

**HOW TO  
FIND  
A  
FRIEND  
WORTH  
KEEPING**

**ALISON COOK, Ph.D.**

# How to Find A Friend Worth Keeping

by Alison Cook, Ph.D.

If you are reading this, you are likely struggling in your friendships. You might be feeling misunderstood, left out, invisible, or hurt. Maybe you are someone who makes friends easily, but you often feel lonely no matter how many people are around. Or, you might be someone who has been harmed by others; and as a result you keep people at a distance. Parts of you long for the kinds of friendships you hear other people talking about. But, you can't figure out how to get them. You wonder if there is something wrong with you.

As a therapist for nearly 20 years, I can tell you that the problem of making and keeping good friends is common for many women. I have spent hundreds of hours coaching women on how to leave the friendships that don't nourish them in order to find ones that do. I have helped women like you:

- Identify key friendship red flags
- Create healthy boundaries in existing friendships
- Leave toxic friendships
- Forge healthy relationships with new friends

These tools simply aren't taught to most women. You weren't taught how to develop friendships in school, and you aren't taught it at church. You weren't taught how to test your friendships before diving into them. In fact, you might have been taught that testing a friendship was wrong!

The truth is that when it comes to establishing healthy relationships with other people, most of what women are taught is flawed. For example, you were likely taught how to:

- Be nice.
- Get along with others.
- Be polite.
- Never rock the boat.

However, being nice, having good manners, and working to make the waters smooth for other people is not how you make good friends. It's how you become a wonderful houseguest.

I want more for you.

I want you to learn how to move far away from toxic people and pull in healthy ones. I want you to have friends who share in your heartaches and celebrate your successes. I want you to have friends who know you inside and out.

And in order to have friends like that—even just one friend like that—you're going to need to know a lot more about relationships than how to be polite.

Take my client, Mei, for example.

"I have a lot of friends," Mei said off-handedly during our first session. "But, I don't like very many of them."

Mei had come to see me because she was struggling with feelings of depression and loneliness. She couldn't figure out why. Her husband wasn't perfect, but he was good to her and their 3 children. By all external measures, she felt like she should be content.

Curious about her comment about not liking her friends, I asked her to tell me more.

Mei paused for a moment, and then opened up: "I mean, honestly, most of my friends drive me crazy. They are always talking about their problems. They never ask about me. If I do mention something that I'm worried about, they brush it off and tell me how lucky I am. I don't really like to go to the big parties they are always hosting. I'm not on social media, and it seems like that's where they do most of their interacting."

"I've heard you say a couple of things, Mei," I reflected. "First, your friends look to you for support frequently, but are not able to provide you with support. Is that right?"

"Yes, I guess so," Mei nodded.

"Second, your friends enjoy big parties and social media, and you do not enjoy those activities. Am I hearing you correctly?" I asked.

"Yes," Mei said. "I mean, I try to fit in. But honestly, I just find the conversations either shallow or gossipy. I feel bad, but if I say I'm busy they get mad or hurt. So I just do what they want."

"So, that's a third thing you've mentioned: when you state a limit or a preference, they get mad or hurt by that. Is that right?"

“Yes, that is exactly what happens,” Mei said thoughtfully. “I hadn’t really thought about it until now. I just thought I was the problem.”

“Mei, I can tell you what’s happening here,” I said: “These aren’t really friends.”

Mei had grown up the only child of a single mother. She worked hard at school and at her part-time job. She was well-liked by others, but she never really got close to anyone. Aware of mean cliques that some of the girls at her high school engaged in, Mei operated under the mantra, “Stay invisible. That’s the best way to fit in.” She didn’t want to make any waves, and she certainly didn’t want to attract unwanted attention to herself. So, she learned to do whatever it took to stay under the radar.

Mei had assumed knowing a lot of women was the same thing as having friends. I assured her that it wasn’t. Over the next few weeks, Mei and I began to unpack what friendship is and isn’t.

Here are some of the things Mei discovered that were contributing to her feelings of loneliness and depression:

- I don’t know who to trust, so I don’t let anyone in.
- I’m afraid to express my struggle. People will think I’m weak or needy.
- I long for the kind of friend who will ask me how I’m really doing and show genuine care. That friend hasn’t shown up yet.

In many ways, Mei was relying on “luck.” And, luck is not a good strategy when it comes to forging healthy relationships.

I created this resource you are reading to take the “luck” factor out of friendship. Mei’s experience is incredibly common for women, and I want to empower you with the same tools I used to help her transform her friendships.

