



# **The Scientific Guide to Making Friends**

**by Jake Teeny**

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# Chapter 1: Who Needs Friends Anyways?

As Aristotle aptly wrote over 2,000 years ago, “Man is by nature a social animal.” And although the great philosopher had no empirical data to support his claim, decades and decades of research since has confirmed the point:

Hardly is there a person who wouldn’t wish for another true friend.

From our evolutionary past, it was necessary that we form social groups to survive. Neither the strongest nor the fastest in the animal kingdom, our superiority as a species hinged entirely on our ability to form groups and work cooperatively. Eons and eons later, however, that instinctual drive for social connectedness remains.



Researchers have termed this affiliative motivation *the need to belong* and claim that it is as compelling as other core drives like thirst, hunger, and sex. Although loneliness (i.e., the perceived lack of social companionship) won’t kill you

like failing to drink or eat, there are a host of negative effects that can occur because of it.

For example, those with absent or deprived social networks experience greater stress, have weakened immune systems, and are more likely to exhibit emotional and behavioral pathologies. In fact, we crave friendship and social approval so badly, that we even feel hurt if ostracized by universally condemned individuals.

In an already classic study, participants played a game called *Cyberball* where they and two other participants played a live game of “pass the ball” on the computer screen. Unknowingly, however, two of the three “participants” in each session were actually just computer programs. And they had been assigned pictures and descriptions of KKK members.

In the beginning of the game, each avatar on the screen takes a turn passing the ball, the participant him or herself able to choose which other avatar to pass it to. However, a minute or so into the game, the two KKK members begin to exclusively pass it back and forth between themselves, creating a sense of *social ostracism* (i.e., social exclusion) in the participant.

And even though the real participants were being rejected by KKK members, they still reported feeling more hurt than those who weren’t rejected.

However, even though a stranger's slight still ails us, that's why we have friends to take solace in. But what exactly is a "friend?"

In a literature review on the topic, researchers categorized genuine friendship with the following qualities: 1) intense social activity, 2) more frequent conflict resolution, 3) more effective task performance, 4) reciprocal intimacy and affiliation, and 5) a context for social and emotional growth.

And although trying to find someone who satisfies all of those qualities may sound difficult, by the end of this course, we will have covered enough on the science of friendship that at least you won't have another Friday night spent alone with Netflix and ice cream.

Unless of course, you want a break from all the friends you've now recently made.



\* \* \*

*Friendly Advice:* We use the same language to describe social pain (e.g., loneliness, rejection) as we do with physical pain. And in fact, groundbreaking research shows they have neural overlap, too—[so much so that everyday painkillers have some unintended side effects](#).

Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological bulletin*, 117(3), 497.

Gonsalkorale, K., & Williams, K. D. (2007). The KKK won't let me play: Ostracism even by a despised outgroup hurts. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 37(6), 1176-1186.

Newcomb, A. F., & Bagwell, C. L. (1995). Children's friendship relations: A meta-analytic review. *Psychological bulletin*, 117(2), 306.

## Chapter 2: The Pressure of Proximity

I'm going to be honest with you: the number one component in predicting friendship is not something I can help you with—only enlighten you about. However, with this knowledge (and your own motivation) the first hurdle is very much hurdleable.

Is that a word? Doesn't matter. It's fun to sound out.

So, when it comes to friendship, you should know that the number one predictor of it is physical distance. In what's known as *the proximity principle*, the closer you live to someone, the greater the chance is you'll become friends with them. For example, even trying to maintain a close, platonic relationship across great distances is challenging.



But now you think: “Why, I have plenty of friends who live all over the world!” Even still: *How did you become friends with that person in the first place?*

Turning to the data, researchers went and interviewed 300 college students living in a dormitory about who their closest friends were. Notably, the research team first learned that 60% of close friends all came from the dormitory itself. But furthermore, whoever lived one door away from the participant had a 41% chance of being named as a very close friend.

That is the power of proximity. Regardless of interests, compatibility, or personal quirks, the mere fact they live so close makes them a close friend.

Granted, with today's social media and communication globalization, the boundaries on proximity have been extended. But even still, when researchers analyzed a mass of social media postings, the majority of them were directed to people in their current state, if not their city.

Now, proximity is important for a lot of practical concerns; however, simply being close enough for frequent, in-person interaction has its own psychological influence, too.

