Key Points

- Humans are social animals. We have prospered as a species not only due to our ability to reason and the position of our thumbs, but also due to our ability to come together and help one another. Relationships are at the heart of what makes us human.

- The quality of our relationships has a profound impact upon our health, probably due to the chronic effect of stress (or stress relief) affiliated with such relationships (or the lack thereof). It is estimated that those who lack satisfying emotional relationships may have three to five times the risk for all-cause illness and premature death than those who have a number of satisfying relationships.

- Companionship and reciprocity characterize friendships.

- Differences in male and female socialization have given rise to somewhat different patterns of communication among males and females.

- Most successful marriages are a balance of friendship, commitment, and romance. Each must be in balance for the relationship to prosper.

- Commitment, appreciation, communication, spending time together, spiritual wellness, and effective coping mechanisms characterize most successful families.

Reading Comprehension – Pages 394 to 398

Friendship:
What are the seven characteristics that mark a genuine friendship?

Guidelines for effective communication:
What is the difference between an "I" statement and a "you" statement? How does one focus on a specific behavior? (What should one avoid?) What is "reflective listening"? What is the advice regarding advice?
Conflict and conflict resolution:
- What is the problem with anger?
- How does one clarify the issue?
- How is reflective listening used in finding out what each person wants?

Marriage and family:
- What are the best predictors of a happy marriage?
- What are the six major qualities or themes in strong families?

Supplemental Knowledge

Dean Ornish is a cardiologist, probably the world's leading authority on non-invasive (e.g., non-surgical) rehabilitation from cardiac disease. He began his research by looking at lifestyle interventions such as exercise, a reduction in dietary saturated fat, and stress-management techniques, but over time he has become convinced that one of the most profound influences upon our health is the character and quality of our relationships.

Human beings are social animals. Our brains give us the ability to reason, the position of our thumbs gives us the ability to grasp tools, but in large measure we have prospered on this planet due to our ability to come together and form relationships. With each of us helping one another – specialists in support of a common good – we are much better off than we would ever be working alone. By contrast, most humans find loneliness and isolation to be profoundly stressful, so stressful, in fact, that it appears to have a direct effect upon our health and well-being.

In his book, Love and Survival, Ornish points out that many of the cultural underpinnings of society have deteriorated in the last fifty years. Families are much more likely to experience divorce, people have moved from small towns and villages to large cities, extended families (aunts, uncles, cousins) are much less likely to live in the same geographic area, people are much more likely to change employers or careers, and many of our cultural institutions (churches, schools, civic clubs, youth organizations, etc.) do not hold the same influence they once held.

Ornish believes these cultural underpinnings were, in large measure, the means by which individuals found ways to cope with life – to relieve stress – and with the deterioration of these traditional forces the level of stress in our society has risen. Of course, the quality of medical care has also risen, so people are living longer – but not as long as they could (theoretically) be living, if we still had the same degree of social support. Interestingly enough, Ornish points to the rise in destructive social groups, such as membership in gangs or cults or the rise of ethnic "balkanization" or "tribalization," as evidence for his thesis that isolation is so stressful for humans that negative associations can be seen as being preferable to non-association.

One of the earliest studies that indicated the character and quality of our relationships could have an influence upon our health was the long-term investigation of the Pennsylvania communities of Roseto, Bangor, and Nazareth. All three towns had the same health facilities, water supply, dietary factors, etc., but Roseto had much lower rates
of cardiovascular disease. The conclusion of the researchers was that Roseto – a town of recent Italian-American immigrants – had much stronger family, social, and community ties, and that this social environment tended to protect the population in some way from the level of cardiovascular disease experienced in the neighboring communities. This thesis was seemingly ratified when, during the 1960's and 1970's, Roseto began to drift from the family, religious, and cultural traditions of the past, and the mortality rates in the community rose to mimic those of Bangor and Nazareth.

Another study investigated the rate of cardiovascular disease among native Japanese and Japanese immigrants living in Honolulu and San Francisco. The researchers found a rise in cardiovascular disease among Japanese-Americans that was not explained by differences in smoking, diet, blood pressure, or blood cholesterol. What was significant, according to Ornish, was the degree to which the Japanese-Americans maintained the social networks, family ties, and sense of community of traditional Japanese society. Those who maintained the traditional close ties of Japanese culture had cardiovascular disease rates similar to those living in the Japanese homeland.

Drawing upon these and a host of other studies, Ornish makes the prediction that those who do not have sufficient satisfying, emotional relationships in their life are three to five times more likely to experience illness or pre-mature death (all-cause mortality). In epidemiological terms (the statistics of death and disease), this figure, if correct, is a finding of staggering significance.

