

## How Friendships Improve Your Health and Help You Live Longer – Lydia Denworth with Dave Asprey – #755

Announcer:

Bulletproof Radio, a state of high performance.

Dave Asprey:

You're listening to Bulletproof Radio with Dave Asprey. Today is going to be a really fun interview because you guys have probably heard me talk about the four Fs of life. It's in my latest book and it explains the algorithm of life. And it's that we are wired subcellularly and all life is, whether you're a tree or not is to do something to take care of immediate sources of fear. So fear is the first F word. The next one is food, because you have to make sure you don't die of a famine. The third one is another F word that involves reproduction. Yes, fertility, I don't know what you're thinking about. But the fourth F word is probably the most special F word. And this is friend. The four Fs that drive everything. And what does friendship look like if you're a tree? Well, you become part of a forest.

And if you're a bacteria, you become part of kombucha and you allow other things in. And if you're a human, you form a community and a tribe, and maybe you have a pet, but we're all part of communities. And since we have these innate drives to do this, sometimes the final F word, because these are prioritized by mother nature, not by you. That fourth F word is the most important one because when you do that, you're much happier and healthier. So when I found out there was a book called *Friendship: The Evolution, Biology, and Extraordinary Power of Life's Fundamental Bond*, I said, all right, I have to talk to the author of this book. And that is who is our guest today. Her name is Lydia Denworth. She's a science writer, a contributing editor to *Scientific American*, and she writes about brain and psychology stuff.

And we're talking everything from Alzheimer's to zebra fish. And because of that, she's looked at humans and animals, and I think it's going to be a very fascinating interview. Lydia, welcome to the show.

Lydia Denworth:

Hi, Dave, I'm really happy to be here. You made me laugh because the F word is a factor in my story about science and friendship. So anyway.

Dave:

I love it, and I don't know why they all start with F. I didn't design it that way, but beer and food are fundamental Maslow's hierarchy stuff, but it actually describes well, everything from Alzheimer's, which is a mitochondrial thing all the way to zebra fish. It's the thing here.

Lydia:

Yes.

Dave:

Did you think you'd be writing a book about friendship? Was this something on your bucket list 10 years ago?

Lydia:

No, definitely not. 10 years ago I was writing my... No, I guess I was out in the world with my first book, which was all about environmental science. And then I wrote a brain book. Well, I can hear you whisper. My second book is about deafness. My youngest son is deaf and uses cochlear implant. So that got me interested in the brain and how kids learn and things like that. But after that, I was just looking for what would be the next project, what would be interesting. And I was really struck when I went to meetings with scientists and neuroscientists, that they were talking about friendship in this way that seems really interesting and different from how the rest of us think of it. I think we know, we think we know all about friendship. It's so familiar, but the truth is there's this whole other aspect to it, the biology and evolution of it that we don't know.

Dave:

I thought it was kind of cool that you pulled together the history of friendship, the biology, the neuroscience, but a bunch of different areas where maybe you wouldn't think to do it because you're an accomplished science journalist. So you're sort of like, oh, this is relevant, this is relevant. You pieced it together in a way that was interesting. And I think you made a convincing point that we're designed as humans for connection and compassion in a way that others aren't. Can you walk me through, what are the biggest reasons you believe that to be true?

Lydia:

Well, let's see, one of the big storylines in my book is that we now understand that there are real evolutionary advantages to being good at making and maintaining friends. And we figured that out by looking in other species. So before this, a lot of people thought, we always thought friendship mattered and that people cared about it a lot, but we thought it was primarily cultural really, and kind of a nice byproduct of other things. And finding friendship or something like it in other species is the thing that got scientists saying, "Hey, wait a minute. This seems really interesting." So the thing is that what humans can do that other species can't do is that we can take it all even further, right? We've used our ability to connect and to cooperate. All of which is part of what drives us to make friends in the first place and to have these strong relationships.

We've used that to achieve all kinds of amazing things. And the biological part of it is that we now understand that friendship is as important for your health as diet and exercise. And it gets under your skin as scientists say, as biologists say, right? So it really affects your health on all kinds of levels, your immune system, your stress, your cardiovascular system, your mental health and cognitive health. And the fact that it does that, that a relationship that exists outside the body entirely can get in and change how your health works seems to me a sign that this is something that is really critical and that is deserving a far more respect and attention than we tend to give it.

Dave:

It's a pretty big claim that friendship is as important as food and exercise. Do you really think so? What happens if people don't have friends?

Lydia:

They die sooner usually.

Dave:

Okay. It's a pretty good point that we might need them. Okay.

