



What it means to be friends

What does it really mean to call somebody your friend? It means that we care about them and respect them as equals. CHEW WEI SHAN finds out that some people do not understand this.

Today, I speak to Soe Hla, Adam, and Nguyet about friendship.

Shan: Let's talk about friendship. What does it mean to be a friend to someone?

Soe Hla: Okay, this one is not about me, but I think it is really relevant to our discussion. My friend Srijesh, who is Bangladeshi, shared with me that when a Singaporean befriends migrant workers like him, they often take pictures and post them online. Then, these Singaporeans suddenly become hailed as heroes on social media.

Dozens of netizens comment on their posts, saying things like "Wow, so nice of you to befriend a migrant worker".

This made Srijesh very confused. On the one hand, he was genuinely grateful to make new friends. But, on the other, it really affected his self-esteem.

"I am very happy that they are my friends. But, why are they called heroes for just hanging out with me?" Srijesh asked. "How is it different from hanging out with their other local friends? Did they really want to be friends, or was it just so they could look good online?"

Shan: It is sad that Srijesh could not just enjoy having a new friend. It must be painful to have to question the motives for someone wanting to be your friend.

Soe Hla: It also made me insecure about some of my own friendships. Do people make friends with me because they really like me? Or is it, in some weird way, to “earn points” for “bothering” to make friends with a Burmese like me?

Adam: I can relate to what you are saying! I am Eurasian. My dad, who is white, left my family when I was a kid. I was raised by my Peranakan Chinese mother, and identify most with Peranakan culture.

Back in secondary school, all things Western were seen as “cool” by many teenagers — music, movies, and pop culture. So much so, my friends always called me their “white friend”.

Sometimes, they would even use me to prove a point. They would say, “This must be true, lah. Our American friend thinks so too.” Firstly, why should an American saying something make it true? Also, I’m not even American! I was born and raised in Singapore. I speak perfect Singlish! And, my dad is Dutch.

Shan: Wait, your friends didn’t even know that?

Adam: Yeah, it was weird. Sometimes I wondered whether they really liked having me around, or if having a “white friend” made them feel cool, or more in tune with Western culture.

At the same time, they would say things like “Aiya, you ang moh, you wouldn’t

understand such things.” Or, call me “guai lou” which means “ghost person” in Cantonese. So, even though I was part of the friend group, these comments always made me feel like an outsider.

Often, they would ask me to speak Malay, and then point and laugh at me like I was some kind of freak. Malay is my mother tongue, so I wondered why they made such a big deal out of my being able to speak my own language.

Shan: What about you, Nguyet?

Nguyet: Me? Well, I moved from Vietnam to Singapore while in primary school. Nobody knew how to pronounce my name, so they just called me “Oi!”

Many of my classmates often came to me for help with their homework. That made me feel good! I felt accepted. But, when it came to playing sports, I was never picked to join a team even though I was very fit. When it came to hanging out, or parties, I was never invited. I sometimes felt like I never even existed except when they wanted my help with schoolwork.

I realised that I was only considered a friend when it suited them. They acted chummy and nice when I could be useful to them. After I fulfilled that purpose, I was not wanted anymore. That made me feel lousy.

Adam: I’m sorry you were made to feel that way. That’s not cool.

Nguyet: Yeah, like you guys were saying earlier, it really makes me wonder. When am I someone’s friend, and when do I stop being their friend? Was I ever really a friend to them?

The author of this series was born in Singapore. As she had never experienced racism here, she interviewed people who sometimes felt like outsiders in their own country. Based on their stories, she wrote up these conversations for you to read. The people’s names have been changed, but the stories are real.

Nguyet (cont'd): At the café I work at, my boss likes to make **insensitive** remarks about my Malay co-workers. When other people call him out, he likes to say, "I'm not racist lah. I have Malay friends, okay."

I wish I could ask him if they are really his friends. Just because you have Malay friends doesn't mean that you understand Malays. It doesn't grant you the right to say anything you like about Malays. If my boss truly respected his Malay friends and considered them as equals, he would not be putting them down like that. Can he really

consider himself a friend to the Malays he knows?

Soe Hla: I wonder the same. If you view somebody as **inferior** to you, or treat that person as lesser than you, that's definitely not real friendship.

VOCAB BUILDER

insensitive (say "in-sen-si-tiv"; adjective) = showing no concern for the feelings of others.

inferior (say "in-fee-rier"; adjective) = not as good as another.

Am I a good friend?

A good friend is sincere and makes a real human connection. Real friends see one another as wonderful and complex individuals deserving of our love, through good times and bad times.

Do your friends make you feel good about yourself? Do they care about your feelings? Will they be there for you when it really matters?

The same should apply both ways. Are you a good friend to others? Do you view them as equals, and treat them with respect? Do you make an effort to understand them? Will you support them through tough times?



WHAT IS EVERYDAY RACISM?

Racism means to treat some people worse than others, just because they are of a different race or skin colour, come from a different place, or have a different culture. Everyday racism is a form of racism where people say or do hurtful things without intending to be unkind. Everyday racism is also called "casual racism", although there is nothing casual about it for the person at the receiving end.

This series is sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, Singapore. You can find more articles about casual racism at <http://more.whatsup.sg>.