



Friends are not just by our side; they can infiltrate and change us, says the writer. They may strongly influence how we perceive the world and see ourselves. The best of them would be like alchemists who transmute parts of us that are unformed and unrealised to something good. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY

# The fragile bonds of friendship

Friendships can sustain our mental health and enrich our lives. But they can also end quite easily.



**Chong Siow Ann**

I met Michael when we both started Primary 1. I was at that time not yet familiar with the language of instruction which was English (my dialect-speaking parents didn't see the need or couldn't afford to send me to kindergarten) which led my teacher to believe that I was somehow mentally impaired, what today we would call a "special needs" child.

Michael didn't have that problem. Light brown hair and eyes, and a toothy smile, he was the only child of a Chinese mother and an English father who owned a small shipyard in Kallang Basin. Despite that initial language barrier, we got on.

Our friendship comprised mainly the stuff that we did together. What I retain from those years are fragments of memories: sitting precariously behind him on the sprung seat of his Raleigh Chopper while he peddled furiously around his neighbourhood; his generosity in sharing his dazzling pile of toys in a big wooden crate; my first beef steak sizzling on a cast-iron

plate in the shape of a cow on an outing together with his mother; and my reciprocal gesture of friendship in sharing my Mandarin homework that he copied word for word which inevitably got us into trouble in due time. Most of all, I remember the feeling of it all: the simplicity of our fun, our raucous laughter over nothing, the innocence of our play.

It all ended when we went to different secondary schools. I forget how it happened but I'm certain nothing had ruptured our friendship. It just faded away inexplicably.

And years later like some long-submerged relic floating to the surface, I became conscious that he has occupied a niche in my psyche. I would think albeit sporadically of our friendship, and of the close friendships that we often take for granted until they peter out and vanish.

## WEAKEST BOND

Our childhood friendships can buffer us from those mental health issues that we are prone to – the anxiety and depression might come from bruising childhood experiences of being taunted, bullied or ostracised. They also instruct us in an unconscious way on how to navigate challenging interpersonal situations as we enter our angst-filled adolescence and go on to form other attachments.

Being a psychiatrist, I know just how vital friendships are to our life. There is an ample body of psychological research that shows having social connections would, to a significant extent, help us live a longer, healthier and more satisfying life. Robust

adult friendships of the sort that provide support and companionship significantly preserve our mental and physical wellness. On the other hand, people bereft of any close relationships are twice as likely to die prematurely – a risk factor even greater than the effects of smoking 20 cigarettes per day.

Among other things, friendships protect us in part by changing the way we respond to stress. Blood pressure reactivity is lower when we talk to a supportive friend, or have a friend by our side while engaged in a tough task rather than working alone.

But beyond all these physiological effects, there is that visceral and transformative power of friendships. Friends are not just by our side; they can infiltrate and change us. They may strongly influence how we perceive the world and see ourselves. The best of them would be like alchemists who transmute parts of us that are unformed and unrealised to something good.

When we are growing up and still awkward and insecure, we yearn for approval and validation of our own worth and competence, and friends who provide that can make a great deal and make a big difference to what we would become. People tend to want to live up to their friends' high regard – in the words of the writer Andrew Solomon, "We exist for ourselves in part by existing in the eyes of others".

But despite their usually salubrious and edifying influences, friendships are ranked the lowest in the hierarchy of important relationships. Spouses, romantic

partners, parents, children, and sometimes even the people in our professional life – all these are deemed more important. Friendships are, in essence, a voluntary type of relationship in that we usually choose who we want to be friends with and, in some ways, they are the weakest bond because we could choose to end them quite easily.

And as we move along the arc of our life, different priorities, commitments and responsibilities emerge which both tether us and pull us in all sorts of different directions: marriage, parenting, career, relocation to a different country, caregiving of elderly parents. And friendships are affected, tested, and may even fray – an attrition that is borne out by research which found that, starting at age 25, we lose more friends than we make each year.

We often tell each other that being friends means that we would "always be there" for one another in times of need and adversity. It is a beautiful and reassuring thought, but the reality is that we rarely have time or energy to spend with even our most valued friends, whether because we are constrained by life's circumstances and vicissitudes, or stymied by that usual situation of good intentions and poor follow-through when the time comes.

## DUNBAR NUMBER

In 1992, British anthropologist and psychologist Robin Dunbar posited that the maximum number of friendships that we are able to maintain is 150 (henceforth known as the Dunbar number and which has since permeated both professional and popular culture). These 150 are what one would regard as casual friends – a little more than a nodding acquaintance. Professor Dunbar argues that it's a matter of the limits of the cognitive capacity of the average human mind that can just manage about 150 stable relationships at any given moment.

Friendships vary in quality and intimacy which Prof Dunbar ordered in a series of layers, or circles radiating out from an inner core of five. These are our closest and most stalwart friends who are bulwarks against the buffeting stresses of living, who would stand up for us even when we are not around, provide the shoulders to cry on, and who would rally around us when our world is crumbling. These special friendships are necessarily rare because – as Prof Dunbar asserted – they require so much time and investment of ourselves and each one of us has finite amounts of these resources.

Real friendships – like all interpersonal relationships that matter – require conscious and committed work to maintain them. If we don't do that, our friends might not know how to support us – and neither would we know how and when to support them.

I have learnt that sustaining friendships does not require frequent or even regular contact, but a resilience that can withstand absence. It comes from a realistic and reasonable expectation of each other – there are things for instance that we should never ask a friend to do for us – and it enables us not to resent or judge each other, to understand and accept each other's all-so-human frailties. And precious too, is that inherent grace to forgive when we transgress, without which no friendship can be sustained and no reconciliation is possible.

Now in my mature years, I have the occasional twinges of wistfulness (admittedly out of a sentimental naivety) when I think of my childhood friendship with Michael, especially in the light of my adult friendships which are more complex and freighted at times with conflicting emotions of affection, admiration, ambivalence, guilt, resentment, and disappointment. But these friendships are also more profound and meaningful at an age when the innocence and simplicity of childhood are just memories.

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