Lydia:

What I am... okay, I will grant you that on this fundamental that you need food to survive and you will die very quickly if you don't eat, we know that, that is not the case with friendship. But what I'm saying more is that when people think about how to live a healthy life, they spend a lot of time thinking about their diet, trying to schedule an exercise or feeling guilty about not scheduling an exercise, things like that. They do not think of their time with their friends in the same category. That's what they need to do. They need to understand.

Dave:

Wow.

Lydia:

And it's great, actually. It's great news. It means I'm giving you permission to go hang out with your friends. It's so much fun usually that we think of it as kind of frivolous, right? So we put it at the bottom of the list. And what we know is that people who are more socially connected and have, it's not how many friends really, it's the quality of your friendships. So the biggest difference is between having zero and one, but they are healthier on almost every level in their physical health and their mental health and they live longer. They tend to live longer than people who are really lonely.

There's all kinds of different ways that we know this, but just as one example, I'll say that in your immune system, the way your genes are expressed, so some of the genes that control your resistance to inflammation and resilience and things like that, they change so that if you are really lonely, your gene expression in your immune system changes in a way that makes you more susceptible to inflammation and viruses and things like that. And if you are really well connected and feel socially connected, you are more resilient to those things. That's just-

Dave:

So social isolation is a really good idea is what you're saying.

Lydia:

I'm saying we need to take this seriously. And I want to, let me just be clear that there are all kinds of different ways to do friendship and to be social. And I am not at all saying everybody has to go out and be the life of the party, or swing from the chandeliers, and be friends with everyone you know or meet. But what I am saying is that building some strong, positive social bonds, which is what they call it when they're talking about baboons or monkeys, but in people we call that friendship. And that is one of these critical things that really makes a fundamental difference in your health. It also makes a big difference I believe in how happy you are and your fulfillment in your day-to-day life. But it's this biological piece that I think people haven't appreciated. So that's what I'm hammering away.

Maybe they didn't appreciate it until the pandemic. I will say that my job has been made somewhat easier in a way. Before, I was out talking about this for a few months before the pandemic really shut everything down. And I thought my job was to convince people that friendship is really, really important. And then when it got taken away and when we couldn't interact, I think it was striking to me how much people realized that they'd been taking it for granted. And so what I hope is that one of the lessons we're learning is that we should not take it for granted.

Dave:

It's interesting what you said earlier in that if you don't have food, you'll die, but it really takes a couple of months. If you don't have water, that's about three, four days. And if you don't have air, that's about three, four minutes. So if you put these on a continuum, friendship is a nutrient the way you're talking about it. And we don't really have a good way to measure friendship. We can measure calories. We can measure how much water you drink. What's the best way that you've seen in all the science to actually quantify and measure, do I have enough friends? Are they good enough friends? Do I spend enough time with them? What's the metric?

Lydia:

Well, one of the metrics that I think is really important that has come out of the science, and by the way, one reason we haven't studied it in this way before was because friendship is a little bit complicated to define and to measure, and scientists, they have to measure. Science is based on defining things and then measuring them. You need outcomes, you need things you're comparing. But the sort of, there's a common theme that has turned up across different kinds of research. So by all primatologists, psychologists, anthropologists, I think it's fair to say there are three minimum requirements for a friendship, or a quality sort of strong sustaining bond if you're going to talk about animals and things. But it's long lasting, it's positive, and it's cooperative. That means that in terms of being a good friend, it means that you're a steady, reliable presence in somebody's life. You make them feel good and they make you feel good. And that there's this reciprocity and helpfulness, and give and take.

And so a friendship can have a whole lot more things going on than that, especially human friendships. We do have these cultural layers to it, but it's got to have those three things. And that is how scientists measure it. They measure relationships that people feel hit those buckets and they get them to describe, how do you feel about this person or that person? Another way that we do it is, so then of course, people do a lot of counting, like trying to figure out, well, how many friends, you alluded to this, how many friends do you have? What we have found is that most people have just an average of four people in their very inner circle that they consider their most important relationships. Now those can be family and they can be friends. It depends. So somebody might have somebody who's married and has a big family, a lot of siblings, they might be all family.

Somebody who is single and has no siblings or no... it might be all friends. But what I'm arguing here is that actually the quality of the relationship is what defines a really good friendship and that those relationships that have those positive elements are the things that affect our health so much. And so metric wise, that's how we measure it. We measure, we count the quality, and we count the quantity. We count, how many people do you see on a regular basis? So epidemiologists early on, one of the ways they figured this out that this mattered so much was simply by asking these very straightforward basic questions like, how often do you see your family? How often do you see your friends? Are you part of a church or a volunteer organization? Things like that. And what they did then was they just followed people over a really long period of time.

