand may seem like a Catch-22, but ongoing efforts spent investing in your social relationships and networks may let your real self truly shine!

Alice!
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