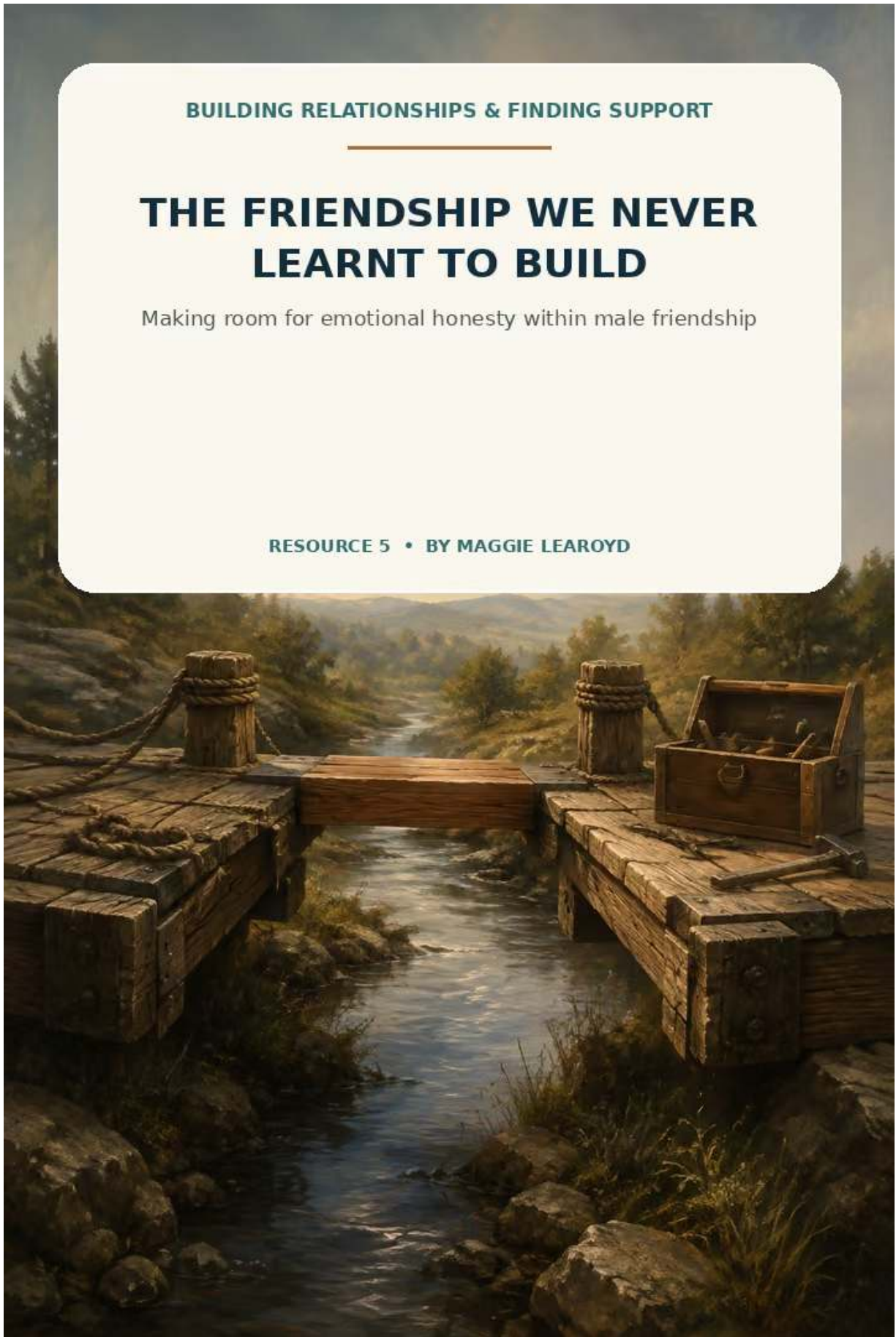


BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS & FINDING SUPPORT

THE FRIENDSHIP WE NEVER LEARNT TO BUILD

Making room for emotional honesty within male friendship

RESOURCE 5 • BY MAGGIE LEAROYD



The Friendship We Never Learnt to Build

Making room for emotional honesty within male friendship

"Friendship is born at that moment when one person says to another, 'What! You too? I thought I was the only one.'" — C. S. Lewis

Friendship is often described as one of life's greatest protective factors. It can bring laughter, perspective, encouragement and a sense of belonging. Yet for many men, friendship changes significantly as life moves forward. School friends move away, careers become demanding, families grow, responsibilities increase and the opportunities for regular connection become fewer. Without consciously choosing it, many men find that the friendships which once felt effortless begin to revolve around occasional messages, shared interests or brief conversations squeezed into busy lives.

