

A Strategic Approach to Friendship

by Tammy Kennon
Writer, sailor, traveler, photographer and blogger

Follow these tips to expand your circle of support.
Your life, quite literally, depends on it.



BE OPEN

Look people in the eye



“No man is an island.”

“No man is an island.” That sounds more like poetry (Donne, 1624) than the conclusion of a scientific research study. But, in fact, it’s the resounding conclusion of hundreds of them.

While it’s no surprise that social isolation can be detrimental to our emotional health, scientists are now finding surprisingly strong evidence that it can be deadly — as damaging to our health as smoking, alcohol abuse and obesity.

Conversely, researchers are finding that having strong social connections improves our health, helps us ward off disease, and demonstrably extends our lives. In fact, the mother of all studies, an aggregation of 148 studies, revealed the shocking news that strong social support increases the likelihood of survival by 50 percent. You read that right: 50 percent. And that remained constant regardless of age, sex, initial health status and the length of the studies — for 308,849 participants (Holt-Lunstand et al., 2010).

To fully reap these benefits, our social network must extend beyond the immediate family. German researchers found that while family interaction has a positive impact on life satisfaction, it comes with a counterbalancing negative effect. Social interaction outside the family network, on the other hand, boosts life satisfaction without any mitigating negative effects, especially for older adults. (Huxhold et al., 2014). Having a strong circle of friends is all good.

In other words, 21st-century science is proving what we already knew: Friendship is not just the butter on our bread; friendship is sustenance itself.

Unfortunately, as we age, our social circle undergoes a natural attrition. Over the years, as our lifestyle changes, we tend to shed friends without necessarily replacing them.

In addition, life’s major transitions can abruptly remove us from the safe embrace of our community, whether it’s a voluntary transition, like moving to a new city, or a transition imposed by circumstance, like moving into assisted living for health reasons. Either way, we are reminded of the value of companionship and the challenge of forming new relationships.

The reality of this truth came home to roost for me when I turned 50. My husband and I left behind our community of 15 years and set off on a sailing adventure. The joy and excitement of our travels were sustaining for a time, but as the months passed, I increasingly felt the absence of those friends I left behind. This sent me scrambling to build a new social network and consequently to relearn lessons about making friends I’d long since forgotten.

Even though I’m a bona fide introvert, I found a way to develop many deep and lasting friendships in our three years of sailing, despite the fact that we were constantly moving. That experience taught me some fundamental lessons about the arc of friendship, lessons that I now employ as I reestablish a community on land.

“We say, “birds of a feather,” and it’s key to finding lasting friendships. Search for a seed of shared interest ...”

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FIND COMMON GROUND

Key to lasting friendships



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INVEST TIME

Your most valuable commodity

SOURCES:

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"Think back to those high school days of laughter and leisure, and try to recreate them with new people."

Be Open. Lolling in the comfort of my posse of friends (and my introversion), I had developed some bad habits. I no longer made eye contact with strangers or engaged them in conversation. As with any other habit, it took diligence and repetition to change. Look people in the eye. Make a connection, and open a conversation.

Practice Your Story. Meeting new people meant introducing myself over and over, something I never had to do with old friends. It takes practice. Learn to make it count. Tell people what makes you get up in the morning, what gives you joy, and how you survived the rough spots. Hone and own your story.

Find Common Ground. Biologists call it "conspecifics," which means belonging to the same species. We say, "birds of a feather," and it's key to finding lasting friendships. Search for a seed of shared interest that can be nurtured into a friendship, whether it's hobbies, traveling, brewing beer or playing dominoes.

Find Urgency. Sailors use an accelerated getting-to-know-you method, a platonic version of speed dating that skips small talk entirely. Imagine you only have one hour to explore whether or not there is potential for a lasting relationship. What's the most important thing to find out about him, and what does he need to know about you? This mental exercise shifts the focus away from idle chitchat and facilitates an earnest conversation.

Ask Questions. Everyone has a story to tell, but sometimes they need help. Work on your questioning (and listening) skills. Start with concrete questions, and then move toward more abstract questions about thoughts and feelings, philosophies and ideas. What do you value most in a friendship, or if I gave you a thousand dollars, what would you do with it?

Be Vulnerable. Imagine that stranger you just met is already your best friend. What would you say to her? Conversation can take a plunge

to a deeper level with a simple show of vulnerability. "I miss my kids today. Do you ever feel that way?" or "Every single day I'm grateful that ..." or "You know what scares me?"

Make Rules. Psychologists tell us that we make flash judgments about the people we meet; by some measures, in the literal blink of an eye (Wargo, 2006). Offer strangers a grace period with a five-minute rule that reflects your own priorities. For me, in the first five minutes, I look for smiles and laughter plus equal measures of listening and talking.

Invest Time. Building new friendships requires investment at so many levels, but at its core, it's about investing your most valuable commodity: time. Think back to those high school days of laughter and leisure, and try to recreate them with new people in your life. Those hours spent hiking through the woods or playing a lolling game of Monopoly have a way of turning strangers into friends — and life into living. ♦

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The three Senior Corps programs – RSVP, Senior Companions, Foster Grandparents are administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service, the federal agency that improves lives, strengthens communities and fosters civic engagement through service and volunteering.