And they added up, how much social connection people seem to have, and then when did they die? And what they found was a basic relationship between the amount of connection people had and how long they were living. And now we've dug in a whole lot deeper. So some of those other things I told you like about gene expression and things like that, or what we know now about what is explaining that, what goes on, but that's one very basic way of measuring it.

Dave:

About eight years ago, when biohacking was just getting off the ground as a movement, I created the Biohacking Conference and the first one was just 100 people in San Francisco. And it grew to a couple

thousand. I did it because I wanted to build community. And I wanted to hang out with people who cared about the same kinds of stuff that I cared about. How do we measure and improve anything we want to measure and improve about ourselves? I look at that over the course of time, the number of friendships I've made, the number of friendships that it has made in that community, even marriages and things like that. And I realized that part of what I was doing there was actually nourishing myself, right? Because I wanted to spend time doing this kind of thing. This year we're doing a virtual conference, which is October 10th.

Even then, the virtual Biohacking Conference, I've been beating up my team saying, "Guys, how do we make it so people can foster those connections with new people?" And we're doing everything we can with breakout groups and social media stuff, and private Facebook groups and all that kind of stuff. But what's the best way for people to make new friends during the pandemic?

Lydia:

I would say that's the hardest thing. You've put your finger on something there. One of the reasons is because the... and this is such a reminder of the value of face-to-face time and what we get from that. And you need to spend time with people in order to feel closer to them. It's still true that you can spend time with people over technology like you and I are doing now. My argument is that what we need to think about are those qualities of a good friendship that I mentioned earlier, that it makes you feel good and that it has this back and forth and reciprocal stuff going on. When you're first in it, in that every way you're connecting with somebody now.

So with your existing friends, you want to make sure that you're kind of hitting those buckets, that you're checking in, that you're paying attention to when was the last time I checked to see whether you, Dave, or how you're holding up, or how you're feeling and whether the smoke is bothering you in Victoria from the wildfires or something like that. With new friends, it's about finding shared interests, getting to know each other, and then just putting in some time and some conversation. And then ultimately what happens to trigger the movement from a more casual relationship to a real friendship is some kind of shared emotional experience. So maybe in your conference, if people are in a breakout room and they're having a really good conversation about something and they feel that connection, then they should seek to carry on that conversation with one of the other people in the group.

That's the way... they're going to have to be a little bit... you have to make yourself vulnerable. You have to say, "Hey, I'd love to keep talking with you about this." But the same principles apply. You have to put in the time and you have to work to connect to people. And then the more time you do it, whether it's by phone or by Zoom or whatever it is, the closer you will be. But it is going to be hard. Most of us are online relationships, when they become better friendships, they shift to having an offline component to like, there's, our closest friends, we connect to both ways. And then when we're limited in this way and we don't have that history, it isn't easy to create it from scratch. So I'm not going to lie.

Dave:

Okay. So it's about putting the time in.

Lydia:

It is.

Dave:

When you're measuring friendship and you're doing it in such a way that you can write about it. And there's all these different fields that are trying to do it. How do you divide between, oh, that's a family

member. That's a friends with benefits versus that's a dating interest. It seems like all of those are just necessary human interaction, but when you're really focusing on just friends, how do you know when it's family versus potential mate?

Lydia:

Well, so obviously there are differences. The very technical definition of a friend is someone that we're not related to and don't have sex with. Right?

Dave:

Okay. There you go.

Lydia:

But the point that I'm making or that I think is really interesting is that all this research, this deeper research into how there is this biology and evolution to friendship is showing us that the really quality relationships are the ones that really matter in this interesting way. And that those are the ones that can be defined the way I did, that they're long and stable, that they're positive and cooperative. And so what I do is look for that in all relationships with my family members, with my spouse, with my friends. And it's a reminder I think that we want to work to make our family relationships positive. Often we... I joke that I would never snap at my friends about the way they load the dishwasher the way I do my husband. So I don't know about other people, but the dishwasher is a constant source of stress in our house.

And I think it's... I'm joking a little bit, but it's a reminder that there's a way of treating people and the way you want to be treated that actually does tend to make all relationships stronger. Of course, with family and romantic interests, there's other things going on. There's other things you have to deal with. And there's other motivations. Obviously we all, when we're romantically interested in someone, there's another element to that. But I'm saying that you can use friendship as a template for all other relationships if you think about these quality elements to it.

Dave:

Okay. That makes sense. There's also a dishwasher hack that I have to share with you.

Lydia:

Okay. Please.

Dave:

This has made such a difference in my marriage. It's way cheaper compared to 10 sessions of marital therapy over the dishwasher. What you do is you get a second dishwasher.

Lydia:

Ah, and what, his and hers or-

Dave:

You can do his or hers, or it just means that there's always one available to put crap in. And if it's not loaded as efficiently, it's okay. Right?

