

Creating Your Coterie

By Mary D. Petryszyn, F.SWE and Jill S. Tietjen, P.E., F.SWE

From the Merriam-Webster online dictionary: **co-te-rie**: an intimate and often exclusive group of persons with a unifying common interest or purpose

Have you ever said that your really dear friends keep you from going crazy? Do they provide you with truthful feedback when you come up with ideas for the direction of your life, your career, or your selection of a life partner? Are they always there for you when life hands you one of its curve balls? Do they support you in the good times and the bad? If you know the group of people we are talking about, you have found yourself a coterie! If not, we recommend that you start looking: A coterie can not only improve the quality of your life, but in some instances, it can — literally — save your life.

Why do you need a coterie?

You need a coterie to counteract the stress you experience in your daily life. A groundbreaking UCLA study found that women, in general, do not respond to stress in the same way as men^[1]. Most men react to stress

in what has been characterized for years as “fight or flight.” Women’s reaction to stress involves the release of the brain chemical oxytocin. This brain chemical causes women to tend their children and gather with other women — what has been characterized as “tend and befriend.” When women tend and befriend, their brains release more oxytocin, which further counters stress and induces calming.

In addition, studies have shown that social ties reduce blood pressure, heart rate, and cholesterol. Not having close friends is actually detrimental to your health. Thus, your coterie will help you to live better and perhaps live longer.

How do you find the members of your coterie?

As per the definition, your coterie should include people who share common interests or a common

purpose with you. For us, the common interest has been the Society of Women Engineers. Through working initially together on the 2001 SWE national conference, we have forged a bond that will be lifelong. Our coterie includes other SWE members as well.

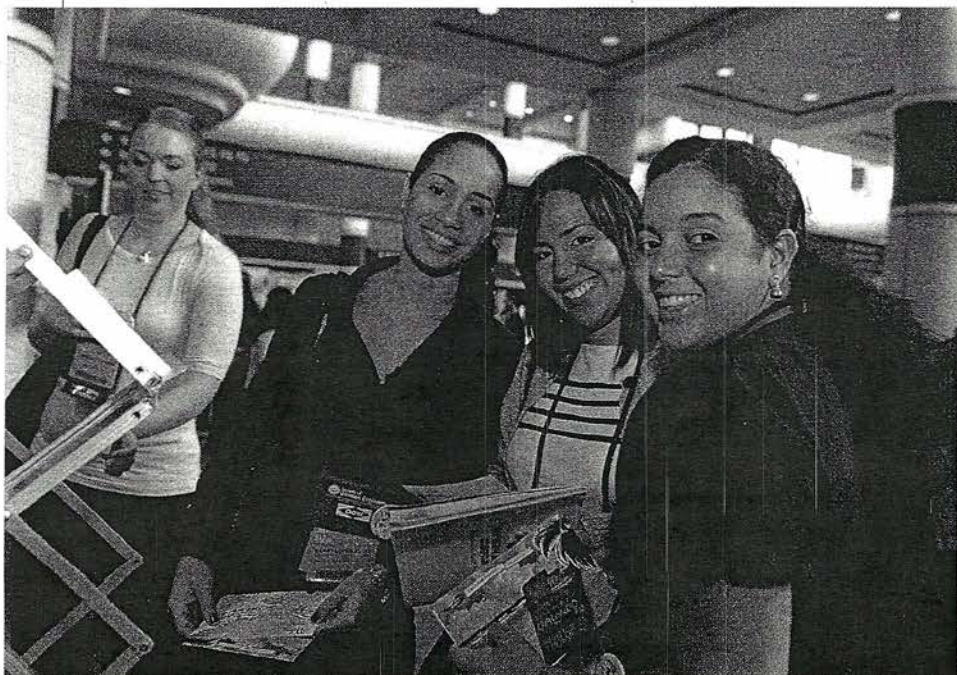
For you, the reader, SWE friends may certainly become your coterie. Alternatively, your dear friends could be people you meet at work, through your religious affiliation, through your sports activities, or through your volunteer work. But, there will need to be a thread that unites the members of your coterie.

Think about whom you turn to for advice when you face a challenging decision. Consider reconnecting with someone from your past who always seemed to have your best interests in mind. Mull over whom it is that you trust with sensitive issues — and who trusts you. If you can identify some common thread, it is conceivable that if you got these few people together, you might experience the initial chemistry of creating your coterie.

What can you expect from your coterie?

Once you have a small circle of dear friends, you can expect the truth when you ask questions, heartfelt advice, and sometimes information and suggestions you don’t want to hear. In this circle, however, all comments are made with your best interests at their core.

The connections among our coterie are varied. A few of us are entrepreneurs, while a couple of us work for large corporations. Some have children; others do not. Our interests are diverse, yet overlap to varying degrees — some like theater, some ballet; some enjoy gardening, while others are thrilled to have someone else mow the lawn. And a few of us find common ground in writing. We don’t always do everything with the



full group included, but we tend to find a unique pleasure in getting together and sharing what's going on in our lives on a fairly regular basis. When one of us can't make it, we catch up on that friend's life through the rest of us.

An article in *The Wall Street Journal*, discussing friendship among men, describes how women "turn to friends for guidance and empathy"^[2]. We have experienced firsthand how our coterie has played a significant role in providing collective guidance when one of us has been confronted with a daunting situation or difficult choice to make. And this steadfast corps has been instrumental — perhaps lifesaving, in fact — in helping each one of us through a difficult time in our lives or careers. At the heart of our coterie is just that: heart. We have trust, admiration, and great affection for one another.

A coterie can be an essential part of what keeps you grounded. That spirited nucleus of intimate friends who you know always, no matter what, will be there for you — through the proverbial "thick and thin." They will share in your joy as you achieve successes. Likewise, you can count on them to dust you off, build you up, and send you back into the fray when you suffer disappointment or failure. Discovering our coterie has indeed added great depth and quality to our lives. By all means, we encourage you to create yours!

As a final note, when the idea for this article blossomed, one of us thought it might be somewhat mushy compared with our usual, seemingly practical subject matter. As it turns out, this may be one of our most sensible articles yet. We'll leave it to you to decide. ■

References

1. Berkowitz, Gail, "UCLA Study on Friendship among Women," www.anapsid.org/cnd/gender/tendfend.html
2. Zaslou, Jeffrey, "Friendship for Guys (No Tears!)," <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304620304575166090090482912.html>

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