The friendship factor
by DeWitt S. Williams

Stress is the definer of modern life. With or without reason, real or imagined, everyone--from children to elderly persons--seems to feel the impact of stress. How can one live a stress-free life? Is there a single factor that can lessen stress and increase the joy in living?

Not long ago, Andrews University Academy conducted a study involving 179 students. One question was put to them: "If you were stranded on a desert island, what would you wish for?" The students were to choose only one from several possible answers given. One percent of the respondents wished for clothes and accessories. Four percent wanted some sports or music equipment to keep them company. Eighteen percent wanted food. Sixteen percent wanted a Bible. Two percent wanted radio and TV—to keep in touch with the outside world. Three percent chose the opportunity of being with another person whom they had never met before. But—this is important—an overwhelming fifty-four percent wanted a friend—somebody they knew, somebody who had flesh and blood, somebody they could talk to and share their experiences. Is friendship so crucial in life, in overcoming loneliness, in leading a normal life? Skip MacCarty, associate pastor at Pioneer Memorial Church at Andrews University, has developed a course called, "Stress: Beyond Coping." One part of the course is entitled, "The Amigo Factor." It shows the power of relationships to deal with stress and to keep us well.

A national stress survey conducted by Prevention magazine, involving 11,000 respondents, showed that the element of modern life said to cause the most stress, was "disagreements and conflicts with loved ones" (58 percent). Money problems came second (55 percent), and the pace of modern life a distant third. Close and loyal friendships and relationships are the most important components of a happy, healthy, fulfilled life.

Another study, reported in the American Journal of Psychiatry, showed that men going through a separation or divorce have increased risk of outpatient or inpatient psychiatric care by 1000 percent. For women it was 500 percent. Loneliness and estranged relationships seem to affect men more than women. Single, separated, and divorced men as well as widowers don't live as long as married men. It seems that women can do better without men than men can do without women! Women, when they get together, talk more intimately. Men talk about sports, cars, politics, and other things. Elderly men with two or more close friends or relatives had half the death rate following a heart attack than those who had no friends.

A study of medical records of 1,337 students at Johns Hopkins University reported that the psychological factors that most strongly correlated with illnesses were: (1) lack of closeness to parents, and (2) negative attitudes towards one's family. These findings and others led James Lynch of the University of Maryland Medical School to write: "In a surprising number of cases of premature coronary heart disease and premature death, interpersonal unhappiness, the lack of love, and human loneliness seem to appear as root causes of physical problems."

Barbara Powell, a clinical psychologist, adds: "In my own profession, as a clinical psychologist, whatever a patient's initial complaint--insomnia, phobia, depression, generalized anxiety, or a lack of life direction--the discussion usually gets around to a stressful relationship or the stress of not having a relationship."

Loving relationships

An announcement in a church bulletin read, "Irving Benson and Jessie Carter were married on October 24 in the church. So ends a friendship that began in school days." Sounds whimsical? Not, when you realize that today, in the United States, 50 percent of marriages end up in divorce: People who have been friendly before, somehow loose the bonds of that friendship, and their marriage breaks up.

Loving relationships and loyal friendships help provide needed social support in times of severe stress, and promote happiness, better health, and longevity. A research team, headed by Dorbert Nerum, at the University of Houston, set out to see if diet alone would raise the cholesterol level and produce a heart attack. They developed a high cholesterol diet and fed it to their test rabbits. Sure enough, the diet worked. The rabbits started getting high cholesterol and heart disease. As they re-examined the data they noticed that there was one group of rabbits that didn't seem to develop high cholesterol and heart disease. They were all being fed the same diet, so they went back to the data. After further study, the baffled team discovered that the lab assistant who fed the rabbits often brought his little daughter with him. The little girl, not knowing that she was interfering with a controlled experiment, would feed the rabbits and then open the cage and take the rabbits out and pet them. The rabbits that were regularly petted, held, talk to, and played with, had reduced cardiovascular disease by 60 percent.

