



## Making Good Friends

Tips for Meeting People and Making Meaningful Connections



Friendships have a huge impact on your health and happiness. Good friends relieve stress, provide comfort and joy, prevent loneliness and isolation, and even strengthen your physical health. But close friendships don't just happen. Many of us struggle to meet people and develop quality connections. Whatever your age or circumstances, though, it's never too late to make new friends, reconnect with old ones, and greatly improve your social life, emotional health, and overall well-being.

### Why are friends so important?

Our society tends to place an emphasis on romantic relationships. We think that if we can just find that right person, we'll be happy and fulfilled. But research shows that friends are actually even more important to our psychological welfare. Friends bring more happiness into our lives than virtually anything else.

Developing close friendships can also have a powerful impact on your physical health. Lack of social connection can be as damaging as smoking, drinking too much, or leading a sedentary lifestyle. Friends are even tied to longevity. A recent Swedish study found that, along with physical activity, maintaining a rich network of friends can add significant years to your life.

#### The benefits of friendships

While developing and maintaining friendships takes time and effort, good friends can:

**Improve your mood.** Spending time with happy and positive friends can elevate your mood and boost your outlook.

**Help you to reach your goals.** Whether you're trying to get fit, give up smoking, or otherwise improve your life, encouragement from a friend can really boost your willpower and increase your chances of success.

**Reduce your stress and depression.** Having an active social life can bolster your immune system and help reduce isolation, a major contributing factor for depression.

**Support you through tough times.** Even if it's just having someone to share your problems with, friends can help you cope with serious illness, the loss of a job or loved one, the breakup of a relationship, or any other challenges in life.

**Support you as you age.** As you age, retirement, illness, and the death of loved ones can often leave you isolated. Having people you can turn to for company and support can provide purpose as you age and be a buffer against depression, disability, hardship and loss.

**Boost your self-worth.** Friendship is a two-way street, and the "give" side of the give-and-take contributes to your own sense of self-worth. Being there for your friends makes you feel needed and adds purpose to your life.

### Why online friends aren't enough

Technology has shifted the definition of friendship in recent years. With the click of a button, we can add a friend or make a new connection. But having hundreds of online friends is not the same as having a close friend you can be with in person. Online friends can't hug you when a crisis hits, visit you when you're sick, or celebrate a happy occasion with you. Our most important and powerful connections happen when we're face-to-face. So make it a priority to stay in touch in the real world, not just online.

## Know what to look for in a friend

A friend is someone you trust and share a deep level of understanding and communication. A good friend will:

- ▶ Show a genuine interest in what's going on in your life, what you have to say, and how you think and feel about things
- ▶ Accept you for who you are

- ▶ Listen to you attentively without judging you, telling you how to think or feel, or trying to change the subject
- ▶ Feel comfortable sharing things about themselves with you

As friendship works both ways, a friend is also someone you feel comfortable supporting and accepting, and someone with whom you share a bond of trust and loyalty.

### Focus on the way a friendship feels, not what it looks like

The most important thing in a friendship is how the relationship makes you feel—not how it looks on paper, how many things you have in common, or what others think. Ask yourself:

- ▶ Do I feel better after spending time with this person?
- ▶ Am I myself around this person?
- ▶ Do I feel secure, or do I feel like I have to watch what I say and do?
- ▶ Is the person supportive and treat me with respect?
- ▶ Is this a person I can trust?

The bottom line: if the friendship feels good, it is good. But if a person tries to control you, criticizes you, abuses your generosity, or brings unwanted drama or negative influences into your life, it's time to re-evaluate the friendship. A good friend does not require you to compromise your values, always agree with them, or disregard your own needs.

## Tips for being more friendly and social (even if you're shy)

If you [are introverted or shy](/articles/relationships-communication/dealing-with-loneliness-and-shyness.htm) (/articles/relationships-communication/dealing-with-loneliness-and-shyness.htm), it can feel uncomfortable to put yourself out there socially. But you don't have to be naturally outgoing or the life of the party to make new friends.

**Focus on others, not yourself.** The key to connecting to other people is showing interest in them. When you're truly interested in someone else's thoughts, feelings, experiences, and opinions, it shows—and they'll like you for it. You'll make far more friends by showing your interest rather than trying to get people interested in you. If you're not genuinely interested in the other person, then stop trying to connect.

