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## You Gotta Have Friends

“You Gotta Have Friends.” More than just a song title, having friends can also mean living a more fulfilling and healthier life as you get older.

Unfortunately, says developmental psychologist Susan Pinker, author of “The Village Effect: How Face-to-Face Contact Can Make us Healthier, Happier and Smarter,” the loneliest group of individuals in the United States are middle-aged or older, with a third of those between the ages of 45 to 49 saying they have no one to confide in. If you’re in that group, Pinker’s advice is short and to the point: Find a friend (and the more the better).

### **The Healthy Benefits of Friendship**

“Those with a tightly connected circle of friends who regularly gather — even if it’s just to eat and share gossip — are likely to live an average of 15 years longer than a loner,” says Pinker, adding that people with active social lives are more physiologically resilient and recover faster after an illness than those who are more socially isolated.

A study of women with invasive breast cancer, for example, found that women with the most social ties, such as spouses, community engagements, friendships and family members, had significantly lower breast

cancer death rates and recurrence of the disease than women without social connections; one reason for this finding is that social contact appears to switch on and off the genes that regulate our immune responses to cancer and the rate of tumor growth. Research has also shown that friends can inspire each other to have a healthier lifestyle, as well as help reduce stress, which can lower blood pressure, decrease the risks of depression and heart disease, and reduce the odds of developing dementia.

“Social connections are as protective as regular exercise,” says Pinker. “A hug, a squeeze on the arm or a pat on the back lowers one’s physiological stress responses which, in turn, helps the body fight infection and inflammation.”

### **Face to Face or Screen to Screen?**

While technology can be a boon if you’re unable to visit your friends regularly—as we’ve all seen during the pandemic—for the best health benefits, says Pinker, aim for real-world contact.

“Facebook may help you reconnect with people from your past or even meet new friends,” she says, “but carrying on a friendship solely online will not provide

you with the same physiological and emotional benefits that a night out with your BFF will.”

**Think Younger**

As we get older and our friends move away, become ill or, sadly, die, it’s even more important to keep adding to our roster of friends.

Steven Petrow, author of “Stupid Things I Won’t Do When I Get Old,” who also writes frequently on aging, health, and civility, recommends deepening the friendships you already have as well as making new ones, even (or especially!) if they’re younger.

“New research shows that ‘intergenerational’ friendships provide value to all,” says Petrow. “To have friends well into old age, you need them to be younger than you!” That’s why Petrow has chosen to identify as a “Perennial,” a term coined by

tech entrepreneur Gina Pell to describe “ever-blooming, relevant people of all ages who live in the present time, know what’s happening in the world, stay current with technology, and have friends of all ages. Perennials get involved, stay curious, mentor others, and are passionate, compassionate, creative, confident, collaborative, global-minded risk takers, and who know how to hustle.”

“Millennials can be Perennials. Boomers can be Perennials. Anyone can choose to be a Perennial,” says Petrow.

**Keep the Old but Bring in the New**

Ruth Thaler-Carter is an expert at both keeping old friends and making new ones. In her peripatetic life, the 68-year-old freelance writer and editor has moved from her

hometown of Rochester, N.Y., to St. Louis to Washington, D.C., where she lived for eight years; on to Baltimore for 13 years; then back home to Upstate New York; and now back in St. Louis.

Throughout her many moves, she has kept many friendships and made many more. The benefits of friendships as she gets older are many, Thaler-Carter observes. “Friends inspire me to try new things, go to new places, and stay aware of what’s going on around me, both close and afar,” she says.

“Being connected to old and new friends keeps me young and happy, especially now that my beloved husband is gone,” Thaler-Carter continues. “I have close friends I’ve known my whole life, and when I’m in contact with them, it’s as if the years never passed, even though some of us are getting gray- or

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white-haired, have grandkids/-nieces/-nephews (even great-grand!) or are retired. That shared life history is a wonderful thing, while new connections keep me growing mentally and emotionally. Especially in these continuing pandemic days, we all benefit from staying or becoming connected with friends both old and new. Social isolation can be dangerous on many levels.”