You will learn how to:

- Identify unhealthy friendships
- Discover new healthy friendships
- Test new friendships, before you dive into them

Here’s the main point I want you to know: Developing healthy friendships is a skill any woman can learn.

You don't have to stumble your way through a maze of relationships hoping to get lucky. You don't have to wait for years hoping that a great friend will fall into your lap. You can learn to seek out and cultivate safe, supportive friendships.

You can also say "No" to unhealthy friendships that you don't want. Let's get started by discussing the types of friendships to avoid.

## How to Identify Unhealthy Friendships

If you want to develop healthy friendships, the first thing you have to do is to identify the unhealthy ones. It's hard to forge healthy friendships if your time and energy is spent on dead-end relationships.

Remember Mei's experience? She spent time with several women, they just didn't happen to be friends. However, instead of paying attention to what she felt about these relationships, she told herself the following lies:

- You're terrible for feeling that way.
- You must be the problem.
- You're just not lucky in the friend department.

I want to teach you to do the opposite, just like I taught Mei. If you don't like something about someone or about a relationship, don't shove that feeling aside. Instead, get curious about it and measure it against the following red flags.

### 7 Red Flags of an Unhealthy Friendship:

#### 1. Your friendship is based on guilt.

- Do you stay connected to this person because you feel guilty if you don't?
- Are you afraid to say "No" to this friend because you worry that she won't be OK without you? For example, do you consistently overlook boundary violations because you feel sorry for her circumstances? It is important to help others who are in need. Please be generous in your service, work, or ministry. But, let me be clear: a relationship based only on charity is not friendship.

#### 2. Your friendship is based on fear.

- Do you fear that if you were to say "No" she would get angry with you? For example, do you avoid being honest with her about areas where you disagree?

- Do you fear the power this person has in your life or in shared communities? For example, do you fear that she might talk poorly about you with other people if you don't tell her what she wants to hear?

### 3. Your friendship is inconsistent.

- Does the friendship bounce between "hot" and "cold"? For example, is she texting you frequently when she has a problem, but disappears when she no longer needs you?
- Was she super available and gushed over you at first, but now seems to have withdrawn? Don't chase her. This is her problem; not yours.

### 4. Your friendship is all about the other person.

- Does she only talk about herself? For example, does she get distracted or change the subject if you bring something up that is important to you?
- Do you always do things on your friend's terms? Are her preferences, activities, and needs always more important than yours?

### 5. Your friendship is based on talking about other people.

- Does this person gossip about other people you both know in common? If so, you can bet she is also talking about you.
- Do your conversations center around a "common enemy"? In other words, are you friends as a result of a mutual dislike for another person, group, or family member? Bonds are often formed when two people are suffering similarly, and that's OK initially. But, if it doesn't move beyond the common enemy, that's a red flag.

### 6. Your friend is possessive of you.

- Is your friend jealous of personal time that you give to someone else?
- Does she attempt to control your time and monopolize your relationships? For example, do you find yourself concealing time that you spend with others from this friend because you don't want to anger or hurt her? It's OK to be sensitive to the feelings of another, but possessiveness is a red flag to watch for.

### 7. Your friend is abusive.

- Is your friend cruel to you? Does she enjoy making you feel small?
- Do you worry that anything you share will be minimized, shamed, or twisted and used against you? Many women who grew up in abusive home find themselves in

abusive friendships. Toxic love is the only love you've known. If you notice this pattern in your friendships, please know there is so much more for you.

If you have a friendship characterized by any of these qualities, then please take a closer look. It doesn't necessarily mean that you have to end the friendship immediately, but it's important to get clear about the unhealthy patterns that you see.

For instance, if you're in a friendship that is demonstrating any of these red flags, you need to ask yourself why you are staying in it. Are you able to address the issues directly? If not, what keeps you from setting boundaries with a friend like this person?

Here are two key questions to ask yourself:

- **What fears come up if I consider stepping away from this friendship?**
- **Can I reduce my expectations in certain areas and still enjoy her good qualities?**

Remember: the goal is not to seek out someone perfect. Instead, the goal is to free up time you could be investing in better ways. I will say it again: It's hard to forge healthy friendships if your time and energy is spent trying to mitigate the damage from unhealthy relationships.

In fact, the more you say "Yes" to healthy friendships, the easier it will be for you to say "No" to these red flags. The more health you taste, the more your tolerance for toxicity diminishes.