In 1992, researchers had four different women (of similar appearance) attend a college lecture class to different extents. For one woman, she only attended five classes, the other two: ten

and then fifteen. The fourth girl didn't come at all. However, none of the women interacted with any of the other students for the duration of their attendance.

At the end of the semester, the actual students were shown pictures of the four women and asked how much they liked each individual. And due to the *mere exposure effect*, the woman who had attended the most classes was evaluated the most positively.



According to the theory, the more you see someone, the more familiar you become with them. And the more familiar you become with them, the more comfortable you feel around them. Thus, you end up liking them more than if you'd never seen them before.

So, when first considering where to make friends, recognize that the closer the better. Whether that's at work, at the coffee shop, through classes, or in hobby

groups, aim for accessibility. For if nothing else, at least you'll save money on gas.

\* \* \*

*Friendly Advice:* There's another way in which distance and friendship are closely related—road trips. Which research has come to find [can produce some surprising effects](#).

Festinger, L., Schachter, S., & Back, K. (1950). *Social pressures in informal groups; a study of human factors in housing*. Oxford England: Harper.

Moreland, R. L., & Beach, S. R. (1992). Exposure effects in the classroom: The development of affinity among students. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 28(3), 255-276.

## Chapter 3: Approaching Your New Bestie

If you have any lemon juice handy, I want you to help me with an experiment I conduct in my classes: pour the lemon juice into a Dixie cup, raise said Dixie cup into the air, drink.

What kind of face did you make? Was it really pinched from the sourness? Or...was it not that bad?

If you're introverted, you likely looked comical with your wince. If you're extroverted, you probably looked like John Wayne in a whiskey shooting contest. Research shows that introverts tend to be more sensitive to physical stimulation than extroverts, be that with tastes, sounds, activity, etc. For example, introverts (vs. extroverts) tend to prefer things like quieter surroundings, cooler showers, and even less spicy food.

Extroverts, on the other hand, have no problem approaching people and speaking in a crowd—they crave the stimulation, cranking up the music on their headphones or requesting the spiciest dish on the menu.

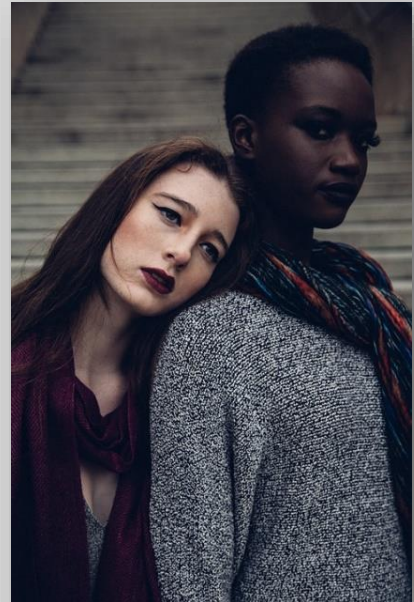
Thus, when you're looking for new friends, try to settle on locations that suit your preference for stimulation. Not everyone can make friends in a bar, nor can everyone stay entertained in a book store. So aim for locations that suit you.

However, if you're introverted, you may think it doesn't matter *where* you look for friends; your years of study on sitting silently by yourself makes the notion of approaching a stranger seem blasphemous.

So here's some scientific advice on how to reduce the anxiety of approaching:

First, one of the primary barriers to approaching someone is the fear that they'll reject you. But if you can get over that, then everything else is easy. To do it, one psychological exercise for you is called *flooding*, a technique powerful enough to eliminate phobias.

Essentially, you engage in a sort of rejection therapy. That is, first take the time to intentionally imagine yourself successful in socially-anxious situations, and then later, expose yourself to inconsequential and even unrelated rejections. For example, the next time you're out somewhere, ask if you can go into an employee-only area (i.e., the employee will likely say no, in which case you'll be practicing "getting rejected").



Between this combination of both positive visualization and exposure to the actual “negative” outcomes, you will be able to adapt past your fear of rejection and realize things were never as bad as you used to imagine.



Want a fun challenge in rejection practice? The next time you're in the checkout line, ask the person in front of you if they'll pay for your groceries. If they say “no,” so what? And if they say yes? Well, you're welcome.

