Friendship, Loneliness, and Community · About 4 minutes

When a Friendship Can No Longer Take Its Old Form

Recognizing a change without rewriting the whole relationship

The chessboard is out. Ada has crossed town again, and Finn's chair is empty.

For years, Tuesday chess was an easy part of their friendship. Now each missed evening seems to ask a much larger question: did the friendship ever matter to him?

Ada and Finn are fictional, but the dilemma is common. A changed circumstance can strain a valued relationship. Understanding that circumstance doesn't tell you how much uncertainty you can continue to live with.

The old friendship and the present arrangement

Finn's work has genuinely changed. Ada's wasted journey is also real. She can care about his difficulty and ask for timely notice. He can regret losing the routine without expecting her to keep traveling on the assumption that he will be there.

Their years of friendship need not be rewritten as a mistake. At the same time, a good history cannot make the current arrangement workable. Holding both in mind allows a practical decision without requiring either person to become entirely good or bad.

A sentence such as "I'm no longer willing to travel without a confirmed plan" identifies what Ada can do. It tells Finn something useful. "You never cared about our friendship" reaches into a history the current difficulty alone cannot settle.

What can each person reliably offer?

Equal regard doesn't require identical availability. During illness, one friend may give much more. Another may have less money for travel or less freedom because of care responsibilities. Generosity can be wanted and meaningful. It becomes harder to sustain when one person's needs cannot be discussed.

Research on intimacy connects closeness with disclosure and perceived responsiveness.[1] An explanation may help Ada understand Finn. Whether a new arrangement helps their friendship will also depend on what happens afterward.

He might suggest confirming by midday. Ada might accept, or decide that she needs a different plan. If they agree, the notice needs to occur. A warm conversation about reliability cannot do the work of being reliable.

Bowen's account of differentiation offers a way to think about maintaining a considered position while remaining responsive to another person.[2] Here that might include hearing Finn's proposal without abandoning Ada's limit. It could also include choosing distance. Continued contact is not a required outcome.

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Even a workable change can hurt

Perhaps the new arrangement succeeds. Ada may still miss the ease of knowing what Tuesday meant. There can be grief in a friendship becoming smaller, less frequent, or more deliberate. Gratitude for what remains doesn't have to silence that loss.

Other friendships end because of repeated disregard, harm, or interests that have moved apart. Acknowledging an understandable circumstance does not oblige you to accept every consequence of it.

Ada has to reckon with the loss of a familiar evening while she learns what the friendship can be now.

Next week she can choose whether to make the trip. I would leave room for the sorrow of wanting the old evenings, even while she decides what she can count on now.

Companion reading · A Place Among Others

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Friendship, Loneliness, and Community (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] Laurenceau, J.-P., Barrett, L. F., & Pietromonaco, P. R. (1998). Intimacy as an interpersonal process: The importance of self-disclosure, partner disclosure, and perceived partner responsiveness in interpersonal exchanges. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 74(5), 1238–1251. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.74.5.1238 Source.

[2] The Bowen Center for the Study of the Family. (n.d.). Differentiation of self. The eight concepts. Source.

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