How do you say "Yes" to healthy friendships? It starts by understanding what to look for. You might want to think about some of your friends, and see if they meet the following criteria.

## **7 Signs of a Healthy Friendship**

### **1. You respect this person.**

- Do you respect this woman and how she lives her life? Respect is not the only ingredient of a healthy friendship. But, it is an essential one.
- Are there things about her character that bring out the best in yours? Respect has to do with a quality in that person that inspires you to become a better version of yourself.

### **2. You believe they have your best interests at heart.**

- Does this person encourage you to be who you are, even when it is different from them? Someone has your best interests at heart when they can see you as a distinct

person from themselves. They want you to thrive in every way, even if it means you expand your circles beyond them.

- Does this person show that they want what is best for you, even if that means telling you what may be difficult for you to hear? This does not mean that they criticize you about things that bother them. This means they care enough about your well-being to tell you when there is harm in your way.

### 3. They are generally reliable.

- Do you have a sense of how she will respond to you, even if she gets busy? No one is perfectly consistent. But, a true friend shows predictable patterns of behavior over time.
- Would you call this person if you were in a crisis?

### 4. Your friendship is a two-way street.

- Do you take turns sharing about various aspects of your lives?
- Does she know about your interests or struggles, just as you know about hers?
- Does this person reach out to you? Or, are you the only one initiating?

### 5. You enjoy spending time with this person.

- Do you have shared interests, such as work, parenting, or hobbies that don't center on gossip about other people or constant complaining?
- Are you able to laugh together and give each other grace? Or, are they critical and demanding?

### 6. This friendship creates safe spaces for you to share your struggles.

- Can you share about your struggles without fearing judgment or shame? Not every friend will earn your deepest confidence, but a true friend should nurture a sense of safety in you.
- Does this person keep private what you confide in her? Do you trust her to take in what you share and hold it with respect?

### 7. This friendship creates safe spaces for you to share your successes.

- Is your friend happy for you when you discover other friends and relationships?
- Can she celebrate with you when you score a big "win"? That's not to say jealousy doesn't creep in to even the healthiest of friendships. But, when it does, can this person manage her envy in a healthy way?

Take a look through this list and think about your friends. Not every friendship has to meet every single one of these criteria to the same degree. For example, a friend you

deeply respect may not be the one you turn to for a great time when you need to laugh. But, a true friend will hit every one of these qualities on some level.

## How to Build New Healthy Friendships

After reviewing these two lists, you might realize that you do not have many healthy friendships. That's okay. Don't panic.

First, I want to commend you on the courage it takes to recognize and move away from unhealthy relationships.

Facing the truth about your friendships can be scary at first. And, it may well lead you into a period of adjustment and uncertainty. You have left behind one kind of friendship and don't yet know what your new friendships will look like. Transition can feel lonely and uncertain, but that doesn't mean it's a bad place to be. Instead, this transitional season is an opportunity to learn more about what you need.

It's an opportunity to get wise about who you bring into your life going forward.

You've learned how to say "No" when you see the red flags, but that's only the first part. Now, it's time to learn how to say "Yes" to healthy friendships. And, as my mom used to say to me when I was struggling to make friends, "It only takes ONE to get started."

Finding and investing in a good friend is a bit like dating. It can feel lonely and vulnerable while you are in the process of searching. You might get to know a lot of people before you find those one or two ladies with whom you connect and who show themselves loyal over time. But, if you commit to the process with care and intention, you will find new friendships that satisfy your needs and desires.

Remember, hoping to get lucky is not a strategy. So, start by taking an inventory of some key areas of your life. The more you lean in to the types of things you value and enjoy, the more you increase your chances of finding people who share those things in common. Here are some ways to start:

### 1. Shared activities

Think about the things you enjoy most: it could be a hobby, such as crafting; or a physical activity, such as jogging. Maybe you enjoy seeing the latest movies or talking about social issues. What are some ways you can pursue those interests in community? You might join a local book club, drawing class or running group. It takes courage to

put yourself out there, especially on your own. But, by pursuing the activities you love, you just might find a kindred spirit.

## 2. Shared faith

If your faith is important to you, consider a woman whose faith you admire. You might ask that woman to meet with you regularly to pray or read the Bible together. When I first moved to a new city, I met a woman at a retreat whose faith I was drawn to. She was a busy mom who worked in full-time ministry. So, when I raised the possibility of spending time together, she was candid about her limitations: “I want to be honest, that I don’t have much time for friendship. But, I would love to pray with you on a regular basis.” I respected her honesty and said “Yes” to bi-weekly prayer meetings. That friend and I have prayed together twice a month for 7 years. We’ve almost never gone out socially. Yet, we know each other inside and out. Being clear about what you need and about your limitations creates a healthy foundation for developing a new friendship.