### Finding New Friends

Not sure how to go about finding friends? Here are some suggestions that have worked for Thaler-Carter and others.

- Get a dog and take it for a walk (good for both you and the dog!). Love animals but can't have a pet? Local animal shelters often host events where you can meet fellow animal enthusiasts.
- Volunteer with a charitable cause or organization. Do good while doing good for yourself.
- Find a way to get involved with a new hobby. Enjoy knitting? Yarn shops, for example, often have drop-in knitting circles where you can stitch and chat. Or take up a new sport. Susan Koontz Laber, 72, who now lives on Maryland's Eastern Shore, started playing golf four years ago and joined the local LPGA amateur golf league. "I've met many interesting ladies as we learn and play the great game of golf together," she says. "We really cheer each other on! The league also sponsors local happy hour events as well as other social activities! It has been a very fun way to meet new people and enjoy their company."
- Join (or start) a neighborhood association.
- Join a political group at the neighborhood or town/city level,



and get involved in an issue you care about.

- Take your newspaper or tablet to your neighborhood coffee shop, bookstore, pool or other location you enjoy visiting. "I've made new friends when someone initiated a conversation about something I was reading or working on, and by commenting aloud about an article or offering the paper to someone else," says Thaler-Carter.
- Join (or start) an alumni association for your high school or college, or a club for people from your hometown. The Washington area has many such opportunities. When Thaler-Carter moved from St. Louis to D.C., she found a St. Louis Club whose members knew or were related to some of the people she knew in Missouri. "Having St. Louis in common was a great way to make new friends with little effort," she says.
- Join and be active in a professional organization or membership association. Work-related contacts often become good friends.
- Go to the grocery store around the same time on the same day of the week. Other "regulars" could become friends as you "bond" over produce, treats and other favorites. "I made a new friend just by chatting about my preferred seafood items in the prepared

foods section," says Thaler-Carter, fondly remembering the "Social Safeway" in Georgetown, famous for both informal and organized meet-ups.

- Check out online neighborhood groups like **NextDoor.com** or **meetup.com** to find like-minded nearby neighbors.
- Be the one to reach out. Whether you live in an apartment/condo building, a detached house, or a senior living residence, introduce yourself to neighbors and consider hosting the occasional neighborhood social event.
- Join a health/fitness club or recreation center. A shared effort at better health can be the start of a beautiful friendship.
- Enjoy reading? See if your local library has a book club you can join.
- Take a trip. If solo travel isn't your thing, the not-for-profit Road Scholar, a leader in educational travel for baby boomers and beyond, offers trips to 100 countries and all 50 states (as well as virtually during the pandemic). According to president and CEO James Moses, the organization's learning adventures are designed to foster social connections, bringing together people from all walks of life who share a passion for learning. "The camaraderie our participants find on our programs

is one of the things that keeps them coming back year after year, and we hear so often how vital these social experiences are for our participants.”

- Be the one to get back in touch. Think about friends from childhood, high school, college, past jobs; send an email message, pick up the phone, message them on Facebook, and see if you can still find common ground. Reconnecting can be a lot of fun, and it’s easy these days thanks to Zoom and social media.
- Online peer to peer groups such as **Supportiv** or **Facebook** groups such as the Over 70’s Friendship Group (or groups for different age ranges) can introduce you to people from around the world or even your own neighborhood. And if your life circumstances

have changed and you’ve lost a spouse or significant other, Rockville, Maryland-based life coach Amy Schoen suggests joining support groups such as **New Beginnings** or **Widow Care**.

In short, says Melissa Bachelor, director of George Washington University’s interdisciplinary Center for Aging, Health and Humanities, “as humans, we are social beings and having strong social support from family and friends becomes increasingly important as we age.”

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