Lydia:

Okay.

Dave:

And what that means too is that you spend less time putting stuff in cabinets because then you just take whichever one's clean and you take those dishes and just use them. And I swear, we save like eight hours a week by having two dishwashers and seriously, a dishwasher is about a thousand bucks. And compared to what it would cost to try and triangulate with a therapist, it's actually money very well spent [crosstalk 00:20:39]-

Lydia:

Very interesting. Unfortunately, here in Brooklyn, we have small kitchens.

Dave:

Right. Well, you don't need cabinets anymore. Just rows of dish washers.

Lydia:

Okay. There you go. All right. That could work.

Dave:

What happens in our brains and our brain waves when we have friends or when we don't have friends?

Lydia:

One of the things that I think is most fascinating and that I, it comes towards the end of the book, but the really cutting edge neuroscience is looking at how your brain is processing the world and how that looks similar or different to your friends. And so what they found was that... what they did was they looked at, I think it's like 200 and some, let's call it 250 graduate students who all knew each other or knew each other... what they did was mapped out the connections between them. So Dave is friends with Susie, who's friends with Ben, who is friends with whoever. And so you could see the degrees of separation. And then they put them in a brain scanner and they watched how their brains processed a series of video clips.

What was amazing was that you could actually tell just by looking at the results of the brain processing, who was closest to who. So it looked more similar and it isn't just little pieces of the brain. It's big swaths of the brain, like the audio, visual, how you pay attention, what you're focused on, looks much more similar. So they could predict from the brain processing and the brainwaves who was friends with who, and then they could see it get less and less similar as you get to about three degrees of separation. And now what they're trying to do is understand whether we are drawn to friends because our brains process the world similarly, or whether we become more similar once we are friends and like a lot of things in life. We think that the answer is a little of both. But so that study has been underway.

So what they did was they got another cohort of graduate students and they started measuring them on day one in September.

Dave:

Wow.

Lydia:

This was pre-COVID, right? And then they followed them for a year to see who became friends with who and how did their brains change or not change over that time, but I don't have the answers yet, but I think it's fascinating. You literally see and hear the world more like your friends than like other people.

Dave:

Wow. So your friends are setting your filter. It's a very common, personal development trope to say, oh, you are the sum of the five people you spend the most time with, and those are meant to be friends, although probably some family would be involved in there and your spouse. Do you believe that's true? Is it real that you are the sum of those five people because your brain likely changes or do we not know enough yet?

Lydia:

I haven't thought about those two things together, the way the brain is changing and those... Is it true that you are absolutely the sum of those five people? Not exactly. Is it true that those five people really reflect parts of who you are? Yes, very much so. We tend to hang out and become friends with people who are more like us than not, or who feed certain parts of us. I have a lot of friends who are middle-aged creative women because that's what I do. Right? And so we have a lot to talk about and we tend to meet each other. I have a lot of other kinds of friends as well, but there is a reason why people gravitate. And I mean all the way back, Aristotle knew this, that friendship had some similarity involved, proximity involved, just it's easier to make friends with people you happen to be around.

The other thing I think is really interesting is that we have, one of the researchers I spoke with, they had this idea of emotionships, which is that you have certain friendships that serve certain emotional needs you have. If you are an anxious person, you have a friend you go to who helps calm you down. And you would not, when you're feeling anxious, want to call your sister who's also super anxious because she's just going to make you feel worse. So those five people might on some levels reflect some of that, some of those different ways that we have friendships. But yeah, I think there's definitely truth to it. And there is a little bit of an indication of how we... And conversation actually does bring the brain more into alignment or two brains more into alignment so that if you and I both saw a movie and then we got together and talked about what we thought that movie was all about and our interpretation, and then we watched another video clip, the second time, our brains would be more similar.

So every time you're having conversation with your friends, you are coming a little bit more into alignment, but how much you start that way, I don't know. But I do buy into the five friend thing pretty much.

Dave:

Have you ever fired a friend because they weren't good enough?

Lydia:

Sort of. In fact, I will say, it's so fascinating that this is what comes up all the time in talking about friendship is everybody wants to talk about the end of friendship. And I will say that I believe that those difficult friendships are not necessarily worth it and that people should not feel that they are beholden to... just because you've known somebody a long time, for instance, but if they're really draining, or demanding, or been... that's not a good thing for you. In fact, what's really interesting is that... it's obvious that positive relationships might make us feel good and negative relationships, truly negative relationships are toxic, but what's super interesting is this new work on ambivalent relationships, which

is more of our relationships than we want to believe where we feel both positive and negative things about somebody and those are not good for our biology either.

