

Best Friends Day: Friends Make Life Better at Any Age

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Best Friends Day, celebrated on June 8th, is a time to cherish what our dearest friends mean to us. Why not plan an outing or meal together, or give your best friend a call if he/she doesn't live nearby?

We all enjoy having friends, but maybe don't always realize just how important they are to our well-being. As we get older, we may lose friends through life circumstances, moves and death. On the other hand, after retirement most people have more leisure time to enjoy with friends and even meet new ones.

Benefits of Friendship and Social Interaction

The benefits of social interaction, for older adults in particular, include:

- Potentially reduced risk for cardiovascular problems, some cancers, osteoporosis, and rheumatoid arthritis
- Potentially reduced risk for Alzheimer's disease
- Lower blood pressure
- Reduced risk for mental health issues like depression (above from University of Rochester Medical Center)
- Protection against cognitive decline: the rate of cognitive decline in one 12-year study was 70% less for those with high levels of social interaction (Drexel University School of Public Health).
- Less disability and higher likelihood of being able to live independently longer: even when controlling for risk factors like smoking and prior disease, someone with high levels of social activity has 43% less disability than someone with low levels of social activity.

BEST friends, or good friends, are particularly important. People who have one or more good friends are in better health than those who have only casual friends or no friends.

Close friends provide emotional support and help us through challenging times



Tips for Friendship in Later Life

- Stay in touch with old friends, even if circumstances change. Regular phone calls, emails or catching up on Facebook or Skype can be meaningful ways to stay connected even when you can't be face-to-face.
- To have friends, the key is to be a friend. Check in on people, listen to them, reach out to do things together.
- Be flexible (to keep friends and make new ones). Friendships change over time and not all friends have to like all the same things or see eye-to-eye on everything.

It can be tough to make new friends at any age, but it's especially hard if you've lost some of your life-long friends or a spouse and find yourself "out there again". Finding a buddy (even just an acquaintance or neighbor) to go along on new adventures can help

minimize the anxiety of attending new events so that you can more easily expand your social circle. Some other tips for making new friends:

- Join groups/events where you can meet like-minded individuals. What interests do you have? Even seemingly solitary hobbies like knitting have groups/classes you can attend.
- Volunteer in your community or take a class. Find out if your church has classes or other groups; see if there is a committee you can join.
- Check out all the activities at the local senior center and offered by the community (community centers, YMCA, city festivals). Look into civic groups/organizations (Rotary, American Legion, VFW, alumni groups, etc.).
- Search online (meetup.com has something for everyone in most areas) to find new events or groups to check out. Making connections online can be great too, especially if you're limited in your ability to get out and about. Check out Facebook groups (search your interests on Facebook) or other online forums.
- Join in a fitness class at the gym (or a walking/fitness group).
- Men's friendships tend to be based more on structured activities, so it really helps for men to join groups that offer organized activities or planned meetings. Or, consider getting together your own group (weekly golf outing, card game, etc.) or inviting friends to an event.
- Don't let age be a barrier. Common interests can cross over age differences.
- Accept and extend invitations. When someone invites you, consider going even if it doesn't sound like your ideal outing.

Happy Best Friends Day!