It is interesting to note that Ornish found the quality of relationships to be much more important than the quantity of relationships. Apparently most of us know plenty of people on a casual basis. We do not hunger for association in our society, we hunger for intimacy – for relationships of deep security, places where we can expose our innermost selves and still find that we are loved, cared for, and valued. Indeed, some of the studies Ornish cites found a profound positive effect when chronically ill patients simply spent time with a friendly dog or cat, perhaps the closest thing these patients could find to a source of unconditional positive regard.

The textbook lists several characteristics of meaningful friendships, all of which seem to cluster under the two categories of companionship and reciprocity.

We seek out those who have similar interests and values because it is there we find respect, acceptance, and trust. Since their attitudes and values are the same as our attitudes and values, our friends reinforce ourselves. We feel comfortable and lighthearted in their presence, and we enjoy spending time with them.

In addition, the quality of reciprocity indicates that, in meaningful friendships, "one hand washes the other." We help them; they help us. We are loyal to them; they are loyal to us. We can count on them; they can count on us.

One way in which we seek out some friends who are – at least in one way – strikingly dissimilar to ourselves is our formation of friendships with those of the opposite gender. It is interesting to note that while there are wide ranges of individual variation, in our culture men still tend to be socialized towards independence and problem-solving ("hunters and warriors"), and may feel threatened by strong showings of emotion, prolonged eye contact, or evidence of dependence upon another person. For reasons both biological and cultural, females continue to be the primary care givers of
young children in our society ("keepers of hearth and home"), and as such women tend to
be socialized towards emotional intimacy and problem-sharing.

As a classic example of the conflict that can result from these differences in
socialization, consider the woman who comes to a male friend to tell him about the
problem she is having at work. Being socialized towards sharing problems with other
women, she expects someone who will listen to her and share the emotions she is feeling.
Her male friend, having been socialized towards independent problem solving, believes
he is being asked to present a solution, and he does so. The woman feels marginalized
because he will not share her emotions, and she reacts with anger. The man feels
threatened because his solution was rejected, and he also reciprocates with anger.

There are those, of course, who do not wish to perpetuate these socialization
patterns with their children and actively work against them. It is a hard thing to chan-
the behavior of an entire society, however, and even if typical male or female patterns of
behavior are not practiced in the home, they are likely to be practiced with other children
at school or in the community. Therefore, an understanding of the socialization pressures
that each gender experiences may ease some of the stereotypical conflict between men
and women.

Usually our most meaningful friendship is developed with a marriage partner, or
at least a "significant other." In such a relationship a genuine friendship forms an ideal
base, but, according to the work of Robert Sternberg, a successful marriage (or similar)
relationship goes beyond the companionship and reciprocity of a good friendship into a
special kind of commitment. Lifetime partners must be committed to a long-term
relationship, because even the best of friends will have days, weeks, or months (or even
years) where things do not go all that well. This relationship of commitment is marked
by loyalty and unselfishness, but it usually also includes shared values deeply held, a
"spiritual" basis to their relationship that transcends the two individuals. This may be
why couples that do not live together before marriage have a lower divorce rate than
those who do. While popular wisdom suggests that a "trial period" might be prudent,
compatibility is only one side of Sternberg's triangle – commitment is another. It appears
that commitment may be enhanced by all of the traditional weight society gives to a
formal wedding ceremony: Something you can't obtain by simply asking the postmaster
to forward your mail to a new address.

The final side of Sternberg's triangle, romance, is important throughout the
partnership, but perhaps more so as "kindling to the fire" in the early years, when minor
differences in compatibility between the partners are likely to be discounted in the light
of the sheer magical nature of the partner's presence. Research has shown that there is a
certain chemical "cocktail" of neurotransmitters in the brain associated with the
excitement of being in love. This condition is heavily intertwined with sexual interest, of
course, and is reinforced by the proximity of the other person and by the physical
sensations of touching, caressing, cuddling, etc.

All three elements of Sternberg's triangle – friendship, commitment, and romance
– are important. By way of warning, however, there is an element of danger to any
unbalanced relationship, with the possible exception of "too much" friendship. As an
example, romance is designed to be the spice of the marriage, but, just as one would not
sit down each morning to a big bowl of paprika, there must needs be something more
substantial to the relationship if the partnership is going to last. Be advised that the neurotransmitter "cocktail" associated with romantic attraction mellows somewhat after the first two or three years of close association — no matter how intense those feelings were initially — and, if this is the only basis for the relationship, dissatisfaction is almost sure to follow.