So you have a choice, you work to make the relationship better. You end it, like you said, I don't ever think, I haven't thought of it as firing a friend exactly. Or another thing I think is maybe more realistic is that we have these circles, like I said, there's four in the inner circle and usually about 10 to 12 in the next one, and then a bigger circle outside of that, maybe you shuffle that person to the outer realms of your social circles so that they're less of your, at least emotional sustenance. And I don't, like I said, I hadn't ever thought of the term firing, although I do think it's interesting that social media has given us all of this vocabulary for the end of friendship, which is not something we had before. We have separation, divorce, estrangement for the end of romantic relationships and family relationships. But with friends, we didn't have that, but now we have ghosting, and unfollowing, and unfriending and they're kind of harsh. Right?

But it does reflect the fact that in fact, that often there is a sort of a pain to those relationships, and often it feels like somebody has fired somebody else.

Dave:

Well, it's kind of funny. If you had a friend who came over and broke plates every time and left food on your couch, you wouldn't invite them over like, okay, clear separation.

Lydia:

That would be easy.

Dave:

But if that same person came over with good manners and complained all the time, whined all the time, was a victim all the time and then criticized you, you might put up with that for a very long time before you're like, why do I feel bad every time I'm around this person? I want less of them, or I want none of them. I don't know why people are wired that way, but you might know why we're wired that way.

Lydia:

We're wired that way because we have this need to belong and to feel connected. And also because relationships are messy, but it's very hard to, for some of us, actually, some people do not have a hard time walking away from friends who annoy them or who they find are hurtful. But for a lot of us, it feels painful. It's uncomfortable. So we avoid it. We tend to avoid the uncomfortable, right? But human nature is... not that. But we also, if we have a long history with someone, we might feel that well, but this is this good friend of mine from college and we've known each other for so long. And we think that that outweighs the bad behavior like you just described. And what I'm saying is actually no, and we should pay attention to that. We should look at how do they make us feel when we're with them? And are we just putting up with that?

Especially friendships where it's really lopsided and one person does all the talking or is very demanding and the other one's always doing the giving and not the taking. That's not healthy.

Dave:

Is it a good exercise for people listening to maybe sit down and diagram who are my four inner circle, who are my 10 or 12 outer, who are my 20 beyond that? Is that healthy or is that not healthy?

Lydia:

I think it's healthy. In fact, I have that very exercise. I have a playbook you can download on my website that is kind of applying the science of friendship. And I think one of the things that is a good idea to do about friendship is to take a little bit of an inventory and look at not just who those people are, but also, how are you as a friend? Are you a good friend to people? Are you doing the things you would like them to be doing? Are you making people feel good? Are you being helpful and showing up from a distance right now? But you can still show up from a distance. Those are important questions to ask yourself and to try to be self-aware about, and then do that same question of, and how are they, how are they treating me and who of these people do I really feel I can count on when I need them? I think it's a useful exercise. I really do.

Dave:

What about the opposite of friendship, which is loneliness? What did you learn in writing your book about friendship about loneliness?

Lydia:

I see them as the two ends of the same continuum. So all the ways in which friendship is good for us, loneliness is bad for us. It is the same thing that Dr. Mathew is describing in his book and that he's found in them. There's a reason why people are talking about our books in the same breath a lot this spring. What I wanted to do was in addition to talking about how bad loneliness is for you, and I'm sure everybody's heard it's like the equivalent of smoking 15 cigarettes a day, and things like that. You die 30% earlier. Your chance of living longer is, and I'm forgetting the exact statistics right this second, but it's really bad for you. But the point I want to make is that we spend a lot of time thinking about loneliness as the bad thing and the culprit, but I wanted to really try to also... and in my book, there's a huge amount about how loneliness is bad for us.

But I really wanted to also offer the positive and to say, remember friendship is the flip side, and you can actively work to take care of your friendships. And that will be good for you. One of the social epidemiologists has worked on this her whole life. One of the most big quotes or the ideas that has stuck with me the most was that she said, "If you spend your whole life smoking from say 16 to 65, and then you quit, it's better to quit, but a lot of damage will have been done." And she said, "We need to think of friendship in the same way. And we need to work on it and actively be thinking about it our whole lives and not wait until our kids are grown and our professional lives are less busy when we get older and just think then we can focus on friendship." And she said, "If you wait until you're 60 or 65, damage will have been done." And she put it in that same context, and I thought that was fascinating. So get busy calling your friends.

Dave:

All right. So in addition to your daily nutrition, food plan, your exercise plan, your meditation plan, you've got have a friend plan.

Lydia:

A friend plan. I hope what it means is that you actually just don't cancel on your friends or that you let yourself go hang out with them, right? But yes, if you have to schedule it into your calendar, make it part of your routine. And the good news is that it's fun.

