



FRIENDSHIPS: ENRICH YOUR LIFE AND IMPROVE YOUR HEALTH

Friendships can have a major impact on your health and well-being, but it's not always easy to build or maintain friendships. Understand the importance of friendships in your life and what you can do to develop and nurture friendships.

What are the benefits of friendships?

Good friends are good for your health. Friends can help you celebrate good times and provide support during bad times. Friends prevent loneliness and give you a chance to offer needed companionship, too. Friends can also:

- Increase your sense of belonging and purpose
- Boost your happiness and reduce your stress
- Improve your self-confidence and self-worth
- Help you cope with traumas, such as divorce, serious illness, job loss or the death of a loved one
- Encourage you to change or avoid unhealthy lifestyle habits, such as excessive drinking or lack of exercise

Friends also play a significant role in promoting your overall health. Adults with strong social support have a reduced risk of many significant health problems, including depression, high blood pressure and an unhealthy body mass index (BMI). Studies have even found that older adults with a rich social life are likely to live longer than their peers with fewer connections.

Why is it sometimes hard to make friends or maintain friendships?

Many adults find it hard to develop new friendships or keep up existing friendships. Friendships may take a back seat to other priorities, such as work or caring for children or aging parents. You and your friends may have grown apart due to changes in your lives or interests. Or maybe you've moved to a new community and haven't yet found a way to meet people.

Developing and maintaining good friendships takes effort. The enjoyment and comfort friendship can provide, however, makes the investment worthwhile.

What's a healthy number of friends?

Quality counts more than quantity. While it's good to cultivate a diverse network of friends and acquaintances, you also want to nurture a few truly close friends who will be there for you through thick and thin.

What are some ways to meet new people?

It's possible that you've overlooked potential friends who are already in your social network. Think through people you've interacted with — even very casually — who made a positive impression.

You may find potential friends among people with whom:

- You've worked or taken classes
- You've been friends in the past, but have since lost touch
- You've enjoyed chatting with at social gatherings
- You share family ties

If anyone stands out in your memory as someone you'd like to know better, reach out. Ask mutual friends or acquaintances to share the person's contact information, or — even better — to reintroduce the two of you with a text, email or in-person visit. Extend an invitation to coffee or lunch.

To meet new people who might become your friends, you have to go to places where others are gathered. Don't limit yourself to one strategy for meeting people. The broader your efforts, the greater your likelihood of success.

Persistence also matters. Take the initiative rather than waiting for invitations to come your way, and keep trying. You may need to suggest plans a few times before you can tell if your interest in a new friend is mutual.

For example, try several of these ideas:

- **Attend community events.** Look for groups or clubs that gather around an interest or hobby you share. These groups are often listed in the newspaper or on community bulletin boards. There are also many websites that help you connect with new friends in your neighborhood or city. Do a Google search using terms such as [your city] + social network, or [your neighborhood] + meet-ups.
- **Volunteer.** Offer your time or talents at a hospital, place of worship, museum, community center, charitable group or other organization. You can form strong connections when you work with people who have mutual interests.
- **Extend and accept invitations.** Invite a friend to join you for coffee or lunch. When you're invited to a social gathering, say yes. Contact someone who recently invited you to an activity and return the favor.
- **Take up a new interest.** Take a college or community education course to meet people who have similar interests. Join a class at a local gym, senior center or community fitness facility.
- **Join a faith community.** Take advantage of special activities and get-to-know-you events for new members.
- **Take a walk.** Grab your kids or pet and head outside. Chat with neighbors who are also out and about or head to a popular park and strike up conversations there.

Above all, stay positive. You may not become friends with everyone you meet, but maintaining a friendly attitude and demeanor can help you improve the relationships in your life and sow the seeds of friendship with new acquaintances.

How does social media affect friendships?

Joining a chat group or online community might help you make or maintain connections and relieve loneliness. However, research suggests that use of social networking sites doesn't necessarily translate to a larger offline network or closer offline relationships with network members. In addition, remember to exercise caution when sharing personal information or arranging an activity with someone you've only met online.

How can I nurture my friendships?

Developing and maintaining healthy friendships involves give-and-take. Sometimes you're the one giving support, and other times you're on the receiving end. Letting friends know you care about them and appreciate them can help strengthen your bond. It's as important for you to be a good friend as it is to surround yourself with good friends.

To nurture your friendships:

- **Be kind.** This most-basic behavior, emphasized during childhood, remains the core of successful, adult relationships. Think of friendship as an emotional bank account. Every act of kindness and every expression of gratitude are deposits into this account, while criticism and negativity draw down the account.
- **Listen up.** Ask what's going on in your friends' lives. Let the other person know you are paying close attention through eye contact, body language and occasional brief comments such as, "That sounds fun." When friends share details of hard times or difficult experiences, be empathetic, but don't give advice unless your friends ask for it.
- **Open up.** Build intimacy with your friends by opening up about yourself. Being willing to disclose personal experiences and concerns shows that your friend holds a special place in your life, and deepens your connection.
- **Show that you can be trusted.** Being responsible, reliable and dependable is key to forming strong friendships. Keep your engagements and arrive on time. Follow through on commitments you've made to your friends. When your friends share confidential information, keep it private.
- **Make yourself available.** Building a close friendship takes time — together. Make an effort to see new friends regularly, and to check in with them in between meet-ups. You may feel awkward the first few times you talk on the phone or get together, but this feeling is likely to pass as you get more comfortable with each other.
- **Manage your nerves with mindfulness.** You may find yourself imagining the worst of social situations, and feel tempted to stay home. Use mindfulness exercises to reshape your thinking. Each time you imagine the worst, pay attention to how often the embarrassing situations you're afraid of actually take place. You may notice that the scenarios you fear usually don't happen.

When embarrassing situations do happen, remind yourself that your feelings will pass, and you can handle them until they do.

Yoga and other mind-body relaxation practices also may reduce anxiety and help you face situations that make you feel nervous.

Remember, it's never too late to build new friendships or reconnect with old friends. Investing time in making friends and strengthening your friendships can pay off in better health and a brighter outlook for years to come.

By Mayo Clinic Staff

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/friendships/art-20044860>