**The True Meaning of Friendship**

What is it that makes a true friend?

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The Japanese have a term, *kenzoku*, which translated literally means "family." The connotation suggests a bond between people who've made a similar commitment and who possibly therefore share a similar destiny. It implies the presence of the deepest connection of [friendship](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/friends), of lives lived as comrades from the distant past.

Many of us have people in our lives with whom we feel the bond described by the word kenzoku. They may be family members, a mother, a brother, a daughter, a cousin. Or a friend from grammar school with whom we haven't talked in decades. Time and distance do nothing to diminish the bond we have with these kinds of friends.

The question then arises: why do we have the kind of chemistry encapsulated by the word kenzoku with only a few people we know and not scores of others? The closer we look for the answer the more elusive it becomes. It may not in fact be possible to know, but the characteristics that define a kenzoku relationship most certainly are.

#### **WHAT DRAWS PEOPLE TOGETHER AS FRIENDS?**

1. **Common interests**. This probably ties us closer to our friends than many would like to admit. When our interests diverge and we can find nothing to enjoy jointly, time spent together tends to rapidly diminish. Not that we can't still care deeply about friends with whom we no longer share common interests, but it's probably uncommon for such friends to interact on a regular basis.
2. **History**. Nothing ties people together, even people with little in common, than having gone through the same difficult experience. As the sole glue to keep friendships whole in the long run, however, it often dries, cracks, and ultimately fails.
3. **Common values**. Though not necessarily enough to create a friendship, if values are too divergent, it's difficult for a friendship to thrive.
4. **Equality**. If one friend needs the support of the other on a consistent basis such that the person depended upon receives no benefit other than the opportunity to support and encourage, while the relationship may be significant and valuable, it can't be said to define a true friendship.

#### **WHAT MAKES A FRIEND WORTHY OF THE NAME?**

1. **A commitment to your**[**happiness**](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/happiness). A true friend is consistently willing to put your happiness before your friendship. It's said that "good advice grates on the ear," but a true friend won't refrain from telling you something you don't want to hear, something that may even risk fracturing the friendship, if hearing it lies in your best interest. A true friend will not lack the mercy to correct you when you're wrong. A true friend will confront you with your drinking problem as quickly as inform you about a malignant-looking skin lesion on your back that you can't see yourself.
2. **Not asking you to place the friendship before your principles**. A true friend won't ask you to compromise your principles in the name of your friendship or anything else. Ever.
3. **A good influence**. A true friend inspires you to live up to your best potential, not to indulge your basest drives.

Of course, we may have friends who fit all these criteria and still don't quite feel kenzoku. There still seems to be an extra factor, an attraction similar to that which draws people together romantically, that cements friends together irrevocably, often immediately, for no reason either person can identify. But when you find these people, these kenzoku, they're like priceless gems. They're like finding home.

#### **HOW TO ATTRACT TRUE FRIENDS**

This one is easy, at least on paper: become a true friend yourself. One of my favorite quotations comes from Gandhi: "Be the change you wish to see in the world." Be the friend you want to have. We all tend to attract people into our lives whose character mirrors our own. You don't have to make yourself into what you think others would find attractive. No matter what your areas of interest, others share them somewhere. Simply make yourself a big target. Join social clubs organized around activities you enjoy. Leverage the Internet to find people of like mind. Take action.

As I thought about it, there are four people in my life I consider kenzoku. How many do you?