Third, the mere exposure effect (Zajonc, 1968) can explain why we feel close to those who are nearby. As discussed in Chapter 6, this effect refers to the relationship between familiarity and liking. The more times we are exposed to a stimulus, the more we like that stimulus. Seeing the same people in our neighborhoods, schools, or places of business renders them more familiar and heightens our affections for them. Moreland and Beach (1992) conducted a clever demonstration of the mere exposure effect. These researchers arranged to have a female undergraduate attend class on various occasions. The woman did not draw attention to herself in any way, except to walk into class, sit down, and walk out. At the end of the academic term, the rest of the students were shown the woman’s picture and asked to indicate how much they liked her. Illustrating the importance of the mere exposure effect, Figure 11.4 shows that liking for the student increased with familiarity. The more class sessions she attended, the more her fellow students liked her.

Finally, the costs of social interaction can also explain why we are attracted to people who are nearby. Suppose you want to go to a movie with a friend, and you are driving. You can choose to ask someone who lives nearby or someone who lives far away. If you like the two people equally, you will probably choose the person who is nearby, because the costs of interacting with that person are lower. However, you might be willing to drive clear across town for someone who is especially desirable to you.

Your preferences can be explained by a general theory of interpersonal attraction known as social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1961). Social exchange theory adopts an economic model of human behavior and analyzes interpersonal relationships in terms of market demands. The theory makes two important assumptions. First, people bring to the interpersonal marketplace certain goods they can exchange. These goods include tangible qualities (e.g., a fancy car); personal qualities (e.g., good looks); or social status (e.g., a good family name). Second, people keep track of what they are giving and receiving in an interpersonal relationship—and they seek a bargain. In essence, they strive to get as much as they can for the goods they have to offer. Because it is less costly to interact with someone who is nearby, social exchange theory predicts that you will like those who are near to you more than those who are far away.