

## The Friend Factor

When it comes to self-confidence, company is critical. In many ways, our confidence is either built or destroyed by those who influence us. This begins at a young age with parents, older siblings, then in the schooling years, teachers and classmates play a role too. As we enter our teenage years and eventually adulthood, it becomes our friends, work colleagues and spouses who have the biggest impact on our confidence.

If you reflect back at your life, you will remember many incidents that had a major impact on your confidence. Whether it was confidence killers like a teacher teasing you, bullies beating you up or a parent calling you a stupid child, or confidence boosters like a supportive mother, an encouraging teacher who believed in you or an older sibling who was always there for you. There is no doubt that the company we keep is critical to our self-confidence.

While we have no control over our past and what the people in our past did to our self-confidence, we do have control over the present. We may not control who our parents are, who our siblings are or which school we went to but as adults we do control who we associate with, who our close friends are and who we marry. Your choice in this area is critical to your self-esteem

Good company is something highly recommended in the Qur'an and Hadith. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) warned us, "Every person follows the religion of his closest friend, so be very careful whom you take as a close friend,"<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps one of the best Hadiths on the topic of friendship is the following one in which the Prophet (peace be upon him) uses a very powerful metaphor:

A good friend and a bad friend are like a perfume-seller and a blacksmith: The perfume-seller might give you some perfume as a gift, or you might buy some from him, or at least you might smell its fragrance. As for the blacksmith, he might singe your clothes, and at the very least you will breathe in the fumes of the furnace.<sup>2</sup>

Comparing a good friend to a perfume-seller gives us a glimpse of how powerful good company can be. From among the benefits of righteous company are the following:

1. They inspire you to be a better Muslim

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<sup>1</sup> Sunan Abu Dawud

<sup>2</sup> Bukhari and Muslim

2. They remind you when you slip or stray
3. They support you in all the good you do
4. They motivate you, encourage and treat you with respect
5. They want to see you succeed
6. They serve as role models for you in their actions and lifestyles

Just like a perfume shop, a good companion has very subtle effects on you, and can improve you in very subtle ways. In terms of self-confidence, good friends are motivating and have a positive attitude to life that keeps you going and makes you feel better about yourself.

If you have such friends, treasure them. If not, I recommend finding such friends as they will play a major role in boosting your self-confidence.

For many people, their closest friend is their spouse. Your spouse probably has more impact on your self-confidence than your friends. An abusive spouse can completely shatter a person's self-confidence while a righteous spouse can help you rise up to your true potential. If you are not married yet, choose your spouse very carefully.

Just as good company is important for self-confidence, bad company is terrible for it. Just like a blacksmith will get your clothes dirty even with minimum interaction, a bad friend can poison your heart in subtle ways.

Bad company are usually the type of friends who put you down and call you names if you don't fall in line and do what they want. They can be vulgar, abusive and harsh. They do not allow you to be yourself, and they laugh at your goals and dreams. They have low self-confidence and feel threatened by anyone who doesn't follow them, so they work to bring you down to their level through bullying.

Pessimistic and cynical people are bad company for someone striving to increase self-confidence. They view the world negatively and can only see the flaws in your goals and plans. They will drag you down to their level of negativity. It is better to keep a friendly distance from such people, and not allow them to mess with your head.

The most common form of bad company today are gangs. In a gang, every member wants to prove himself to be good enough and will do whatever it takes to fit in, no matter how evil it is. In fact, gangs are made up primarily of people with low self-confidence. It is very rare to find a confident person join a gang because such a person knows they have nothing to prove to such people.

Bad company can suck the joy out of life, kill any confidence you have and hold you back from chasing your goals. Worst of all, bad company forces you to live a lie, you put on a mask and pretend to be someone you are not, just to fit in and avoid

criticism. As a result many people live their entire lives pretending to be something they are not, and there is no happiness in that.

Islam teaches us that having good company is a must, and having bad company is prohibited as it is a primary means of going astray. This does not mean that we are harsh towards any people whom we perceive as bad company. Rather, Islam teaches us to be friendly and influential with everybody. However, we have to be very careful who we allow to influence us. These are our close friends, our inner circle and they need to be people of righteousness.

### **Dealing with Bad Company**

For most people who want to make a positive change in their lives, there comes a time when you need to let go of bad company and it often isn't a smooth transition. This applies to people trying to improve their self-confidence as well.

If you are hanging around friends who constantly put you down, pick on you and hold you back, you will not be able to excel or grow into a confident person. Letting them go is essential to success.