## 3. Shared family dynamics

Whether you’re divorced, single, or married, look for support groups that cater to your unique set of circumstances.<sup>1</sup> Then, when you attend the group, prayerfully observe other participants. Get curious; don’t rush in. Notice the kind of women who stand out to you, ones who say things that resonate. Consider asking someone to coffee to get to know them a little bit. If it goes well, try it again.

## 4. Shared vocation

Notice work colleagues whom you admire, or other moms who volunteer at school. Maybe you respect the way they lead or appreciate their work ethic. Don’t underestimate the value of such friendships, even if they don’t move outside of the work you do together. You might ask this person to meet for lunch. Maybe she reciprocates. If things go well, add some structure to it. For example, you might suggest that you meet together regularly to encourage each other in your work goals or service activities.

**As you get to know potential friends, remember that trust is built over time.** Proceed cautiously and keep in mind the 7 Red Flags. As trust develops, consider the idea that structure is your friend. As much as possible, get into regular rhythms with tried and true friends to ensure you’re staying in touch. For example, you might set up a monthly walk with a woman who does not have much time. Or, you might set up a quarterly Zoom meeting with friends who live far away.

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<sup>1</sup> For a list of various support groups, check out the Resources page of my website at [www.alisoncookphd.com/resources](http://www.alisoncookphd.com/resources)

No one friend will ever meet ALL your needs. You might find a friend with whom you love walking and another friend with whom you love praying. The important thing is that in each of these friendships, conversation is reciprocal and centered on encouraging each other to grow toward health and wholeness together.

Finally, if you're in a transition and feel lonely, avoid trying to please the "in-crowd" just to get invited to the "popular" parties. Please hear me say: It's better to take steps toward developing one or two meaningful, mutually nourishing relationships. You will be surprised how life-changing just one good friend can be, and how one healthy relationship can lead to more.

## When to Test a New Friendship

In this final section, I want to address an important topic that many women don't realize. You might never have learned the value of testing a relationship before diving in too soon. Instead, you were probably taught at a young age to be trusting and open-hearted. In contrast, men are taught that trust must be earned.

Before you give away your heart, it's crucial to test a friendship during the early stages. Think about it: women tend to be honored for being kind to others, for showing grace. Men are honored for having good boundaries, for being cautious. The problem is that both men and women get a raw deal in this dichotomy.

Ladies, please take this message to heart: **Your trust must be earned.**

You can be kind **and** maintain healthy boundaries.

You can be gracious **and** cautious.

The way to do this is through testing a friendship before giving your trust away. Testing a friendship is an art you can learn. It's not about putting the other person on trial. It's about proving to yourself that you won't put up with less than you deserve.

This idea of "testing" may go against everything you were taught. But, it's actually biblical. For instance, Jesus told a number of parables related to the idea of testing. In one particular teaching he cautioned, "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces." (Matthew 7:6). And, the main theme of the book of Proverbs is to learn wisdom vs. foolishness: "Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm." (Proverbs 13:20).

It's wise to be cautious when picking your friends. When faced with a possible new friendship, ask yourself:

- Is this friendship worth your precious time, energy, and emotional bandwidth?
- Is this a person who is going to help you become more of the beautiful woman God made?

This can feel uncomfortable at first, so please allow me to be clear: You can be kind to a lot of people. You do not have to give lot of people the privilege of your friendship.

People tend to put their best foot forward at first. So, take it slow. It's important to give yourself time before you bare your soul. Here are some ways to test a friendship:

### 1. Say "No" early on

I'm not suggesting that you act like a jerk or put up walls as a way of playing games. Instead, look for genuine opportunities when it makes sense to disagree or say "No, thanks, I can't make it." Remind yourself of the Red Flags, especially numbers 1, 2, 4, and 6, that I discussed earlier.

This is your opportunity to ensure that you're not engaging in a friendship out of guilt or fear, and that it's not going to be all about them. After you say "No, thank you" or politely disagree, notice the following:

- Does she respect your "No"?
- Does she encourage you to share honestly about your own opinion?  
or...
- Does she try to make you feel guilty?
- Does she get annoyed at you for disagreeing with her?