Dave:

The saving grace here is something that Professor Stew Friedman from Wharton talked about first in his book, Total Leadership. And then he came on again with his book after that, it's that if you're conscious of these things, you can actually say, "I think I'll have a meal with a friend, I'll exercise with a friend, I'll meditate with a friend." And all of a sudden, then you didn't spend more time on it, but you did spend extra energy on planning it, which I think is really important.

Lydia:

Absolutely. You're getting a twofer. I say that all the time, go for a walk with your friend or go for a jog or go. Yes, go out and get a meal or cook together or something. Now, yes, we're in COVID. So you're more limited, but not entirely. And it's just that it's so important that people understand that they and their friend are really getting something fundamentally important here not just sort of a pleasurable time.

Dave:

All right. Got it. So you're nourishing yourself with a good friendship-

Lydia:

You are.

Dave:

... and that is something that we don't talk about nearly often enough. So thank you for highlighting that. You also, in your book, you talk about three main types of friendship. What are the three main types of friendship and how are they different?

Lydia:

Well, this was the work of a psychologist that's been expanded on, but yes, they call them friendships styles. And so the first is discerning, which is the idea that there are certain part of the population that really focuses on just a handful of very close relationships. And a lot of us are like that. That's like the most common. Independent is more of the people who are going to try to be arguing with me that I don't need friends. They're not focused on friendship. They think they're fine. And most of them, I think maybe do actually have one or two friends in their lives of some sort, but it's not where they put their energy. And then there are acquisitive people, they call it. And actually the acquisitive friendship style has two divisions or subsets, I guess.

One is unconditional, which is that you just love to make friends with whoever you meet. You're always looking to make friends, you stay in touch with all the people from the different parts of your life. And then selective acquisitive is that you are more careful about it just like it sounds, right? But you are looking to make friends in all the different venues of your life and you're open to that possibility. I feel like that's what, I'm probably selectively acquisitive. I have friends from different parts of my life still. Not everybody, not as close to everyone. I always have a sense of who I'm closer to and who I'm not, who I feel most connected to, but not... but I feel really pleased and thrilled that I feel that I have a lot of people I can count on in my life. But any of these discerning works too, as long as you've got that person, what's a little more unhealthy is the independent one.

If you just never stay in touch and all your relationships are situational, you have colleagues at work, but you never ever see anybody outside of work and you don't have other friends in other ways, that is more of a problem.

Dave:

It feels like there might be a difference between the way men and women approach friendships. It's very stereotypical. A lot of guys, all their friends are at work and then they retire. And two years later, they're lonely and they die. It's almost become a myth or an archetype. It doesn't have to be that way. So that may be a guy thing, that may just be a breadwinner thing, who knows, or an older way of living, but what are the sociological scientific differences we know about between the way women approach friendship and the way men approach friendship? And throw in a little bit about men and women who are friends with each other because I think that may be different as well.

Lydia:

Yeah. So what I think is super interesting here is that the similarities in the way men and women approach friendship far outweigh the differences, but we are so focused on the differences. And I believe that most of those differences are cultural actually more than, there's no biological reason why men should not be as good at friendship as women are. In fact, there are plenty of men who do have very close friends. I'm the mother of three boys. And so I've watched them develop their friendships over their lives. And I know their friends are front and center for them, but the difference is... one of the things is that women are, well, it comes down to a little bit of this, the way they do friendships. So women, the stereotype and there's truth to it, is that women do friendship face-to-face. They talk, and talk, and talk, and talk, and talk.

They share their emotions, and men do friendships side-by-side. So they're more likely to do things together, to watch sports, or play sports, or sit on bar stools next to each other. But maybe less likely to engage in the kind of self-disclosure that women do. One of the points I think is really important is that it doesn't have to be, friendship doesn't have to be all about self-disclosure. If you feel that this is somebody that you really care about and value, and who is there for you in whatever that means, then that's good. And that's what the research is finding is that men value friendship as much as women do, they just do it a little differently, it looks different. And so I'm arguing that, I think that women like to think that their way of doing friendship is the only way. And that that's part of why we're giving male friendship the bum rap here.

It's also true, like I say, culturally men have not been encouraged in the same ways, especially older men that women have to develop their friendships. And it was a really funny, John, the comedian, John Mulaney, you know him, he had a monologue on Saturday Night Live a couple months ago, and he had a joke about how his mother has all these friends and his father who's like between whatever, he's 70 or something, has no friends. He has his mother's friends' husbands, and that's who's in his life. Those are the people you're talking about. And obviously we laugh at that joke because there is some truth to it. We recognize that, that there's especially an older generation of men I think who were not encouraged and who somehow feel that... they tend to put their emotional eggs in one basket, which is with their spouse, if they're married. And that's, it's great to have a really good strong marriage, but it's better to have a strong marriage and some friends outside of it.