But if rejection therapy sounds too daunting, there is some other psychological insight useful in approaching your new best friend.

Research shows that labeling the negative emotions you feel (e.g., the anxiety at the prospect of approaching someone) will help you reduce them. That is, when you start to feel anxious, create and speak a sentence that a) describes the negative emotion you feel and b) articulates what you're actually afraid of. For example, “I feel anxious that s/he's not going to want to talk to me after beginning conversation.”

Even in participants who didn't believe the effect would work, they later self-reported that it had. And once you get past the first meet and greet, the making friends parts is very easy.

\* \* \*

*Friendly Advice:* Still don't think you have what it takes to approach someone? Check out this research on [improving 'unimprovable' traits](#).

Emmelkamp, P. M. (1974). Self-observation versus flooding in the treatment of agoraphobia. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 12(3), 229-237.

Kircanski, K., Lieberman, M. D., & Craske, M. G. (2012). Feelings Into Words Contributions of Language to Exposure Therapy. *Psychological science*, 0956797612443830.

Rusting, C. L., & Larsen, R. J. (1995). Moods as sources of stimulation: Relationships between personality and desired mood states. *Personality and individual differences*, 18(3), 321-329.

## Chapter 4: Hi My Name is...

All right, let's exercise our imagination for a moment. Like most people, you've probably had to participate in some kind of orientation meeting. At which point, you have the dreaded task of deciding where to sit.

In the back, there is that comfortable looking chair isolated from everyone else, but you decide all that data on the importance of friendship is motivating enough to sit next to someone. So, scanning people's faces, you settle on someone who looks friendly (and normal). And after sitting down next to them, with a push of courage, you introduce yourself.

Now what?



When it comes to meeting someone new, psychologists describe the way in which you interact with them as *impression management*. Essentially, this is the process by which we attempt to influence the way others see us. And although there are numerous ways to do this, I'm going to focus on two robust methods for making a good impression.

First, it should be your goal to learn about this other person rather than trying to communicate about yourself. For example, researchers brought participants into the lab and instructed them to either have “self-enhancing goals” (i.e., talking yourself up to demonstrate your worth) or to have “learning goals” (i.e., trying to learn more about others) when attending a social function.

Afterward, the researchers found that those who had the learning goal were liked significantly more by their peers than those in the self-enhancement or no instruction group. Asking questions and learning about the other people like this is such an effective strategy at making friends, because, well, people get real enjoyment talking about themselves—literally!

When researchers put participants into a brain scanner and had them disclose information about themselves, the *reward centers* in the brain—the same areas activated when one eats or has sex—light up! Thus, getting people to talk about themselves makes them feel happy, a feeling which they then ascribe to your presence.

However, as you ask questions and get to know this other person, your secondary goal should be to establish *similarity*.

Research shows time and time again that we are attracted to similar others. In fact, people tend to choose friends who are even similar in DNA. When analyzing the genetic markers of about 2,000 people, the researchers found that the DNA of close friends had the same genetic similarity as 4<sup>th</sup> cousins.

But you don't need to modify your genome sequence to increase your similarity. Without lying, tell the other person if you own an article of clothing similar to theirs, or if their name is similar to someone close to you, or if they've traveled to a place you've always wanted to go.



Of course, repeatedly saying, “That’s my favorite band/show/food/etc., too!” will become obvious to the other person; however, simply asking questions to learn about the other person—while noting instances of similarity between you two—is one of the easiest and most effective ways to begin with a good first impression. Plus, now you don’t have to worry about filling any awkward silence—they’ll do it for you!

\* \* \*

*Friendly Advice:* Some people just seem like naturals when it comes to social interactions—so [who are these charismatic jerks and how did they become that way?](#)

Christakis, N. A., & Fowler, J. H. (2014). Friendship and natural selection. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 111(Supplement 3), 10796-10801.

Tice, D. M., Butler, J. L., Muraven, M. B., & Stillwell, A. M. (1995). When modesty prevails: Differential favorability of self-presentation to friends and strangers. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69(6), 1120.

## Chapter 5: Rock Your Body

If you're an introvert, then engaging in the game of small talk can be rather intimidating. *What happens if I can't think of anything to say? What if there are long awkward pauses?*

Fortunately, as you practice asking questions (as advised in the previous post), you'll quickly come to realize that people can talk about themselves indefinitely.