It's possible this new friend may react poorly. But, isn't it better to discover this red flag now, before you're neck-deep in the friendship? By practicing setting boundaries early on in a friendship, you are communicating to this person: "I respect you, and I also respect myself." That is a great foundation to build on.

### 2. Practice sharing vulnerably about small things at first

There are hundreds of ways that we can feel vulnerable and sensitive to rejection. You might be tempted to hide those things about yourself. Or, you might be tempted to

bare your soul too fast. Neither extreme will help you build the kind of trust you deserve and need. Instead, test the waters before sharing your deepest darkest secret.

For example, instead of telling your new friend every detail about your terrible relationship with your parents, you might start off with: "My family lives far away from here. I wish I had family closer, but it's healthier for our relationship to have some space."

Or, instead of divulging all the details of your divorce, you might say, "I'm single now. I was once married."

This kind of cautious vulnerability might feel foreign to you at first. But taking small steps with intention is so valuable when discerning whom to trust. Remember, trust is earned over time. You can be honest without sharing every detail of your life. As you do, notice how your friend responds:

- Does she push you for every detail before you are ready?
- Does she seem disinterested and quickly turn the conversation back to herself?
- Do her texts stop coming all of a sudden?

These are red flags.

On the other hand, maybe she listens and honors what you have shared. Perhaps on another occasion, you notice she remembers what you said and is curious to learn more. By sharing slowly and strategically, you are communicating to this person: "I want to get to know you; and I want for you to get to know me, too."

### 3. Invite your new friend into situations that matter to you

This one can sound so simple, and for some of you it might be. But, if you are used to one-way friendships, it can feel very vulnerable to ask someone to do something that you enjoy or to invite someone into a small part of your world.

I remember vividly when I was in the process of making new friends after having moved to a new city for graduate school. One woman in particular caught my attention. She was flashy and fun and seemed to have a lot of friends around her. I was flattered when she invited me to several parties and events at her home. She seemed to want to be my friend, and I was elated.

However, it soon began to dawn on me that she did not know one single thing about my world, including where I lived in a tiny graduate school apartment. I knew, instinctively, that this might be a problem for this woman. But, I also knew that it

wouldn't be a real friendship if I simply rode along as her sidekick, hiding aspects of myself. I felt shy about inviting her over to my home. But, I decided that it was an important test of this new friendship.

I wish I could say I felt great about her visit to my tiny apartment. I didn't. Instead, I could tell she did not approve. She was too well-mannered to say much overtly. But, the awkwardness was palpable. And, I knew that in order to invest in this friendship, I was going to have to pretend to be someone I was not.

Initially I beat myself up. "Why did I let her see where I live?" But, then I reminded myself of the facts. My apartment was small because I was a single woman supporting myself through graduate school. If she was judging me for that, well, then: her loss.

And, I moved on to look for other, healthier friends who supported and encouraged me toward this work I do that now reaches tens of thousands of women like you.

## You Can Say "Yes" to Healthy Friendships

Your journey toward healthy friendships starts with recognizing the red flags of toxic people. That's the hard part. But, trust me, the next part gets a lot more fun.

Like most women, you were likely taught the idea that to have a friend, you must be a friend. However, learning to be a friend to others is only one half of the friendship equation.

What's the other half? It's learning how to let someone be a friend to YOU.

Once you have identified and moved away from toxic friends in your life, start getting to know yourself, what you enjoy, and what you value. The more you know yourself, the more you will know what kind of people to put in your life.

As you learn to value yourself, you will realize that your trust must be earned. You won't be tempted to turn yourself inside out in order to please someone else. And, you'll stop settling for less than what God wants for you in your life. Instead, you will start to enjoy the benefits of healthy two-way friendships.

I know you can do it! Thanks for letting me walk you through this important issue.

## About Alison Cook

Alison Cook, M.A., Ph.D. is a counselor, speaker, and the co-author of *Boundaries for Your Soul: How to Turn Your Overwhelming Thoughts and Feelings into Your Greatest Allies*.



For over 15 years, Alison has helped women learn how to stand firm, develop confidence from the inside out, forge healthy relationships, and fully live out their God-given potential.

Each week, over 25,000 women receive Alison's email newsletter packed encouraging advice and helpful insights.

For more information about Alison, visit: [www.AlisonCookPhD.com](http://www.AlisonCookPhD.com)

For more information about *Boundaries for Your Soul*, visit: <https://amzn.to/3f9c4ev>