Dave:

I love that advice. It's funny, I'm remembering my friend, [Alan Linewand 00:41:32] who's been a CTO, COO at a large number of Silicon Valley companies. When I first had my first baby, or my wife and I had our first baby, he said, "Dave, you need to come over to my house. I'm going to tell you what to buy and what not to buy. I'm just going to give you the engineer's download of all the cool parenting stuff." And it was probably the most valuable hour or two, and I've done the same thing for other friends. Like, here's what no one tells you. And one of the things that stands out that you just triggered for me is that,

he said, "Dave, most of the people I see are the parents of my kids' friends." He said, "So basically there's a whole flock of people that I spend most of my time with that I don't get to pick because they just go to the same school."

So he said, "Pick your school based on whether you want to hang out with other dads in the school because that's what you're going to be doing for the next, probably eight years." And he was actually very right about that just because proximity seems to be such a big variable for friendship.

Lydia:

It's huge.

Dave:

So if proximity is a big thing for friendship, does that mean that the best advice is, go to places to make friends where there's the kind of people you want to hang out with, like go to a conference on something that you care about, or go to a yoga class or something just because then you'll have a regular proximity or is there some other way to create proximity because accidental proximity creates less conscious friendships it seems.

Lydia:

No, you're absolutely right, or your friend was right that it's really good to... I think young parents don't fully appreciate how much their kids' social lives are going to determine their own social lives. And so picking a school, not just for the academics, but for the community and the kinds of... There are, let's be clear, at every school, there are all kinds of parents. But most schools have an ethos, right? And certain kinds of families that are there. And so I think that's very true. And in general, when people ask me about how to find friends, I do say, it seems almost corny and a simple answer, and yet it is deeply, it's profoundly true is that shared interests matter a lot.

And so like if you move to a new town and if you have young kids, or you don't but let's say you like to go hiking or something, look for the hiking club, go to yoga classes, or join, if it's a parenting thing, like yes, look for the parenting groups. And then you can spend time trying to figure out who within that group you feel most connected to. But it's not rocket science, you are more likely to connect with someone who kind of shares your worldview, who is got some similarity to you. And that doesn't have to be by the way, that all the white people or all the black people. I live in urban parts of Brooklyn where I'm much more connected to all the different people of different races and religions here than I am to somebody who lives in some very rural part of the middle of the country. I have more in common with the people here.

So I want to be clear. I'm not saying that we shouldn't have diverse friends. And there's a lot of benefit from that, but we are more likely to connect more deeply with people that we have something in common with. So yeah, seek it out.

Dave:

I think I heard you say don't have friends in the flyover states. Is that-

Lydia:

No, I realized as I said that thing. That's not what I meant to say at all. What I was trying to say was that it's really, there's a natural tendency to be drawn to people who are like us, and that can encompass a lot of things. And so it's not just that whether somebody is the same race as you.

Dave:

You don't mean people who look like you, you mean people who think like you or are interested in the same things as you regardless of how they look.

Lydia:

Thank you. Yes. Yes. Thank you. You're digging me out of that hole. Right. That's exactly right.

Dave:

That's actually what I was hearing you say, to be honest, I just rephrased it for you.

Lydia:

Thank you. I appreciate that.

Dave:

That said, I did grow up in a flyover state. So if you're in one of the flyover states, I feel for you, you can move. Just kidding. You should stay. We need people spread out far than they are.

Lydia:

Yes. Well, and maybe that's one thing the pandemic will do is spread people out, but we'll see. Interesting.

Dave:

Living up here on a 32 acre farm on an Island in Canada, I can tell you it's not a bad place to be a little bit spread out, at least right now, I'm feeling like I'm very fortunate. So maybe that will be a side effect, but if we are more spread out, one of the problems I deal with up here that I wanted to ask you about is loneliness just because, well, the population density is much lower. So how does one go about making and maintaining friendships when they are in a place that is geographically more spread out? You're in Brooklyn. You can have a friend every five feet away from you if you want, but what about the rest of us?

Lydia:

Well, you're right. You have to work at it. You have to understand that it's something that you have to work at. I would say two things. One is that if you live somewhere where it's more rural and there are fewer people around, one is actively working to connect to the people that are near you and seeking them out, making the effort to find people that you like and connect to where you are. And the second is that you're probably going to want to work harder at maintaining your long distance relationships with the friends that you already had. And I think that that can be... it's as simple as picking up the phone on a regular basis, which is something we don't necessarily do all that much anymore.

