

Stay Social, Stay Happy

A Guide to Building Friendships
as You Age



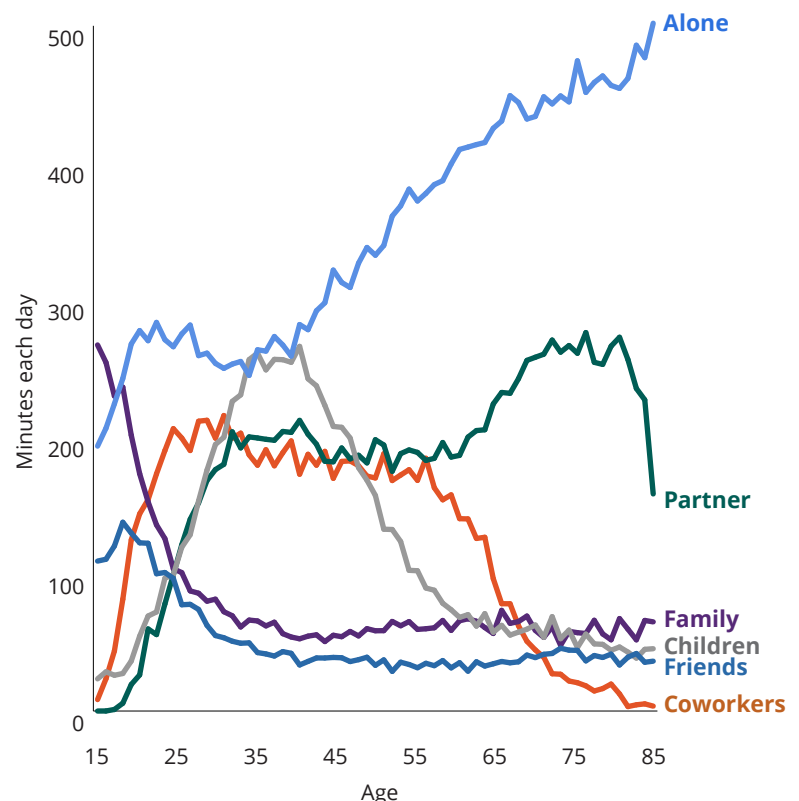
Maintaining social connections is crucial for our overall well-being and quality of life. But as we age, it's common for our social circles to shrink. For instance, Americans aged 65 and older spend an average of 7.5 hours alone each day (see Figure 1). This loneliness can significantly impact our physical, mental, and cognitive health, leading to serious issues such as heart disease, depression, and cognitive decline.

Health and mobility issues, along with major life changes like retirement, the loss of a spouse, or relocating, can make maintaining social connections more difficult. But even if you've been out of the loop for a while, it's never too late to reconnect and build new friendships. Here are some tips to help you get back in the groove and make new friends, whether you're feeling a bit rusty or just looking for new ways to connect.

We'll Cover How to:

- How to get back in the social groove
- What to say to break the ice
- How to use the three Rs to grow friendships

Figure 1: Who Americans Spend Their Time With by Age



Source: Visualized: Who Americans Spend Their Time With, Visual Capitalist, 10/28/22. Most recent data available.

First, How to Get Back in the Social Groove

It's perfectly fine to ease into socializing at your own pace. Building relationships takes time, and that's completely normal.

Start Small: If you're looking to put yourself out there, whether to practice socializing or make new friends, start with brief, low-pressure interactions. Try chatting with a neighbor by saying hello and asking about their day when you see them outside or in your apartment building.

If you like dogs, be on the lookout for people walking them. Ask them about their dogs and you'll be chatting away. You can also walk in a nearby park and greet the people you pass by or visit a local café and ask someone for their recommendations.

Pursue Your Interests—or Explore New Ones: Consider joining clubs or groups that focus on your favorite hobbies, like reading, gardening, or exercise. Meetup groups (meetup.com) are great for finding people with interests like yours, whether it's learning new skills or enjoying physical activities. You'll instantly have something in common with other members, helping conversations flow naturally.

Sometimes people lose touch with their interests over time due to life changes and shifting priorities. If you're unsure about what to do, ask yourself what activities you enjoyed in the past or have always wanted to try.

Volunteer: Volunteering provides an opportunity to meet new people in a structured environment and create meaningful connections. It's a fantastic way to make friends because it connects you with like-minded people who share your passion and values. To find opportunities, VolunteerMatch.com allows you to type your location in the search bar and lists all the volunteer options near you. You can sort them by cause—such as animals, children, and the arts—to find the right fit for you.

