

Friends more vital than we know

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- THE AUSTRALIAN
- 12:00AM JUNE 9, 2018



Friends become more important than family as we age

We are often referred to as “the Lucky Country”, but Australia is in the middle of a loneliness epidemic. “The biggest crisis facing this country is mental health,” British-Swiss writer Johann Hari said at the recent Sydney Writers Festival. He added: “You guys have the largest per-capita use of antidepressants in the world.”

“Our ancestors on the savanna were better than we are at bonding together into a tribe. If you were cut off from your tribe, you were - anxious because you could be eaten.”

To answer the question of what is driving this bout of depression and misery in the Western world, Hari travelled 60,000km to places such as a Berlin housing project where immigrants, punks and people with mental and physical disabilities were uniting to create a caring community.

In an impoverished district of London, he met a general practitioner prescribing garden therapy for depressed patients in “shit alley” behind his practice. Experiencing the natural world and helping others, including a homeless man, acted as a “natural antidepressant” for these patients. “As the garden began to bloom, we began to bloom,” they told Hari.

Hari argues that the main cause of depression is the way we are living. His second book, *Lost Connections* (the follow-up to his best-selling *Chasing the Scream*), is one of a plethora of new titles about our need for greater connectedness.

Books discussing the related topics of friendship and the need for a more empathetic society also seem to be having their moment.

Kate Leaver, an Australian journalist who specialises in social issues and famous people, writes about the science, psychology and curative nature of having mates in our lives in her first book, *The Friendship Cure*.

Leaver combines artful storytelling about her own relationships and those of “kind strangers from the internet” with evidence-based studies about the health benefits of close friendship support.

Researchers from Brigham Young University in Utah looked back over the scientific literature on loneliness from 1980 to 2014, totalling 3.4 million participants. They concluded that loneliness could increase the risk of death by 30 per cent, with some estimates putting it as high as 60 per cent.

Loneliness is more harmful than smoking 15 cigarettes a day and deadlier than obesity, and so Leaver argues we should treat it like any chronic illness. The social ties that keep us healthier throughout life apparently also have the capacity to keep us alive longer.

The chapter entitled Friends with Health Benefits includes the story of a 100-plus-year-old Sardinian nonna who makes minted ricotta ravioli every Sunday for other residents of her tiny, crowded village. The higher than normal percentage of centenarians of both sexes in Villagrande has been attributed to them living in close proximity to the people they love.

These centenarians are living proof of something Leaver says we have come to realise about humanity — “our greatest chance of survival is companionship”.

Friends become more important than family as we age, but Leaver considers herself an expert on friendship at all stages of our lives.

Leaver, 30, who lives in London with her boyfriend, communicates with her three closest girlfriends via the multiple texting platform WhatsApp. Her message threads range from “personal silliness” to advice on how to be a woman in a man’s world.

I enjoyed the warm writing style and funny asides of this “internet native”, as Leaver refers to herself, who guides us through the new - global language of “dancing lady emojis” and “bromantic memes”.

The Friendship Cure is more than just a manifesto on the loveliness of good friendship and the dangers of the bad, it also includes valuable life lessons. Leaver advocates that friendship “should be a skill we pride ourselves on and actively develop throughout our lives”.

But what about empathy? Is it a skill that can be acquired, mastered and quantified, or is it an intrinsic value that distinctly shapes how one moves through the world?

This is the central question explored in *I Feel You: A Journey to the Far Reaches of Empathy* by Cris Beam, an author and assistant professor at the University of New Jersey.

She discusses empathetic experiments in the arts, educational facilities and the justice system in this comprehensive reference book, which will be a useful addition to the literature for people working in these fields.

Although heavy reading at times, Beam’s book provides thought-provoking discussions about the benefits of incorporating empathy into school curriculums and youth restorative justice programs.

Beam says empathy is the capacity to really understand and feel the experience of someone else. It makes sense that the term was born out of the 19th-century arts movement because paintings, dance, books and the theatre all evoke empathy. “We gauge the actors’ success by how ... acutely we feel their emotions and experiences in ourselves,” Beam

writes. “Live theatre is exciting because the actors are then pulling from the feeling of the crowd. It’s an empathy loop all around.”

Beam’s two previous books are about transgender issues and in this latest volume she is again drawn to others who identify as LGBT, including a gay feminist artist and a transgender sex worker she meets in a courtroom.

The opening narrative of a section, Justice, includes an account of how Beam was violently attacked in a New York subway station by masked youths who called her a dyke.

On reading these stories, I wonder if one of Beam’s aims is to encourage empathy for the LGBT community. I think this is a worthy aim; however, I felt uncomfortable reading details about the disintegration of Beam’s marriage to Seth as he transitioned from woman to man. Forgiveness is a topic she explores in her fractured relationships with Seth and several family members, who never have the right of reply.

The most profound section of the book for me is Beam’s visit to the birthplace of truth and reconciliation, South Africa, where she meets a black teenager whose father was killed by the leader of apartheid’s notorious C10 death squad. In a poignant jail scene, Candice Mama is able to foster a “caring-for attitude” towards the broken and remorseful Eugene de Kock. This opened Mama up to forgiveness and a great sense of relief.

Beam concludes that empathy is an intrinsic value that can be refined and improved.

This academic has a different writing style to the internet-savvy Millennial Leaver, but they share some important messages.

Both agree we need to change the way we look after disenfranchised people, including the mentally ill, refugees, indigenous people and others facing discrimination. This requires a revamp of our values as a human race so we prioritise compassion and integrity over what Hari refers to as “junk values”: seeking status and money.

Leaver’s words sum it up best: “Increase your quota of kindness and deliberately implement a policy of empathy in your life. Be the friend you

wish you had in this world, and maybe we will start to chip away at this epidemic of loneliness.”

Tina Allen is a medical writer and medical scientist. Her debut book is Bill Gibson: Pioneering Bionic Ear Surgeon.

The Friendship Cure: The Art of Friendship and Why it Matters More Than Ever

By Kate Leaver

HarperCollins, 294pp, \$29.99

I Feel You: A Journey to the Far Reaches of Empathy

By Cris Beam

Scribe, 251pp, \$32.99

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/.../friendship...more-than...journey.../%2053eda5f4d8fc36fdfa85fca8610dacb9>