



How's Your Social Wealth?

by Will Marré

People who have trusted friends are the happiest. It's true.

Research on what makes human beings happy is at a high watermark. Economists, professors, neuroscientists and psychologists around the world are doing increasingly sophisticated research as to what makes us happy. It turns out that the biggest, single predictor of both happiness and fast recovery from sadness is the quality of our close friendships.

This research makes clear that just as over-investing in our best customers leads to prosperity, over-investing in healthy friendships has a huge payoff in our daily moods, as well as in helping us feel that our life is rich.

Economists refer to the depth and quality of our trusted friends as *social capital*, and cultures that are high in social capital rank high in happiness. Perhaps you won't be too surprised to learn the U.S. is

experiencing a rapid decline in social capital. More simply, more of us have fewer trusted friends than we did ten years ago.

Harvard researchers recently surveyed Americans, asking them, "How many friends do you have with whom you would share your deepest secrets?" Twenty-five percent of us answered zero! This figure represents the single largest decline in social capital since its measurement began.

Our culture is running dangerously low on happiness, but there's a quick and easy fix: invest more of yourself into the lives of those who mean the most.



Too important to neglect

Not having trusted friends is a big deal. Social isolation is associated with much higher rates of chronic health problems, depression, addiction and most every other bad condition that sucks the joy of life from us. Although we don't know for sure why we are suffering a big decline in friendships, the most common reason given is that we are too busy to stay deeply connected.

We are so busy with work, raising children, paying the bills and keeping our lives together that we find it difficult to invest much of ourselves in the intimate lives of others. We may be investing too much time on the quantity of our acquaintances on Facebook, and too little on one or two "best friends" who love us enough to jump in front of a bus on our behalf to save our lives. But having hundreds of superficial "friends" online cannot produce the inner feelings of happiness that a single deep, loyal and trusted friendship can.

We can change this. Psychologists tell us there are three things we can do to invest in friendships that make them deeper and more satisfying.

1. *Select friends carefully.* People tend to be either faucets or drains. Givers or takers. Takers look for givers and often use a combination of flattery and guilt to keep givers giving.

If you are a giver and find yourself exhausted rather than energized by a current friend, it may be because your friend is a taker. His or her neediness does not constitute a real friendship. Rather, healthy friendship is based on a mutual support that creates rather than drains positive emotional energy. Be a faucet and invest your time in the friends who are faucets in your life, too. You will get a torrent of love.

2. *Be fully present.* Emotional intimacy arises from centering your full attention on the other. Have you ever been frustrated by trying to have a conversation with someone while they were texting someone else? It's sad but true: most of us are so over-busy that we hardly devote our full attention to what's in front of us. As we stand before and attempt to connect with those we love, we are too often preoccupied with "mental texting" and inner multitasking to really be listening. As a result, we create this dull distance in our most vital relationships that separates rather than unites.

To deepen a friendship, try to invest at least 30 minutes a day fully engaging with a loved one, with no agenda other than listening to and supporting them. Ask questions. Laugh and commiserate. Do not advise or judge. Simply be present in the moment.

Full presence amplifies love — and believe it or not, this simple gesture is the highest-grade investment you can make in your happiness.

3. *Have fun together.* Human beings love being stimulated by new positive experiences, and enjoying them with those we love enriches our friendships. A shared experience gives us something new to talk about and creates a bond that goes beyond verbal expression. When we see and do the same things together, we are most likely feeling the same feelings. That builds closeness.

We should never find ourselves too busy to invest in the deeper joys of our lives. Investing in our "best" friendships is the best blue-chip investment we can make in our

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