On the other hand, as Dean Ornish points out, most people find loneliness to be profoundly stressful, and they will do most anything to avoid the prospect of being alone, even to the point of entering into a negative relationship. Therefore, if lust is the counterfeit of romance, then perhaps fear is the counterfeit of commitment. It may help you to understand some of the complexities of adult life to know that — while such couples often make a show of romance and friendship for appearances sake — there are a great number of relationships that have been entered into, or maintained, out of a fear of being alone.

Not everyone experiences a marriage (or similar) relationship, and by no means do I mean to imply that such a relationship is an essential requirement for a happy and fulfilling life. Trust me on that one. But, for most people, their marriage partner becomes the most significant person in their life, and as such, the relationship with the greatest likelihood to provide the depth of emotional intimacy Ornish speaks of. Consequently, the lack of such emotional intimacy is this relationship of relationships can bring us tremendous pain and emotional distress.

In a similar manner, families can be the source of our greatest joys or our greatest pains. Hopefully, your family was and is a source of joy to you. If not, perhaps you will have the opportunity to make a family of your own. According to the textbook, successful families have six major qualities or themes, which I have supplemented with the results of other research literature.

First, family members have a deep commitment to each other, such that they invest much of their time and energy into the family. This is a pro-active commitment on their part; they block out time to spend with their family rather than relying upon developing family relationships in the leftover minutes of the day.

Secondly, family members show appreciation for one another with open demonstrations of love and affection.

Third, the family has developed good patterns of communication, including the ability to resolve conflicts. Successful families also tend to have a sense of humor. Indeed, the most successful families often have humor enshrined as an institutional value. A sense of humor is important not only for generating feelings of genuine enjoyment of each other's company, but also as a potent means of relieving stress.

Fourth, the family spends time together in active (not passive) interaction. Usually this includes the use of little ceremonies and traditions, often things having meaning only within the family. For example, one woman I knew served all-orange foods on Halloween, all-green foods on St. Patrick's Day, and so on, while a student of mine came from a family in which everyone always wore new pajamas on Christmas Eve. Another family I know of used to occasionally make double-double batches of chocolate chip cookies and eat them for Sunday dinner — the entire Sunday dinner — washed down with a few quarts of cold milk.
Fifth, the family has a strong value system, what the textbook calls "spiritual wellness." Similar to the marriage relationship, family relationships seem to be enhanced when the family has a sense of commitment to something higher than themselves.

Finally, successful families have the ability to cope with crisis. Frequently this involves the presence of support networks, such as extended family, church affiliation, neighborhood affiliations, etc. In addition, since finances are the roots of many a crisis, the burdens upon a family tend to be lower when they practice sound financial management, including the use of savings plans and the avoidance of debt.

As a final observation, the evening news is filled continually with stories of hatred, one group for another, and we can easily see that hatred often becomes its own reward: Hatred for hatred's sake. Rivals in the Balkans or the Middle East are continuing grudge matches that are often hundreds, even thousands of years old. And history has shown that the easiest way for a power-hungry despot to generate a following is to fuel a common hatred. Herds can be gullied into madness just as easily as individuals, perhaps more so, and if you can get the crowd inflamed with an "us versus them" mentality – religious, racial, ethnic, political – a power-hungry leader can steer the group anywhere he wants to go. It is so cheap, so easy, and it almost always works.

And these conflicts are not limited to other nations. There are those who would like to fuel the fires of discontent to feed their own ambition, and as America has moved from a small-town, extended family culture to a society of individuals in a crowd we often see increasing fractionalization, separating each of us into quarreling special interest groups.

This trend appears to have carried over into the higher education environment. I am not quite old enough to say from my own experience, but Arthur Levine and others (When Hope and Fear Collide: A Portrait of Today's College Student) claim that the marketplace nature of American education (money in exchange for a degree; a degree in exchange for a higher standard of living) has eroded the students' sense of personal identification with a college or university as a community of learning: A place where one supports the athletic teams, participates in campus-wide activities, and exhibits a sense of pride in the institution because all these things are a reflection of us, an image of ourselves. This sense of community has been further fractionated, according to Levine, as universities across the nation have followed the general trend of society and more and more special interest groups have sought to separate themselves; lauding diversity as if it were an end goal, and not merely a first step towards mobilizing a previously marginalized segment into a fuller place within the community. To my mind we have prospered as a society not because of our ability to divide ourselves, but because of our ability to come together, and our end goal is full participation, not further isolation.