

Discerning the Four Levels of Friendships

Many people lack a clear understanding of the levels of friendship. Friendships involve specific freedoms and responsibilities depending on the closeness of the relationship. The four levels of friendship are (1) acquaintance, (2) casual friendship, (3) close friendship (fellowship), and (4) intimate friendship.

1. *Acquaintance*

This level of friendship is characterized by occasional contacts. **Regard each introduction to a new acquaintance as a divine appointment.** Learn and remember his/her name and greet him/her by name during your next encounter.

Be prepared to ask him/her general questions that will provide “public” information. For example, you might ask a person, “Where do you work?” or “Where do you go to school?” Your questions will demonstrate your acceptance and sincere interest in him/her.

Questions can be like arrows in a hunter’s hands: Take a question out of your “quiver” and guide it to its destination. If you miss the target, that is, if your question does not help you get to know the person better, take another question out of your quiver and try again. When you are prepared to ask good questions, **you are free to concentrate on what the other person says** and then use additional questions to maintain the conversation. Be a good listener as your new acquaintance responds to your questions.

2. *Casual Friendship*

A casual friendship can develop quickly, even during your initial contact with an individual. As you **discover common interests, activities, and concerns**, you may be given freedom to ask more personal questions. For example, you could ask questions about his/her goals, wishes, or opinions.

As your casual friendship develops, it is important to discover your friend’s strengths and praise him/her for positive character traits that you observe. **A good friendship will build Godly character in both your lives.** Be honest about yourself and acknowledge your own weaknesses when appropriate.

Be a trustworthy friend. Learn about his hopes and goals in life; show interest and sincere concern if he/she shares problems with you. Pray for him/her.

3. *Close Friendship (Fellowship)*

A casual friendship involves oneness of the soul (the mind, will, and emotions), but **a close friendship—fellowship—reflects oneness of spirit.** We can have many acquaintances and casual friendships with both believers and non-believers. However, true fellowship requires that both persons share the same life goals.

The Lord instructs us to “*consider [observe fully] one another to provoke [incite] unto love and to good works*” (Hebrews 10:24). This third level of friendship carries with it the responsibility to picture true achievement for one another, exhorting “*one another daily . . . lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin*” (Hebrews 3:13). **Discuss specific goals in your lives;** identify potential hindrances to achieving those goals; creatively design projects to help you reach your goals.

Fellowship is “walking in the Light.” “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. . . . If we walk in the light, as he [Christ] is in the light, we have fellowship one with another . . .” (1 John 1:5, 7). Your fellowship should include investments in projects that will equip you to achieve your life goals.

4. *Intimate Friendship*

The fourth, and deepest level of friendship should be based on a commitment to **generously invest in one another’s lives with the goal of helping each other mature in Godly character.** Honesty, humility, and discretion are requirements of an intimate friendship. Comfort one another through trials and sorrows; pray diligently for one another.

At this level, friends have freedom to **correct one another and point out each other’s blind spots.** Don’t simply point out character deficiencies; discern their causes and suggest solutions. Search the Scriptures for keys to solutions, and be a faithful, loyal friend as you encourage one another to pursue spiritual maturity.

The Truth About Emotional Affairs

Contributing Factors and Warning Signs

A number of factors can lead to having an emotional affair. Certainly, communication or conflict resolution issues can lure a spouse to look for companionship elsewhere. Extramarital relationships can also attract those wanting to escape stressful situations, pressure and responsibility associated with family. And as with other temptations like pornography, the pursuit of fantasy undermines the presence of reality.

So how can you recognize an emotional affair? These signs may indicate that a relationship has gone too far:

- You share personal thoughts or stories with someone of the opposite sex.
- You feel a greater emotional intimacy with him/her than you do with your spouse.
- You start comparing him/her to your spouse, and begin listing why your spouse doesn't add up.
- You long for, and look forward to, your next contact or conversation.
- You start changing your normal routine or duties to spend more time with him/her.
- You feel the need to keep conversations or activities involving him/her a secret from your spouse.
- You fantasize about spending time with, getting to know or sharing a life with him/her.
- You spend significant time alone with him/her.

Marriage & Relationships

Platonic or Romantic?

Before you were married, you may have had lots of friends of the opposite sex. But once you've said "I do," your relationship with your spouse must now take priority over every other relationship, and it must be protected against any threat.

So if you are close friends with someone of the opposite sex, you may need to honestly look at that relationship to determine if you have fallen into an emotional affair. Here are a few warning signs that may indicate your friendship has crossed the line from platonic to romantic:

1. Do your conversations with your friend include things that should be kept between you and your spouse?
2. Do you find yourself daydreaming about your friend?
3. Have you found yourself withdrawing from your spouse emotionally or physically?
4. Do you look for excuses to see or talk to your friend?
5. Do you share thoughts, feelings and problems with your friend instead of your spouse?
6. Are you convinced that your friend understands you better than your spouse?
7. Is there flirting or sexual tension between you and your friend?
8. Do you look for "legal" ways to touch your friend (brush lint off his jacket, help her with her coat)?
9. Do you find yourself paying attention to how you look before you see your friend?
10. Is there *any* secrecy about your relationship (how much time you spend together, what you do together, what you talk about)?

Protect Your Marriage

No marriage is affair proof. We are all at risk of losing our focus and being swept into an emotional affair. But you can do several things to safeguard your marriage:

1. Stay honest with yourself and with your spouse. If you find yourself attracted to someone, admit it quickly to yourself and to your spouse. Honesty is the key to preventing a relationship from escalating into an affair.
2. Avoid magazines, movies and other forms of entertainment that can increase your tolerance of affairs.
3. Try to see your relationships from your spouse's perspective. What would your spouse be comfortable with? How would he/she feel about what you are doing?
4. Do not flirt. Most affairs begin with what's considered "innocent flirting," but there's no such thing! Flirting is not a part of friendship.
5. Keep your marriage as your No. 1 priority. Make sure you are working to meet your spouse's most important needs. If you're not sure what those are, ask.
6. Grow together spiritually. Pray with each other and for each other.
7. Set boundaries about how you will interact with the opposite sex. For instance, you and your spouse may decide that neither of you will be alone with someone of the opposite sex, even for business lunches or late nights at work.
8. Surround yourselves with happily married couples who don't believe in fooling around.

You can keep your marriage safe from emotional affairs. But it requires open, honest communication and a commitment to do whatever it takes to keep your marriage your No. 1 relationship.