

Friendship - how to make new friends

Friendships are an important part of life, but many of us find it difficult to find, make or keep friends. Life events, such as moving to another neighbourhood, starting a job or having a baby, can isolate us from our former support group and make forging new friendships more important than ever. In other cases, shyness or poor social skills can prevent us from taking the first step in forming a friendship. This article offers practical suggestions that may help you to expand your social circle or reinforce the relationships you already have.

Priming yourself for friendship

You may want friendship, but what kind of friend would you make? Factors to consider include:

- **Attitudes to others** - we can drive potential friends away by demanding they share our attitudes, beliefs or behaviours. If you accept that other people have a right to be different from you, then you open yourself up to the possibility of experiencing relationships that bring a fresh perspective to your life.
- **Treatment of other people** - think about how you like to be treated, then offer the same to the people in your life.
- **Don't expect instant results** - good friends aren't made overnight. Sharing your deepest secrets in one night won't necessarily create a close friendship. It may even drive the other person away. Take it slowly. Divulge 'safe' secrets first, and allow the relationship to hold some weight before you share the meatier issues in your life.
- **Curb the urge to criticise** - constantly griping about the failures and weaknesses of other people can make your listener feel wary of you. How do they know you aren't complaining about their flaws to other friends?
- **Don't gossip** - potential friends aren't going to trust you if you constantly gossip to them about the trials and tribulations of other people in your life.
- **Don't compromise yourself** - each one of us has standards of morality and behaviour. Don't allow yourself to compromise yourself for the sake of 'fitting in' with a group.

Places to meet friends

Suggestions include:

- Many people make friends at work. Open yourself up to the possibilities by participating in social occasions, such as Friday night drinks or lunches to celebrate employee birthdays.
- Follow your interests. For example, if you like walking, join a neighbourhood walking group.
- If you don't work and have no particular hobbies, consider joining a volunteer group with a charity that interests you.
- Use your existing network of family and friends to meet new people.
- Don't turn down party invitations.

When making friends is difficult

Some people find it difficult to make friends. Perhaps they are shy, or feel they lack the social skills to start a conversation. Suggestions include:

- Join groups that share your common interests. Talking about one of your passions, such as gardening or writing short stories, for example, can help give you confidence to talk about other things with potential new friends.
- Watch and learn from gregarious people who make friends easily.
- Practise looking people in the eye when you talk to them.
- Listen to what others are saying, rather than focusing on your own self-consciousness.

- Smile.
- Look for anyone else in the room who seems socially awkward, and approach them for conversation.
- When you talk to someone new, ask them questions about themselves or what they like to do; it's a good way to get started.
- Social skills can be learned, so seek professional help if you feel you need it.

Keeping friendships

Suggestions include:

- **Appreciate your friends** - don't take your friends for granted. Take the time to thank your friends for enhancing your life, in whichever way suits best - for example, inviting them over for dinner for no other reason than to have fun together.
- **Offer time and attention** - friendships need to be nurtured. If you are consistently too busy to give time to your friends, they will one day move on without you. Ensure you make friendship an important priority. Actively listen to your friends, and show your interest and enthusiasm in their lives.
- **Be compassionate** - people make mistakes. Sometimes, a friend may do something of which you don't approve. Put yourself in their shoes - would you want condemnation or forgiveness from those who are supposed to love and care for you?
- **Don't abuse trust** - for example, if a friend tells you a secret, keep it to yourself. You might think you're building relationships with others by sharing gossip, but you're actually ensuring that others won't trust you enough to tell you anything. And if your friend finds out you abused their trust, your relationship with them is as good as over.
- **Control jealousy** - you may want your best friend to be 'faithful' to you, which means you experience jealousy if they have other close relationships. Learn to appreciate that love for friends - like love for one's children - can be limitless.

Where to get help

- Local councils (for information about local activities)
- Local community centre or Neighbourhood House
- Australian Psychological Referral Service Tel. (03) 8662 3300 or 1800 333 497

Things to remember

- Life events, such as moving to another neighbourhood, starting a job or having a baby, can isolate us from our former support group and make forging new friendships more important than ever.
- Participate in work social functions, join a hobby group or volunteer for charity work.
- Friendships need love, time, attention and trust if they are to survive.

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