And even though you don't have to talk while the other person answers your questions, you can still act to further along the friendship; namely, control your body language.



Research shows that nonverbal information is so powerful that if it contradicts what your explicit verbiage communicates, people are five times more likely to believe what you said nonverbally. In which case, some of the first intentional body language you should be engaging in is called *social mimicry*.

Essentially, social mimicry involves duplicating the other person's body posture and position with your own body posture and position. For

example, if the other person is sitting with their hands in their lap, you should sit with your hands in your lap, too.

In fact, researchers have found that extroverts (over and over) are better at establishing rapport with other people than introverts are. To this end, research has shown that when extroverts want to make friends with people, they naturally engage in social mimicry to a much greater extent than introverts will—and this in turn leads to heightened rapport.

Beyond subtly mimicking the other person's posture, however, there are three primary body language tactics you can employ to increase the quality of your interaction with your newfound friend.

First, make mostly constant eye contact while listening, but use eye contact more sparingly while speaking yourself. When researchers brought participants into the lab and had them interact in pairs, they found that increased eye contact *as the listener* resulted in the greater liking; however, too much eye contact *as the speaker* conveyed a sense of dominance that the other person didn't care for.

Second, maintain an open body posture. That is, don't sit with your arms crossed or your knees pointed away from the other person. Instead, have your arms at your side or in your lap, square your shoulders toward the other person, and lean forward slightly. This invitational posture will make the other person feel more welcomed, encouraging them to speak and share.

And finally, use gestures to accompany or help illustrate what you're saying. Clear hand or arm gestures while speaking has been shown to imply comfort and intimacy with the other person, so using them right off the bat will help to develop rapport immediately.

Pretty easy, right? For practice, try doing these things with a friend you already have, then, as you get more comfortable with it all, you'll start naturally employing this advice the next time you begin small talk with a stranger.



\* \* \*

*Friendly Advice:* Body language can have more than just an effect on other people, though; in fact, it can actually [affect your own psychology in powerful and unexpected ways](#).

Burgoon, J. K. (1995). Nonverbal signals. In M. L. Knapp & G. R. Miller (Eds.), *Handbook of nonverbal communication*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Berry, D. S., & Hansen, J. S. (2000). Personality, nonverbal behavior, and interaction quality in female dyads. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 26(3), 278-292.

Duffy, K. A., & Chartrand, T. L. (2015). The Extrovert Advantage How and When Extroverts Build Rapport With Other People. *Psychological Science*, 0956797615600890.

## Chapter 6: Deepening Your Bond

Although I have been iterating the importance (and power) of asking questions when it comes to developing friendships, after you have made it past the cursory stages, it's time to tell the other person a little bit about yourself.

That is, *self-disclosure* builds intimacy.

Research shows that the less you self-disclose to friends, the lonelier you feel. Therefore, an integral component of social relationships is intimate self-disclosure. And as a result, you can use what's known as the *dyadic effect* to your advantage

This phenomenon relates to people's willing to disclose information at reciprocal levels of intimacy. For example, if you tell me something heartfelt about yourself, in return, I will feel compelled to share something heartfelt about myself.

Disclosure reciprocity like this is critical in the growth and development of friendships, such that the more you disclose, the more the other person will disclose, deepening the relationship in this back and forth sharing.



However, be wary about revealing too much information too soon. Research does support the *timing effect*, whereby people tend to like others who are quick to reveal something personal that they themselves were responsible for (e.g., in one study, participants liked another person more if he revealed (vs. didn't reveal) that his girlfriend had accidentally become pregnant). But still, you should aim to gradually increase the intimacy of your self-disclosure with new social bonds, beginning with more cursory information before getting into more personal confessions.

In addition to the simple phenomenon of the dyadic effect, another way to help deepen a friendship is to engage in mutual laughter. In one study, researchers had participants in pairs of two either watch a 10-minute clip of a comedy show, a nature documentary (*Planet Earth*), or golf clips. Afterward, the participants were left alone to interact while the researchers secretly watched them.

Compared to the other two films, those who saw the comedy clip were much more likely to self-disclose and to self-disclose to a greater extent. The researchers contend that laughing

increases one's endorphin activation, which has been shown to be involved in the formation of social bonds. So, when trying to come up with something to do with a new friend, consider watching a funny movie or attending a local improv show.

