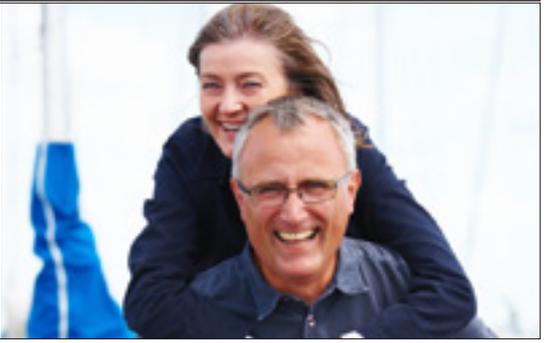


That's What Friends Are For

Friendships in older adulthood **by Alison Thomas-Cottingham, Ph.D.**



Many of us have fond memories of friendships we enjoyed at different stages of our lives. Playing on the playground as young children. Sharing secrets as teenagers. Bonding over life milestones such as marriages, career successes and parenthood with adult friends. All of these experiences have contributed to our well-being. As life changes, so do our social relationships.

HEALTH BENEFITS OF FRIENDSHIP

Maintaining social ties throughout life is important to our physical and psychological health. Research has found the benefits of having close relationships are more evident during older adulthood than at any other period in life (*Chopik, 2017*). Many research studies suggest friends are more influential than family when it comes to health benefits. During older adulthood, simply put, friends serve as a source of enjoyment and generate positive feelings (*Larson, Mannell & Zuzanek, 1986*).

Friendships are credited with providing both psychological and physical benefits. Having social supports later in life has been linked to good physical health outcomes, such as a lower incidence of both chronic health problems and higher mortality (*Valliant, Meyer, Mukamal, & Soldz, 1998*). In addition, having friends can serve as a buffer for the depressive symptoms associated with the loss of a spouse (*Bookwala, Marshall, & Manning, 2014*). In general, the benefits associated with having friends during older adulthood include being happier, more optimistic and having a better sense of well-being (*Mason, 2011*).

ESTABLISHING FRIENDSHIPS ACROSS A LIFESPAN

What is a friend? Our definitions of friendship and what we expect from friends change as we age. We may think of a friend as a person who listens to your problems, laughs at your jokes, takes an interest in your life, or extends an invitation to lunch or a movie. We can all agree on the underlying aspects of friendship. Friends are people with whom we have shared interests. Friends are those whose companionship we enjoy. Friends provide understanding and listen when we need an open ear. They are patient and a good source of support.

But some aspects of friendship change as we age (*Blieszner & Ogletree, 2017*). When we're young, our friends are our playmates. During adolescence, friends are people with whom we share secrets and have similar interests. Friendships during young adulthood change as our friends become the people we go to school with or work with. Our expectations of friends change again during

middle adulthood when our lives are primarily structured around work, family and other priorities. At this point in life our friends may be the caregivers of our children or our co-workers. During later adulthood, we may discover we have lost some of our friends from adolescence, young adulthood or middle adulthood because we have moved, taken on different interests or feel we just don't have time.

Our social networks during older adulthood may become smaller. There are differing views regarding the reason for this occurrence. One view suggests that shrinking social networks are simply a result of the death of friends. The old gang has gotten smaller because members of the group have passed away.

Another view, the socio-emotional selectivity theories, suggests that, as we age, we become more selective about who we choose to include in our friend circle (*Burnett-Wöle & Godbey, 2007*). Specifically, the decrease in friends during older adulthood occurs because older adults become more selective and do not commit themselves to social relationships that will not be socially fulfilling.

Some scholars refer to this deliberate choice, which results in a smaller social circle, as "social pruning." Those of us who garden know we prune our plants to make them healthier so they can thrive. In the case of older adults, social pruning means a person is more likely to eliminate the social relationships that lack reciprocity, or are perceived in general as not beneficial. Eliminating non-beneficial friendships from our lives provides us with more room for healthy ones. This means that older adults are less likely to hold onto relationships they perceive as one-sided or unsatisfactory.

TIPS FOR MAKING NEW FRIENDS

Older adulthood provides us an opportunity to make new friends and to rekindle friendships that may have weakened over time. It may take effort, but it is never too late to make and strengthen friendships, and the results are worth the effort. It may seem overwhelming to initiate new relationships or to reach out to old friends with whom you have lost touch, but there are many ways to forge or rekindle bonds. Here are some suggestions for strengthening your circle of friends:

- Engage in activities you enjoy. Do you like to paint, play cards, volunteer, or read? Do what you enjoy and you will invariably surround yourself with people who share the same passions and interests.

- ▶ Go into your community. Visiting the gym, a place of worship, or volunteer organizations can get you out of the house. Strike up a conversation with the person you see every afternoon at the gym, remain for the coffee hour after a worship service and share your talents with others. These are places where you will meet others who are equally active and socially minded.
- ▶ Manage your expectations and don't expect to become friends with everyone you meet. Your first attempts to form new friendships may not result in new relationships. Over time and with practice, it gets easier to strike up conversation and share ideas with people you don't know. Best of all, some efforts will bring you to people who will become special friends.
- ▶ Consider social media and technology. If you are unable to get out, or uncomfortable in social situations, consider social media. Sites such as Facebook provide opportunities for you to meet new friends and catch up with old ones. In addition, the use of technology can provide meaningful social moments. Facetime a friend, text an acquaintance. Social media and technology can be a useful tool for making social connections.
- ▶ Accept social invitations from new acquaintances. They may be prospective friends. We all get tired, busy, or preoccupied with our own needs. But when someone extends a social invitation, your acceptance might lead to a wonderful long-term friendship, or simply a one-time opportunity to have fun, laugh, or learn something new about someone else and possibly yourself.

Meaningful friendships can produce positive physiological and social benefits. It's never too early or late to invest in your future and your health.

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