

How to Make Friends as an Adult — and Why It's Important

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Anyone who's ever made room for a big milestone of adult life—a job, a marriage, a move—has likely shoved a friendship to the side. After all, there is no contract locking us to the other person, as in marriage, and there are no blood bonds, as in family. Friendships are flexible. “We choose our friends, and our friends choose us,” says William K. Rawlins, Stocker Professor of Communication Studies at Ohio University. “That’s a really distinctive attribute of friendships.”

But modern life can become so busy that people forget to keep choosing each other. That’s when friendships fade, and there’s reason to believe it’s happening more than ever. Loneliness is on the rise, and feeling lonely has been found to increase a person’s risk of dying early by 26%—and to be even worse for the body than obesity and air pollution. Loneliness wreaks health havoc in many ways, particularly because it removes the safety net of social support. “When we perceive our world as threatening, that can be associated with an increase in heart rate and blood pressure,” says Julianne Holt-Lunstad, professor of psychology and neuroscience at Brigham Young University and author of the recent study linking loneliness to mortality. Over time, she says, these effects can lead to hypertension, which increases risk for cardiovascular disease.

The antidote is simple: friendship. It helps protect the brain and body from stress, anxiety and depression. “Being around trusted others, in essence, signals safety and security,” says Holt-Lunstad. A study last year found that friendships are especially beneficial later in life. Having supportive friends in old age was a stronger predictor of well-being than family ties—suggesting that the friends you pick may be at least as important as the family you’re born into.