



Your Inner Circle:

Should You Be More Picky?

The people you see most often can make or break your health, happiness and success – so it pays to choose them carefully, writes self-development expert Ariane de Bonvoisin

It doesn't matter how smart or how old you are. It doesn't matter how talented you are, whether or not you went to university, where you were born or which family you came from. What counts in life are the people you surround yourself with. In fact, as leading personal-development author and speaker Jim Rohn once put it, 'You are the average of the five people you spend the most time with.'

Those closest to us affect our way of thinking, our self-esteem and our decisions. You're your own person, but research has shown we're much more affected by our environment than we think. A study by research-based US consulting company Gallup shows that if your friends and family engage in unhealthy habits such as drinking, smoking or being inactive, you're more likely to do so as well. For example, results showed that people who smoke were twice as likely to be friends with other smokers.

A study by Dr Nicholas Christakis at Harvard Medical School in the US shows that if your friends are overweight, it's likely you will be too. He studied 10 000 people and the influence of the people around them over a number of years, concluding that we are nearly 60% more likely to be overweight if our friends are. Another reference from Business Network International, the largest networking organisation in the world, showed that if your peers are successful, it is much more likely that you'll also have a successful job and career.

It can be a scary wake-up call to realise other people's views of what's acceptable and normal, not to mention our social networks, are silently affecting all our choices.

Let's look at five types of people who contribute ingredients to your daily life. As you read through these, don't be afraid to spend a little less time with certain friends, or expect less support from certain family members if you start surrounding yourself with the right people.

1 YOUR PARENTS

Since our parents are our first authority figures, we tend to put them on a pedestal, thinking they know absolutely everything. That means some of our basic beliefs are actually theirs. But these may not even be remotely right for us. For example, many parents have conditioned their kids to believe in financial scarcity since they had money issues; some might be racist or want their kids to follow their religious convictions or marry a certain type of person. Their limiting beliefs may often hold you back as you believe you must stay loyal to them.

It's critically important that you question your inherited beliefs. If they're good beliefs and uplift you, keep them. If they drain you of energy, choose your own now. And don't be afraid of disappointing your parents. You are not here to protect them; you are here to be happy.

2 YOUR PARTNER

Your partner is likely one of the strongest influences in your life. And because our fear of being rejected is such a powerful force, it can easily make us adjust our personal standards to stay connected. We get into a routine, we fall into the same patterns they have and we aren't totally ourselves. If his standards are not as high as yours, this might bring you down to his level. (It works both ways – you might be the negative force on him!) Your lowered standards become 'the norm'.

You and your partner control each other's lives more than you probably acknowledge. If his standards are dragging you down, don't make ditching him your first option. Make the changes you want to make, whether it is getting fit, getting off your laptop, cleaning up the house or not gossiping. Your partner will often rise to meet you where you are.

3 YOUR FRIENDS AND BFF

Our friends all have good intentions. They want to be there and want what they think is best for us. A good friend can encourage us and hold us accountable, tell us the truth even if it's painful, see the positives in us and be a constant during the messiness of life.

A friend can also be someone who doesn't want to see you change, and doesn't really want massive success or happiness for you, especially if she isn't in a good place. She may feel tied to keeping you the way you are and not having you change (for example, keeping you overweight if you eat out a lot together).

A friend can have a very different view of life, relationships, marriage, religion, work. If you want to quit a job you hate, she may project her need for financial security onto you. If you want to start dating a guy she doesn't approve of, she might discourage you. The downside is your views tend to become more like hers than your own. Because it's so important to us to be liked and be accepted, we downplay our own dreams and ideas. ▶

YOU as a Friend

It's helpful to check in on how you show up as a friend, too. If you were on someone's Top Five list, what do you think they'd say about you? Are you a good influence on them, and in what ways? Can you see how perhaps you're not being as supportive as you could be, or are too focused on yourself? How do they see you? As healthy? Happy? Complaining? Stressed? In a good/bad relationship?

4 YOUR COLLEAGUES

Perhaps, like many of us, you take your work quite seriously. Maybe it took a while to get your job in the first place, so you desperately want to keep your position, fit in and, above all else, be liked and feel you are good enough. Believe it or not, your boss and colleagues are all going after these same goals!

Every work environment has its own set of rules, from the obvious to the invisible (how to dress, what the boss likes, when to speak up and when to be quiet, even what to eat). Your colleagues influence how much you value work, how much stress you take on and how you deal with it, and what work-life balance and leisure activities you create time for, if any. Raise your awareness of these hidden influences.



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5 YOURSELF

You spend the biggest amount of time in your own head. So are you your own best friend? Most of us are our own worst critics. Many of us can't stand to face the person staring at us in the mirror. Yet our self-image and the feelings we drag from day to day are what most influence our actions. This is the one thing in life over which we have total control.

I have a sticker on the mirror that reads 'I unconditionally accept myself right now'. It's not an ego statement. It's just a reminder to allow myself to be human, not focusing on what's bad or going wrong, not judging myself for not being thin/attractive/cool/smart enough. Put your own sticker up on your mirror. It might not feel any different the first few times you read it, but eventually you'll condition your mind to stop the crazy disapproval that's going on.

You can immediately identify those who love themselves: they're kind and accepting of their faults, gentle on themselves and light on life. Raise your awareness of whom you are spending time with and simply be conscious of your choices. Sometimes, you don't need discipline, willpower or more time to make changes in your life. Just notice whom you are letting into your inner circle. ✂

Rate Your Top Five

1 Think about this: who are the five people you spend time with? This doesn't necessarily mean time spent in person – it could be time spent talking on the phone or even chatting online. Your top five might include close friends, family members, your boyfriend or co-workers. Write their names on a piece of paper.

2 Once you have a list, ask yourself this: would you be friends with them if you met them today – or are they legacy friends (those you are friends with because you've known them since school, for example)?

3 Next, consider this: how successful and ambitious are they? How happy, optimistic and enthusiastic? Are they healthy? In relationships? Funny? Stressed? Do they smoke? Drink a lot? Can they have a deep conversation or are they superficial?

4 Evaluate carefully whether they help you with whatever is important to you. For example, if you want to stop smoking or drinking, if you want to lose weight and get fit, or change jobs, travel or explore your spiritual path and start meditating, do they push you forward when you come to them? Or do they laugh at you and try and get you 'back on track'? Does who they are support you or slow you down in your goals?

5 Ask yourself what kind of person is missing from this group. Consider one of your goals: if you want to make more money, is there someone in your top five who has their finances together, for example? If you want to run a half-marathon, is there someone who'll support you in your goal?