Tip—Bring a Friend: Attending an event with a trusted friend or family member (including our pets, when allowed) can make the experience less daunting. Or consider taking your four-legged companion to a dog park, where a fellow pet lover will likely strike up a conversation.

Once you know where you want to go, you need to figure out what to say. Let's dust off a few icebreakers.

Second, What to Say to Break the Ice

Long after you've left middle school behind, concerns about not fitting in can persist. Even adults sometimes worry about how they're perceived by others, especially in new social settings. But not knowing what to say doesn't have to hold you back from making new connections.

Here are some ice breakers that can help you feel more comfortable engaging in social situations:

Compliment and Ask: This involves giving someone a compliment and then following up with a request or question. For example:

- **Compliment:** "I couldn't help but notice how beautiful your garden looks. Your flowers are always so vibrant."
- **Ask:** "Do you have any tips for someone who's just starting out with gardening?"

People are more likely to respond positively to after receiving a compliment. This can lead to further conversation about their interests.

Getting-to-Know-You Questions: Simple questions like "Where did you grow up?" or "Do you have any grandchildren?" can help break the ice and find common ground.

Discuss Hobbies: Ask about their hobbies or what they enjoy doing in their free time. Questions like "What do you do for fun?" or, if you join a club, "How long have you been involved with this group?" are easy conversation openers.

Current Events or Interests: Bring up a recent event or a topic of mutual interest. For example, "Did you catch the latest episode of that show?" or "Have you tried the new restaurant on Main Street?"

Tip—Use the Power of Follow-up Questions: Follow-up questions show that someone is not only listening but also curious. This is particularly good news for introverts who thrive in one-on-one conversations. Of course, you don't want to bombard the other person with questions; instead, focus on listening and learning more about them.

When making small talk, keep the conversation light. Avoid diving into life's biggest problems (including your own) and steer clear of sensitive topics like politics.

Not all connections have to be brand new. You may have existing ones that just need some nurturing. Strengthening these relationships can be just as fulfilling as forming new ones.



Third, How to Use the Three Rs to Grow Friendships

No matter what, making new friends requires effort—but you don't always have to start fresh. Are there people you've met with whom you think there's potential for a closer relationship? These are the countless people that you see, cross paths with, and may have a brief conversation from time to time.

The methods below, aka the “three Rs” may help you form stronger bonds with them.



Rekindle

Reconnecting with old friends can feel like picking up where you left off. The shared history makes it easier to rekindle the relationship and make new memories together.



Repot

Just like a live plant, some friendships flourish when given room to grow beyond their initial containers. If you only interact with someone

in one environment, think about how you can extend it to other areas of your life. For instance, if you had a coworker who enjoyed the outdoors, invite them for a weekend hike. It's a great way to strengthen your connection and enjoy new experiences together.



Ritual

Consistency is essential to building and maintaining friendships. If you meet someone you'd like to befriend or want to stay connected with, try meeting up weekly. Activities could include attending a class or meeting for lunch. The key elements of building friendships through regular meetups are being intentional, available, and reliable.

Nurturing these connections gives you a head start on forming friendships and expanding your social network.

This All Sounds Nice, But I'm an Introvert!

Meeting new people can be challenging, especially for introverts. But it doesn't necessarily mean diving into large gatherings or being the life of the party. Introverts can make friends and socialize just as well as extroverts, though they might approach it differently.

Here are a few tips:

Different social settings: Introverts often thrive in one-on-one or small gatherings where they can leverage their listening skills and thoughtful nature to have in-depth conversations.

Leverage your interests: Introverts often immerse themselves fully in their hobbies, causes, or work. Joining clubs or groups that align with your values can help you form strong, meaningful connections with others who share your values and passions.

Be yourself: Authenticity is key. Don't feel pressured to be someone you're not. Genuine connections form when you let your true self shine, allowing others to appreciate the real you. You might be just the friend they've been looking for.

Remember, it's okay to take your time and find what works best for you. Friendships can grow in the most unexpected ways!

Friendships: They're Good for Us!

It's interesting how many aging adults find themselves spending more time alone without consciously choosing to do so. This quiet shift can go unnoticed until their social world has significantly changed. While this may not happen to you, it's a common trend. Staying connected isn't just enjoyable—it's essential. Strong relationships bring joy, fulfillment, and even health benefits, helping us thrive in many ways. By being intentional about nurturing your social circles, you can stay happy and healthy for years to come.

Next Step

Pick an activity from one of the categories to build or reinforce friendships.