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# Friends with (health) benefits

We all need a little help from our friends, but research shows that they're literally good for us. Acquiring new friends can be tricky as an adult, so consider this [your guide to making and maintaining these supportive relationships right now.](#)

BY ARRICCA ELIN SANSONE

# When you were young,

you probably didn't think about how to make friends: It just happened. You hung out with other kids in the lunchroom, went to practice together, and shared a dorm. Yet as life got more complicated, you might have discovered that it became tougher to nurture grown-up friendships with all kinds of other responsibilities claiming your time.

But it's a good idea to move your friendships front and center and give them the attention they need to thrive. Why? Research shows that social connections actually keep us healthy and help us live longer.

"We often think of our relationships in relation to our emotional well-being," says Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Ph.D., a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Brigham Young University and lead scientific editor on the U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community. "But studies have shown that over time, people who have social

connections are 50% less likely to die prematurely due to all causes, including cardiovascular disease and cancer." In fact, research from the Surgeon General's Advisory found that social isolation was as dangerous as smoking 15 cigarettes a day and riskier than obesity and lack of physical activity. This data is surprising given that many of us consider friends nice to have if we have the time rather than essential to our well-being.

## THE HEALTH PERKS *of friendship*

● ● ● Research over the past few decades has demonstrated that people without social connections have greater health risks: a 29% increased risk of heart disease, a 32% increased chance of stroke, and a 50% increased risk of developing dementia. Not surprisingly, studies also show that social isolation is associated with a higher risk of developing depression and anxiety and can worsen these conditions over time. The evidence is strong: "Humans are social, with social needs," says Holt-Lunstad.

The truth is, individuals are complex, and different friends meet different needs. For example, some friends keep us centered and accountable. "We all need a friend who can tell us the truth or say 'You were wrong,'" says Kelly N. Moore, Psy.D., director of the Center for Psychological Services at Rutgers University. "You probably have different intimacy levels too. You may have the friend who knows your deepest,



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darkest secrets but also one you just meet for coffee.”

And while of course family is important, friends offer rewards that relatives can't necessarily provide. “We choose our friends based on shared interests and values. It's a family of choice versus the family you're born into,” says Moore. Friends also often allow us to be the most authentic about who we are.

It's important to remember that bona fide friendships aren't the only

connections that add value to our lives. Casual ties are meaningful as well, because they help remind us that we're part of a community. Research has found that going 10 hours without social interaction or stimulation (which can include exchanging emails, using social media, and reading fiction) produces a similar neural response or pattern of brain activation as 10 hours without food, showing that we have actual cravings for connection, says

Holt-Lunstad. “When we didn't have a choice and were home during the pandemic, many of us learned that we desperately missed those little daily human interactions.”

## QUALITY *or quantity?*

● ● ● “The research shows that having close, satisfying relationships is more strongly related to your emotional well-being than just having a lot of friends,” says JoNell Strough, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at West Virginia University. Having even one trusted person in your life is helpful.

Unfortunately, when you're juggling a job, kids, aging parents, and the struggle to stake out some “me time,” hanging with friends may feel self-indulgent. “We tend to do our chores first, then meet with friends,” says Tracy Brower, Ph.D., a sociologist and the author of *The Secrets to Happiness at Work*. “But that's almost backward, because spending time with friends actually gives us energy to do everything else.”

For a friendship to thrive, there's got to be an ongoing investment from both people, and even well beyond the height of the pandemic, some of us may feel rusty. “You have to be intentional about spending time together,” says Leslie Tarver, M.D., an assistant professor of psychiatry at the University of California, San Diego. She advises setting social goals that are achievable, such as eating a meal together or even just

having a FaceTime chat. Many of us feel less than confident in our social skills, she says: “Gradually reacclimating to socializing with others can help reduce social anxiety and boost confidence.”

Scientists say that even small gestures count. One study found that digital messaging, especially texting, could build relationships because it showed the recipient that the sender was thinking of them. “It's good for the other person, and it's good for you because it contributes to your own sense of belonging and connectedness,” says Brower.

## MAKING *new friends*

● ● ● You may have lots of friends, but if you're still feeling lonely or unsatisfied with your social life, it's never too late to form new bonds. Even the most extroverted among us may be uncomfortable putting ourselves out there, as it involves the risk of rejection, but making new friends is possible.

To start, look for natural connections. Maybe you can strike up a conversation with someone you regularly see at the coffee shop, your yoga class, or the dog park. “Friendship is about showing up,” says Brower. “If you go to yoga once, you're not going to connect, but if you keep showing up all the time, you generate familiarity. Then it's easier to say, ‘Let's go get a smoothie after class.’”

Beyond that, consider an activity or an organization you love. Groups such as pickleball leagues, gardening and



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book clubs, and religious and community service organizations are structured activities that can introduce you to new people with similar interests. This can keep things from feeling awkward. “When you join a group, you’re focused on an activity such as talking about the book club book, so you’ll have a safety net as you get to know people,” says Brower.

If you’re not one who is often out and about, use social media to create in-person connections, suggests Moore. For example, if you interact with an online network of people who enjoy a certain show or musician, arrange a meet-up to watch the final episode or attend a local concert. Leveraging technology like Zoom can be a good way to stay connected with long-distance friends and lower the hurdles to catching up with local ones, says Dr. Tarver.

It’s also helpful to think about connections you already have that could blossom into full-blown friendships. For instance, maybe there’s a longtime acquaintance with whom you’d like to spend more time: Make one call or send one text to that person this week, and don’t assume the worst if you don’t hear back right away. “Be empathetic. Maybe they’re just busy. It’s so easy not to respond, and often it’s not intentional,” says Dr. Tarver. “Your reaching out to someone you haven’t connected with in a while may mean a lot to them. Just the act of doing good by focusing on someone else has been shown to increase our own happiness and life satisfaction.”

## WHEN TO LET GO

**Because so much of friendship is based on proximity and access,** it’s not unusual for friends to come into and then fade out of your life. For example, you may have been friends with other parents on the soccer sidelines until your child became a theater kid. Or you might have retired and now not feel that you have as much in common with former work friends. “It’s natural for friendships to evolve as our life stages change,” says Brower. In fact, one study found that while the size of a friendship network tends to be consistent over time, the people in it change: About 52% of a person’s friendships turn

over every seven years.

That said, friendship is a safe haven, so when a meaningful friendship falls apart, it can be devastating. “You may say, ‘I never thought we wouldn’t be

friends.’ But you can’t go against your own values, and sometimes values change. The person you were in your 20s is not the same person you are in your 40s,” says Moore. Also, it is not unusual to have conflicting emotions and thoughts, such as anger and fond memories, at the same time. “Even if they wronged you, you don’t have to malign the entire friendship,” says Moore. “At some point you had good

times with this person and got something out of the relationship. Give yourself permission and space to grieve.”

When you have a history with someone, it can be hard to know when it’s time to move on. The below are indications that a friendship may no longer be worth prioritizing:

- You’re always the one initiating contact
- You feel as if your energy is sapped every time you’re with them
- You can’t think of anything to talk about or feel as if you can’t be yourself
- You feel that you *have* to call them instead of wanting to
- You don’t want to pick up when they call you
- You find yourself being more critical and less approving of their actions



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