

Friendships: Enrich your life and improve your health

Discover the connection between health and friendship, and how to promote and maintain healthy friendships.

By Mayo Clinic Staff

Friendships can have a big effect on your health and well-being. But it's not always easy to make or keep friends. Understand the importance of social connection in your life. Know what you can do to build and fuel lasting friendships.

What are the benefits of friendships?

Good friends are good for your health. Friends can help you celebrate good times and support you during bad times. Friends help keep you from feeling alone. Friends also can:

- Raise your sense of connection, belonging and purpose.
- Boost your happiness and lower your stress.
- Improve your self-confidence and feelings of self-worth.
- Help you cope through hard times, such as divorce, serious illness, job loss or the death of a loved one.
- Urge you to change or avoid habits that aren't healthy. These might include drinking too much or not exercising.

Friends also play a big role in your overall health. Adults with strong social connections have a lower risk of many health problems. That includes depression, high blood pressure and an unhealthy weight. In fact, studies have found that older adults who have close friends and healthy social supports are likely to live longer than do their peers who have fewer friends.

Why is it sometimes hard to make or keep friends?

Many adults find it hard to make new friends or keep the ones they have. Work or caring for children or aging parents might come before friends. You and your friends may have grown apart due to changes in your lives or interests. Or maybe you've moved to a new town and haven't yet found a way to meet people.

Making and keeping good friends takes effort. The pleasure, comfort and health benefits you can get from friends make it worth the effort.

What's a healthy number of friends?

How good your friendships are count more than how many friends you have. Having a broad network of friends and contacts might be good. But having close friends who mean a lot to you does more for your sense of self.

What are some ways to meet new friends?

You can make friends with people you meet in your social network. Think about people you've talked with, even just a little, who you liked and whose company you enjoyed.

You may make new friends and feed friendships you already have by doing the following:

- Stay in touch with people with whom you've worked or taken classes.
- Get back in touch with old friends.
- Reach out to people you've met and enjoyed at social events.
- Meet your neighbors.
- Make time to reconnect with family members.

If you think of someone you'd like to know better, reach out. That first step is often the hardest. But it might be easier to take than you think. Ask people who know both of you to put you in touch with a text, email, phone call or visit. Invite the person to coffee or lunch.

To meet new people who might become friends, go to places where people gather. Use more than one way to meet people. The more you try, the easier it gets. And the more you're likely to succeed.

Keeping at it also matters. Reach out instead of waiting for others to come to you. Keep trying. You may need to suggest plans a few times before you can tell if a new friend wants to be with you.

For example, try several of these ideas:

- **Go to events in your community.** Look for groups or clubs that gather around an interest or hobby. You may find these groups online, in the newspaper or on local message boards. There also are 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, charity or something similar. You can form strong links when you work with people who have interests like yours.
- **Give and accept invitations.** Invite a friend to join you for coffee or lunch. When you're invited to a social event, say yes. Then return the invitation.
- **Take up a new interest.** Take a college or community education course to meet people who have interests like yours. Join a class at a local gym, senior center or community fitness center.
- **Join a faith community.** Then go to special activities and get-to-know-you events for new members.
- **Take a walk.** Grab your kids or pet and head outside. Chat with others you see along the way. Or go to a popular park and talk to people there.
- **Calm your nerves.** If you're nervous about meeting new people, you may be tempted to stay home. Use deep breathing, yoga or other mind-body techniques to help you relax.

Above all, stay positive. You may not become friends with everyone you meet. But being positive and reaching out can help make the relationships you have better. It also may help you make friends with people you meet.

How does social media affect friendships?

Joining a chat group or online community might help you make or keep friends and help you feel less lonely. But research suggests that use of social networking sites doesn't always lead to a larger offline network or closer offline links with network members. Also, be careful when sharing information about yourself. And take care when meeting with someone you've met online.

How can I feed my friendships?

Making and keeping friends involves give-and-take. Sometimes you're the one giving support. Other times you're getting it. Letting friends know that you care about them can help strengthen your bond. It's as important for you to be a good friend as it is to have good friends.

To nurture your friendships:

- **Be kind.** Kindness is at the core of good friendships. Think of friendship as an emotional bank account. Every act of kindness is a deposit into this account. Being unkind takes away from it.
- **Be a good listener.** Ask what's going on in your friends' lives. Let others know you hear them. When friends share details of hard times, let them know you get how they feel. Don't give advice unless your friends ask for it.
- **Open up.** Build closeness with your friends by opening up about yourself. Being willing to share your feelings and concerns shows that your friend is special to you.
- **Show that you can be trusted.** Let your friends know that they can rely on you. Show up on time. Do what you say you'll do. Keep what your friends tell you in private to yourself.
- **Make an effort.** Building a close friendship takes time together. Try to see new friends often. Check in with them in between meet ups. You may feel odd the first few times you talk on the phone or get together. But this feeling gets easier as you get more comfortable with each other.

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