**Pay attention.** Switch off your smart phone, avoid other distractions, and make an effort to truly listen to the other person. By paying close attention to what they say, do, and how they interact, you'll quickly get to know them. Little things go a long way, such as remembering someone's preferences, the stories they've told you, and what's going on in their life.

## Self-disclosure: the key to turning acquaintances into friends

We all have acquaintances—people we exchange small talk with as we go about our day or trade jokes or insights with online. These relationships can be fulfilling in their own right, but what if you want to turn a casual acquaintance into a true friend?



(/articles/relationships-communication/dealing-with-loneliness-and-shyness.htm)

[Dealing with Loneliness and Shyness: \(/articles/relationships-communication/dealing-with-loneliness-and-shyness.htm\)](/articles/relationships-communication/dealing-with-loneliness-and-shyness.htm) Making Friends Even if You're Shy

**Friendship is characterized by intimacy.** True friends know things about each other: their values, struggles, goals, and interests. If you'd like to transition from acquaintances to friends, open up to the other person.

**You don't have to reveal your most closely-held secret.** Start small with something a little bit more personal than normal and see how the other person responds. Do they seem interested? Do they reciprocate by disclosing something about themselves?

### Evaluating interest

Friendship takes two, so it's important to evaluate whether the other person is looking for new friends.

- ▶ Do they ask you questions about you, as if they'd like to get to know you better?
- ▶ Do they tell you things about themselves beyond surface small talk?
- ▶ Do they give you their full attention when you see them?
- ▶ Does the other person seem interested in exchanging contact information or making specific plans to get together?

If you can't answer "yes" to these questions, the person may not be the best candidate for friendship now, even if they genuinely like you. There are many possible reasons, so don't take it personally!

## How to meet new people

We tend to make friends with people we cross paths with regularly: people we go to school with, work with, or live close to. The more we see someone, the more likely the chance of a friendship developing. So the places you frequent are a good place to look for potential friends.

Another big factor in friendship is common interests. We tend to be drawn to people we share things with: a hobby, the same cultural background, a shared career path, kids the same age. Think about the things you like to do or the causes you care about. Where can you meet people who share the same interests?

### Making new friends: Where to start

When looking to meet new people, try to be open to new experiences. Not everything you try will be successful but you can always learn from the experience and hopefully have some fun.

**Volunteering** can be a great way to help others while also meeting new people. Volunteering also gives you the opportunity to regularly practice and develop your social skills.



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[Volunteering and Its Surprising Benefits:](/articles/healthy-living/volunteering-and-its-surprising-benefits.htm) (/articles/healthy-living/volunteering-and-its-surprising-benefits.htm) How Giving Improves Your Life

**Take a class or join a club** to meet people with common interests, such as a book group, dinner club, or sports team. Websites such as Meetup.com can help you find local groups or start your own and connect with others who share similar interests.

**Walk a dog.** [Dog owners often stop and chat](/articles/mental-health/mood-boosting-power-of-dogs.htm) (/articles/mental-health/mood-boosting-power-of-dogs.htm) while their dogs sniff or play with each other. If dog ownership isn't right for you, volunteer to walk dogs from a shelter or a local rescue group.

**Attend art gallery openings, book readings, lectures, music recitals,** or other community events where you can meet people with similar interests. Check with your library or local paper for events near you.

**Behave like someone new to the area.** Even if you've lived in the same place all your life, take the time to re-explore your neighborhood attractions. New arrivals to any town or city tend to visit these places first—and they're often keen to meet new people and establish friendships, too.

**Cheer on your team.** Going to a bar alone can be intimidating but if you support a sports team, find where other fans go to watch the games. You automatically have a shared interest—your team—so it can be easy to start up a conversation.

**Unplug.** It's difficult to meet new people in any social situation if you're more interested in your phone than the people around you. Remove your headphones and put your smartphone away while you're in the checkout line or waiting for a bus, for example. Making eye contact and exchanging small talk with strangers is great practice for making connections—and you never know where it may lead!