But one thing that I've seen in the pandemic is that the volume of phone calls has gone through the roof. It rivals, so historically, Mother's Day, apparently is always the number one day for phone calls in the US, I don't know if you've seen this research. But during the pandemic, we're hitting Mother's Day up like every day, or at least in the-

Dave:

Wow.

Lydia:

... in the spring we were because people were picking up the phone in a way that they hadn't. And actually the phone and a good phone conversation seems to make people feel more connected than a Zoom. I think that's because some of the pressure is off, the Zoom is a little bit exhausting and you have to be on the whole time. And sometimes there's a glitch in the technology and our brains do not like that. But a phone call works really well. So pick up the phone and call the people that you left in whatever other part of the country, or that you went to school with on some sort of regular basis.

Dave:

I like that. There's a couple of Zoom hacks that are worth talking about too. One of them is you just change your name on zoom to reconnecting, and then you turn off your video and it says reconnecting. And then like, "Oh, are you guys there? Sorry, my video is going out." So you can do that. Kids are doing that with teachers. The other ones you just move your hand real robotically for a minute and you say, "Oh, there's a video problem." And you turn off video. And then it's a phone call. Or where I am now, sometimes I'm like, "Guys, I'm going to be moving around for a little while. So I'm turning off video so you don't get dizzy." And then you can still talk-

Lydia:

[inaudible 00:49:06]. Right.

Dave:

Because I've run my company over Zoom for eight years and I am remote. This is my office and my labs and all. So if you stare at a screen looking at people for eight or 10 hours a day, it takes a toll, right? So it's okay to turn the video off. I love that you're mentioning that. And neither of those hacks that I talked about is actually one that I really have used, but they both [crosstalk 00:49:29].

Lydia:

Yeah. Well, and I can say as someone who, yes, okay, I live in a more populated place. Although I do spend quite a lot of time at our family farm in Central New York, which is my husband's business. So I have some experience of that too, but I work from home. I work by myself mostly. And so I have had to make a real concerted effort to make sure that I then socialize in the evening or that I go to conferences where I'm likely to meet people that are colleagues and then build those relationships. Obviously now those conferences are virtual, but the point is that there's this extra step I have to take because I don't have colleagues in an easy day-to-day way. And I have done that. I have worked really hard to make those relationships and to build those other kinds of friendships that would have come back when I worked on stuff at magazines, I got it that way.

And so whatever your situation is, whether it's a geography one, or now that we're all working from home, you need to be aware of it. And yes, you need to make that little bit of extra effort.

Dave:

Lydia, if you had three pieces of advice for people listening about how to improve their friendships, only three.

Lydia:

Only three.

Dave:

And your book is so full of stuff. I want to know the top three.

Lydia:

The top three. Oh man, let's see. Well, I think that they go back to things I've already said a couple of times in this conversation. Show up for people, that means all kinds of things. It could mean just texting. It could mean calling. It could mean dropping off food. It could mean showing up at somebody's wedding or in the hospital. And we are understanding, we're talking about pandemic here, but you get what I'm saying. So show up is one, and be positive, and think about what makes you feel good in your friendships and then try to make sure that you are delivering that. When was the last time you told your best friend how much you appreciate him or her, or why, what they do for you?

A lot of times we just don't take the extra step to bother to do that. So that's another one. And the last one is the plan your day accordingly. I've just told you that you will die younger if you don't work on your friendships. And so you do need to schedule, call, whatever it is that's going to work for you to make it a regular part of your life. And no guilt involved. You don't have to say, "But I should be with my family. I should be doing my work." Yes, you need to do those things, but you also need to spend time with your friends. So you need to plan your day accordingly.

Dave:

Lovely. Your website is [lydiadenworth.com](http://lydiadenworth.com), L-Y-D-I-A D-E-Nworth.com. And your book is Friendship: The Evolution, Biology, and Extraordinary Power of Life's Fundamental Bond. Thank you for being on the show.

Lydia:

Thank you so much for having me. This was great.

Dave:

If you liked this episode, it's worth your time to read about friendship. You've probably read about diet. You've probably read *The Bulletproof Diet*, and you're about to read about fasting with my new book *Fast This Way*, which you can pre-order now, but have you ever read a book about friendship now that we've just established it's a new type of nutrient that you should pay attention to as much as exercise, or food, or air? Well, I think it's that important. And I think this book is a great way to get started and just create some awareness in your own life. Am I investing in this? Do I pay as much attention to it as I do the other things that nourish me? It's something that's missing from the world of biohacking.

We all do friendships, but we don't all think about them and do them consciously. And I think there's a lot of room for improvements there that will echo throughout everything else you do in your life. And that's why I wanted to have this episode. I hope you enjoyed it.