

From the Stacks

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There is a profound psychological sanctuary in the predictable. Human beings are wired to seek pattern and stability, finding solace in environments, routines, and relationships where the outcome is already known. Across every stage of life, familiarity serves as an emotional anchor, shielding us from the anxiety of the unexpected and allowing our minds and bodies to truly rest.

From early childhood, the power of a predictable structure shapes our sense of security. Schedules are inherently positive for children precisely because they eliminate the terrifying unknown, replacing ambient anxiety with clear expectations. In contrast, the stress of unpredictable demand is perfectly illustrated by the universal dread a student feels when called upon to read aloud or speak in class without warning. When the safety net of familiarity is stripped away, the mind shifts into a defensive, guarded state.

To counter this tension, we naturally surround ourselves with familiar touchstones that provide quiet comfort. A well-known church hymn can instantly ground a restless spirit; a meal prepared from a childhood recipe carries nostalgic warmth that nourishes more than just the body; and rewatching a favorite movie offers a gentle escape where no plot twist can startle us. This craving for repetition extends even to muscle memory and habit. Whether it is driving home along a route so well-traveled that you arrive safely without remembering the turns, or sinking into automatic tasks like knitting, swinging a softball bat, or performing routine work, familiar actions liberate us from constant decision-making.

This deep comfort reaches its highest expression in genuine human friendship. In a true friendship, familiarity creates a sanctuary where we no longer have to edit or defend ourselves, confident that our thoughts will be received with grace. To know someone so intimately that you can completely relax and drop all pretenses is one of life's rare gifts. Dinah Maria Mulock Craik captured this exact intimacy in her 1859 novel *A Life for a Life*:

“Oh, the comfort, the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe with a person having neither to weigh thoughts nor measure words, but pouring them all right out—just as they are, chaff and grain together—certain that a faithful hand will take and sift them, keep what is worth keeping, and with the breath of kindness blow the rest away.”

Fascinatingly, this dynamic expands beyond real-world relationships and into the literary realm. As we read through a long book series, recurring characters gradually transform into trusted companions. We begin to understand their temperaments, anticipate how

they will react under pressure, and take comfort in their steady presence across hundreds of pages. When a beloved character acts predictably, it reinforces our sense of connection; when they suddenly act out of character, we feel a genuine shock akin to being surprised by a close friend. Through routine, memory, deep bonds, and the stories we revisit, familiarity acts as the quiet architecture of human comfort, granting us safe harbors in an unpredictable world.