## Tips for strengthening acquaintances

**Invite a neighbor or work colleague for a drink or to a movie.** Lots of other people feel just as uncomfortable about reaching out and making new friends as you do. Be the one to break the ice. Your neighbor or colleague will thank you later.

**Connect with your alumni association.** Many colleges have alumni associations that meet regularly. You already have the college experience in common; talking about old times can be an easy conversation starter. Some associations also sponsor community service events or workshops where you can meet more people.

**Track down old friends via social media sites.** Make the effort to reconnect and then turn your "online" friends into "real-world" friends by meeting up for coffee instead of chatting on Facebook or Twitter.

**Carpool to work.** Many companies offer carpool programs. If your employer doesn't, simply ask your colleagues if they would like to share rides. It's a good conversation starter and will help you connect with people who live near you.

## Overcoming obstacles to making friends

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Is something stopping you from building the friendships you'd like to have? Here are some common obstacles—and how you can overcome them.

### If you're too busy...

Developing and maintaining friendships takes time and effort, but even with a packed schedule, you can find ways to make the time for friends.

**Put it on your calendar.** Schedule time for your friends just as you would errands. Make it automatic with a weekly or monthly standing appointment. Or simply make sure that you never leave a get-together without setting the next date.

**Mix business and pleasure.** Figure out a way to combine your socializing with activities that you have to do anyway. It could be going to the gym, getting a pedicure, shopping. It's an easy way to spend time together while still being productive.

**Group it.** If you truly don't have time for multiple one-on-one sessions with friends, set up a group get-together. It's a good way to introduce your friends to each other. Of course, you'll need to make sure everyone's compatible.

### If you're afraid of rejection...

Making new friends means putting yourself out there, and that can be scary. It's especially intimidating if you're someone who's been betrayed, traumatized, or abused in the past, or someone with an insecure attachment bond. By working with the right therapist, you can explore ways to build trust in existing and future friendships.

For more general insecurities or a fear of rejection, it helps to evaluate your attitude. Do you feel as if any rejection will haunt you forever or prove that you're unlikeable or destined to be friendless? These fears get in the way of making satisfying connections and become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Nobody likes to be rejected, but there are healthier ways to look at it:

- ▶ Just because someone isn't interested in talking or hanging out doesn't automatically mean they're rejecting you as a person. They may be busy, distracted, or have other things going on.
- ▶ If someone does reject you, that doesn't mean that you're worthless or unlovable. Maybe they're having a bad day. Maybe they misread you or misinterpreted what you said. Or maybe they're just not a nice person!
- ▶ You're not going to like everyone you meet, and vice versa. Like dating, building a

- ▶ solid network of friends can be a numbers game. If you're in the habit of regularly exchanging a few words with strangers you meet, any rejections are less likely to hurt. There's always the next person. Focus on the long-term goal of making quality connections, rather than getting hung up on any connections that didn't pan out.
- ▶ Keep rejection in perspective. It never feels good, but it's rarely as bad as you imagine it will be. It's unlikely that others are sitting around talking about it. Instead of beating yourself up, give yourself credit for trying and see what you can learn from the experience.



(/articles/mental-health/finding-a-therapist-who-can-help-you-heal.htm)

[Finding a Therapist Who Can Help You Heal: \(/articles/mental-health/finding-a-therapist-who-can-help-you-heal.htm\)](/articles/mental-health/finding-a-therapist-who-can-help-you-heal.htm) How to Choose

## For better friendships, be a better friend yourself

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Making a new friend is just the beginning of the journey. Friendships take time to form and even more time to deepen, so you need to nurture that new connection.

**Be the friend that you would like to have.** Treat your friend just as you want them to treat you. Be reliable, thoughtful, trustworthy, and willing to share yourself and your time.

**Be a good listener.** Be prepared to listen and support friends just as you want them to listen and support you.

**Give your friend space.** Don't be too clingy or needy. Everyone needs space to be alone or spend time with other people as well.

**Don't set too many rules and expectations.** Instead, allow your friendship to evolve naturally. You're both unique individuals so your friendship probably won't develop exactly as you expect.

**Be forgiving.** No one is perfect and every friend will make mistakes. No friendship develops smoothly so when there's a bump in the road, try to find a way to overcome the problem and move on. It will often deepen the bond between you.



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