Bad company includes any friendship based on sin or held together by the bonds of sin, friendships based on ulterior motives (eg: someone is your friend to exploit your wealth) and friends that are determined to hold you back from success. You need to let them go and replace them with better company, but this isn't easy.

The first thing you need to do is honestly introspect the quality of your friends. Make a list of qualities you need in good company and evaluate if your friends have these qualities. It is not surprising to find many people who realize that their friends have the opposite of the qualities they need.

Once you identify which side of the fence your friends are on, you next need to remove from your close circle those who you have identified as bad company. But cutting ties shouldn't be the first step in this process. The first step is to advise and offer assistance to your friends to help them improve. Perhaps even give them a copy of a book like this. Do whatever you can in a friendly manner to help them improve. Remember that if you are influencing them positively then they are in good company but if they are influencing you negatively then you are in bad company, so stay influential.

If you find yourself unsuccessful in influencing them positively, do not despair. It is very common for such situations to occur and you are not alone. The next phase would be to maintain a friendly distance. A friendly distance works with family members who are bad company too, since it is not permissible to cut ties with family. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said that Allah said about family ties, "I

shall keep connection with him who maintains you and sever connection with him who severs you”<sup>3</sup>

A friendly distance means that you are friendly to the individual, and maintain a limited friendship like meeting up for short amounts of time in a good environment, but at the same time you maintain a distance by not letting that person take up too much of your time or influence you negatively.

For example, if you have an aunt who always criticizes you and makes you feel bad whenever you meet her, you cannot cut ties with her and you have been unable to influence her, so what do you do? You continue to treat her well while maintaining a distance, meeting her only when necessary and only interact as much as needed, not giving her any time to lash out at you with her tongue. In this way, you fulfil the obligation of family ties without allowing her to influence you negatively.

Unfortunately, it isn't possible to maintain a friendly distance with everybody. There are some people who will become hostile and aggressive to you if you start practicing Islam or attempt at any positive change. Such people are obstacles that need to be overcome, and sometimes we have no choice but to cut such people out of our lives completely.

In Surah Al-Kahf, there is the famous story of the seven sleepers of the cave. These were seven young men who chose to worship Allah in a city full of disbelievers. Their people turned against them and tried to kill them for abandoning idol worship. These young men bonded together and fled to a cave where they asked Allah for help and He answered their dua by putting them to sleep for over 300 years. They woke up in a better time and were saved from the trials at the hands of their people.

There are several lessons in this story directly related to our topic. These youngsters faced aggression from their people for changing. This is a common scenario and one we need to be prepared for. There exist many people who hate any type of change and such people will become hostile to anyone who undergoes such changes that threatens their way of life.

Yet these young boys did not give up. They befriended each other, shifting away from bad company towards good company, even though it was less in number. They chose to be with the righteous few, rather than the sinful many.

They chose to patiently remain a small group, despite the worldly benefits of compromising on their faith. So Allah ends their story with the following lesson:

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<sup>3</sup> Saheeh Bukhari

Remain constantly in the company of those who call on their Lord day and night, seeking His Face (Pleasure), and do not turn your eyes away from them to chase after the beauty of the worldly life. And do not obey the one whose heart has become heedless to My Remembrance, who followed his desires and whose deeds have been wasted.<sup>4</sup>

This is a strong reminder of the importance of good company, even when it means being a stranger to society. The story also shows us the confidence these young men had in Allah's assistance. They trusted Him with their affairs and He took care of it in a miraculous way. When you have Allah by your side, you can pursue any righteous deed with confidence knowing that He will help you in ways that you never imagined.

Another example of this is Prophet Ibrahim (peace be upon him). He lived in a city full of disbelievers, and his own father was an idol maker. He tried his best to convince them to give up idol worship, but they grew aggressive and hostile. The hostility reached such a high level that they imprisoned him and threw him into a fire, but Allah miraculously saved him by causing the fire to become cool for him. Eventually, he left the city with his few followers and searched for a better environment.

The final bit of advice in dealing with bad company is to remember to be assertive. The very nature of bad company is one of bullying. A bully only has power over someone who lacks confidence and is unable to stand up for himself. Do not give them this kind of power over yourself. Be like the people of the cave and Prophet Ibrahim. Stand firm on the truth regardless of what they say.

Standing up to bullies and leaving bad company is in itself empowering. You feel a sense of self confidence that you are no longer judged by their standards and can finally be yourself without being fake. Use this feeling of confidence to help you take the next important step, finding good company.

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<sup>4</sup> Surah Al-Kahf 18:28