But an even easier way to develop friendship is something your mom has been telling you for years: make sure to say thank you!



The psychological influence of expressing gratitude has shown some pretty amazing effects, and when it comes to friendship, it's no different. For example, researchers had participants either 1) actively express their gratitude to their friends, or 2) merely think about how grateful they were for their friends, or 3) continue on with life as normal.

And at the end of this three-week experiment, the friends who had

actively expressed their gratitude reported greater satisfaction and happiness in their friendship than either of the other two groups.

Thus, when it comes to deepening a friendship, remember: self-disclose, laugh, and express how much you appreciate them.

\* \* \*

*Friendly Advice:* So you like this person; you want to be friends; but next thing you know, you want to be *more* than friends. Take [a quick detour from the platonic to the passionate](#) to learn how you can apply today's lesson to romance.

Derlega, V. J., Wilson, M., & Chaikin, A. L. (1976). Friendship and disclosure reciprocity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 34(4), 578.

Gray, A., Parkinson, B., & Dunbar, R. (2015). Laughter's Influence on the Intimacy of Self-Disclosure. *Human Nature*, 26(1), 28-43.

Solano, C. H., Batten, P. G., & Parish, E. A. (1982). Loneliness and patterns of self-disclosure. *Journal Of Personality And Social Psychology*, 43(3), 524-531.

Lambert, N. M., Clark, M. S., Durtschi, J., Fincham, F. D., & Graham, S. M. (2010). Benefits of expressing gratitude expressing gratitude to a partner changes one's view of the relationship. *Psychological Science*. 21(4).

# Chapter 7: The Foundation of Friendship

Although this course has so far covered a wide variety of insight on the science of friendship, there is a fundamental component of social relationships that determines its formation; that is, *theory of mind*.



Theory of mind (ToM) is the awareness that other people's behavior is shaped by their inner thoughts and feelings, even when these thoughts and feelings are at odds with external reality. For example, you may have said something purely in jest (external reality); however, someone overhearing the remark may misinterpret it in a negative light (a result of their own internal processes).

As much as we like to believe that we directly perceive the world, our own thoughts and emotions bias these perceptions. Thus, what really matters in any situation is not so much what's going on around a person, but what's going on inside his or her head.

At a young age, we develop this ability to recognize that other people have their own inner thoughts guiding their behavior; however, research shows that the more we recognize this fact (i.e., rank higher in ToM awareness), the better and more prolific social connections we have.

Now, although recognizing that others have minds just as complex and unique as your own is invaluable in developing friendships, there is an even more challenging next step psychologists refer to as *perspective taking*.

When trying to imagine how another person would respond emotionally and/or cognitively to a situation, you're engaging in perspective taking. This, of course, is a highly useful skill because using it allows you to tailor your conversation, behavior, or the general situation itself to best appeal to your new friend

Unfortunately, though, humans are not very great at perspective taking.

First, research shows that when we become anxious, we become very self-focused, reducing or hampering our ability to perspective take. For example, when we meet a new person (which can be stressful) this heightened anxiety will inhibit our ability to take another's perspective.

To get around this, one tip you can use to reduce your anxiety is called *self-affirmation*. That is, prior to or in the midst of your jitters, take a moment to dwell on something very important to

you in life—maybe that’s your family, your religion, a hobby of yours, a moral viewpoint, etc.. By reminding yourself of this “failsafe” pride, it helps to buffer you against stress.

However, another psychological issue that gets in the way of perspective taking is known as *the false consensus effect*. If we are asked to estimate the general population’s preferences and



opinions on things, we tend to believe our *own* preferences and opinions are held more broadly than they actually are.

For example, we tend to think that most people like the same TV shows we watch, the music we listen to, and the food we eat. However, when we anchor on these beliefs to imagine how someone else would respond in a situation, it distorts our attempt at perspective taking.

In overcoming this (and other biases), however, the most important thing is simply being aware of them. For as the Benjamin Haydon quote goes: “Fortunately for serious minds, a bias recognized is a bias sterilized.”

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*Friendly Advice:* Our difficulty at perspective taking results in another psychological bias that can make social friends (and social bonds) difficult. Learn more about the [‘spotlight effect’](#) here.