There is nothing inherently wrong with friendships built around football, fishing, cycling, work or shared hobbies. These experiences create memories, strengthen bonds and provide opportunities to spend time together. They remind us that companionship does not always require long conversations. Sometimes simply being alongside another person is enough.

However, there can also be a quieter reality beneath these friendships. Many men describe knowing exactly who they would call to help move furniture, repair a car or lend a hand with practical tasks, yet feeling uncertain about who they would call if they were struggling emotionally. The friendship exists, the loyalty is real, but emotional conversation has never quite found its place within the relationship.

This is not because men are incapable of emotional connection. Nor is it because male friendships lack depth or care. More often, it reflects the way many relationships have developed over time. Practical support has become the language of friendship, while emotional support has remained less familiar. Acts of kindness are offered freely, but conversations about fear, loneliness, grief or anxiety can feel more difficult to begin.

The expectation that we should cope quietly is shaped by many influences. Families, communities, workplaces and cultural expectations all contribute to the messages people receive about expressing vulnerability. For some men, these experiences encourage independence and resilience. For others, they can make emotional openness feel unfamiliar or uncomfortable, even within relationships that have lasted for decades.

When emotional conversations are absent, loneliness can take on a different form. It is possible to have people around us and still feel unseen. Loneliness is not always about being physically alone; it can also arise when we believe that important parts of our experience remain hidden from those who know us best. Feeling unable to share what we are carrying can leave even strong friendships feeling incomplete.

Research consistently highlights the importance of social connection for mental health and wellbeing. People who experience supportive relationships are more likely to cope effectively with life's challenges, recover from periods of stress and feel a stronger sense of belonging. This does not mean friendships must become therapeutic relationships. Rather, it reminds us that feeling understood by another person can make difficult experiences feel more manageable.

Healthy friendships allow room for honesty as well as humour. They make space for ordinary conversations alongside more difficult ones. They recognise that strength is not diminished by openness, and that listening can be every bit as valuable as offering advice. Sometimes the most meaningful support comes not from finding the perfect words but from simply remaining present when someone needs company.

Friendships also evolve throughout life. They may become fewer in number but richer in quality. They may require greater intention than they once did, asking us to make time for a phone call, arrange to meet or check in with someone we have not spoken to for a while. Relationships rarely thrive through chance alone; they grow through small, consistent acts of care.

Building emotionally supportive friendships does not require changing who we are. It begins with creating space for authenticity. A simple conversation about how life has really been can become the beginning of a deeper connection. Equally, asking another person how they are—and being willing to stay with the answer—can communicate acceptance, trust and respect.

Perhaps one of the greatest gifts friendship offers is the reminder that we do not have to navigate every challenge alone. Relationships are not only there to celebrate life's successes; they also help us carry its disappointments, uncertainties and losses. In doing so, they strengthen not only our wellbeing but also our shared humanity.

Strong friendships are not defined by how often people meet or how many years they have known one another. They are defined by the confidence that, when life becomes difficult, neither person has to pretend they are facing it alone.

If This Essay Has Stayed With You...

If this essay has prompted you to reflect on your own friendships, or if feelings of loneliness or disconnection have become part of your life, the following organisations offer different forms of support. Whether you are looking for conversation, community or professional help, reaching out can be the beginning of rebuilding connection.

ANDYS MANCLUB

Free peer-support groups for men aged 18 and over across the UK. Meetings take place every Monday evening in a welcoming, non-judgemental environment where men can talk as much or as little as they choose.

MenWalkTalk

A charity that brings men together through organised walks, creating opportunities for conversation, companionship and improved wellbeing in a relaxed setting.

Men's Sheds

Community spaces where people come together to share practical skills, work on projects and build friendships. Many members find that the sense of purpose and belonging has a positive impact on their mental wellbeing.

Samaritans

Available 24 hours a day for anyone who needs someone to listen. You do not have to be in crisis to get in touch. Whatever you are experiencing, you can speak to someone in confidence.

NHS Talking Therapies

Provides evidence-based psychological therapies for common mental health difficulties such as anxiety, depression and stress. You can usually self-refer through your local NHS service in England.

A Closing Reflection

Friendship is rarely about having all the right answers.

It is about knowing there is someone willing to walk alongside us when life becomes uncertain.

The relationships we nurture today may become the support we rely on tomorrow. Making space for connection, honesty and kindness is not simply an investment in friendship—it is an investment in our emotional wellbeing.