The difference in the results was so significant that they did the experiment over again. This time, as a part of the intentional design of the experiment, a group of rabbits was petted and played with for 5 to 10 minutes each time they were fed. The results came back the same as in the previous experiment. The researchers found it hard to believe that merely touching and petting could make such a difference in the cardiovascular health of these rabbits so they did the experiment again for the third time. They got the same results: there was a 60 percent reduction in cardiovascular disease just by petting the rabbits!

There must be some truth in what someone has said: You need at least four hugs a day for survival, eight hugs for maintenance, and twelve hugs for growth. Have you had your hug today?

A hug can make a difference

A friend sent me pictures of twin babies that were born prematurely. The nurses looked at these tiny babies and didn't think they were going to survive. The larger one might have a slim chance, but the smaller one didn't have much of a chance. So on the night that they thought the smaller baby would die, one of the nurses put her in the incubator with her sister. Almost as soon as the larger twin felt her sister next to her, she reached out and put her arm around her. Lying in bed, she cuddled up to her all night and that arm was wrapped tightly around her. Tubes were in their arms and noses, but they were close to each other. And that's all that mattered. The nurses said that from that moment on the little baby thrived. When they came in the next day, they were surprised to see how alert and responsive the little girl had become. From then on, she grew and gained weight. They both lived and thrived. A big hug and intimate closeness made the difference.

Dr. Lester Breslow, dean of the school of Public Health at the University of California, Los Angeles, studied 7,000 people over a nine-year period. At the beginning of the study, he asked them how many close friends they had. At the end of the nine years, he found out how many of
the people had died and compared that to the number of close friends they had. In all age groups those who had the least connections had about three times as many deaths as those who had the most friendly connections.

**Five levels of relationships**

Relationships exist at five levels. At the bottom of the ladder is the stranger level. These are people we meet everyday, nod at, but we really don't know. The next level up is the acquaintance level: people we may speak to and exchange the time of day or discuss the weather. Then, there is the casual level. We have fewer of these people who may be in the same building with us at work or in the same class with us. We may from time to time exchange some opinions or an idea while waiting at the elevator. On the next level is a smaller, but closer group of 10-15 people to whom we might reveal some of our feelings and emotions. At the highest level are the few intimate friends that know us very well. These are the loyal friends that will stick with us through thick and thin. This level of relationship is characterized by complete openness, a sense of acceptance and affirmation, and mutual loyalty.

**The Jesus way**

What research is finding as a cure for stress and as a way of joyful living, the Bible has revealed to us long ago. It is the Jesus way. Jesus had a large circle of acquaintances. First there were 12. Then there were 70. Then, wherever He went, there was always a crowd. Each one felt that being close to Jesus, being close to each other, was a source of blessing. Peter, James, John, Lazarus, Mary and Martha, and many more. The Jesus way affected each one, and as they learned and practiced the art of friendship and togetherness, they grew in happiness, and in the success of what they did. Four days after their brother's death, Mary and Martha found freedom from stress in the very fact that Jesus finally arrived in Bethany.

Why was Peter so successful at Pentecost? The man who was so frightened and stressed out that he denied his Lord was able to turn around and make such a powerful witness. Peter was successful because of the Holy Spirit, yes, but before the Spirit fell upon him, he was with his friends in the upper room. The bond that bound them together gave them the courage to face every stress in their later life. In addition, Jesus had personally granted Peter forgiveness and the assurance of His friendship.

Studies show that it's not how many people we are acquainted with that makes a difference. Health benefits come from how intimate and how genuine our relationship is. You'll find a difference in your living if you can count on four or five really good friends with whom you can share your feeling, and from whom you can get the hugs you need. If you have even one close friend, consider yourself wealthy--rich in the amigo factor.

Treasure and cultivate unselfish and close friendships wherever and whenever you can. If you move to a new place, do make new friends, but don't forget the old ones. Give them a call or write a letter, and they will appreciate it and reciprocate. Friends bring us great joy and happiness, and also lower our stress. As William Temple once said, "The greatest medicine is a true friend."

But the truest and greatest friend one can have is the One who said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me; " "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (John 14:1; Matthew 11:28, NIV). Whatever your age, your occupation, your gender, and your problem--you can be joyful and stress free, if Jesus remains your friend. No one who has Jesus for a friend will have to be weary or burdened.