Fink, E., Begeer, S., Peterson, C. C., Slaughter, V., & Rosnay, M. (2015). Friendlessness and theory of mind: A prospective longitudinal study. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 33(1), 1-17.

Hales, A. H., Wesselmann, E. D., & Williams, K. D. (2016). Prayer, self-affirmation, and distraction improve recovery from short-term ostracism. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 64, 8-20.

Marks, G., & Miller, N. (1987). Ten years of research on the false-consensus effect: An empirical and theoretical review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 102(1), 72.

Martin, L. J., Hathaway, G., Isbester, K., Mirali, S., Acland, E. L., Niederstrasser, N., ... & Sternberg, W. F. (2015). Reducing social stress elicits emotional contagion of pain in mouse and human strangers. *Current Biology*, 25(3), 326-332.

## Chapter 8: Meeting Yourself

Well, my dear reader, you have made it to the final class of this series on the science of friendship. However, as much as you may now know about the psychology of others, it is equally important to understand the psychology of the self.



That is, learning more about your own personality will allow you to more effectively make friends with the friends you want to make. And although there are many personality traits that influence social relationships, there is one in particular that you should definitely know about: *self-monitoring*.

Self-monitoring is the extent to which a person orients the expression of his or her opinions and behaviors to others in a social setting. For example, *high* self-monitors tend to be focused on social

appropriateness, using others' behavior to guide their own words and actions. A "chameleon" with their social skills and knowledge, high self-monitors are able to strategically present themselves in a way that appeals to the current social setting.

*Low* self-monitors, on the other hand, primarily attend to and act on their own psychological states (e.g., their own personal opinions and beliefs). Rather than trying to fit themselves to the current social situation, low self-monitors tend to express and act as they truly feel, less concerned with how others interpret their words and deeds.



Now, let me be clear: it is not "better" or "worse" to be a high vs. low self-monitor; each has its strengths and weaknesses. For example, although high self-monitors tend to be more skilled in a variety of social settings, low self-monitors tend to have closer or more significant relationships.

When it comes to making friends, though, we tend to prefer those who reflect our own level of self-monitoring (i.e., if you're a high [low] self-monitor, you tend to prefer high [low] self-monitoring friends). As a result, you can see in

*Table 1* some of the friendship qualities that each type of self-monitor tends to seek out.

Table 1

Friendship Outcomes by Extent of Self-Monitoring	
<i>High self-monitor friends are...</i>	<i>Low self-monitor friends are...</i>
<b>based on shared situations</b>	based on shared values
<b>often utilitarian in nature</b>	often person-oriented in nature
<b>superficial, short-term exchanges</b>	profound, long-term exchanges
<b>limited to specific contexts</b>	generalizable across situations

Even though these are *tendencies* for each type of self-monitor, there are still exceptions—a fair rule for all of social psychology. However, in general, high self-monitors’ motivation to engage in strategic self-presentation (i.e., behaving in accordance with general social approval), and low self-monitors’ motivation to engage in self-verification (i.e., behaving in line with one’s enduring disposition) leads to these friendship outcomes.

But in addition to the differences between how self-monitors make and maintain friends, there are also differences in how they deal with problems in an established relationship.

High self-monitors tend to use *passive strategies* (e.g., waiting out a problem, punishing the friend by ignoring him/her, letting the friendship dissolve), whereas low self-monitors tend to use *active strategies* (e.g., discussing the problem directly, seeking a mutual compromise, getting help from a third party).

With all friendships, though, it is some violation of one’s “rules of friendship” that typically terminates a social bond. Thus, it’s important to know how your own personality influences your expectation for the relationship.

And with that, you have made it to the end of the course! However, social scientists have studied far more than just friendship, using methodologically collected data to report on the science of the human mind. And the more you know about the psychophilosophy of people, the easier you’ll be able to befriend them.

Or at least impress them with interesting scientific facts ;)



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*Friendly Advice:* Many of these lessons in this course can be applied to meeting and courting a romantic partner instead of a platonic one. But instead of another eight classes on that, how about an answer for [what science has to on love at first sight?](#)

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Leone, C., & Hawkins, L. B. (2006). Self-Monitoring and Close Relationships. *Journal of personality*, 74(3), 739-778.

Snyder, M., Gangestad, S., & Simpson, J. A. (1983). Choosing friends as activity partners: The role of self-monitoring. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 45(5), 1061.