

When Friends Become Family

More people are focusing on friendships later in life — and research reveals the many health benefits this offers.

by Rachel Guyah



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Famed author and advertising exec Lois Wyse once said: “A good friend is a connection to life — a tie to the past, a road to the future, the key to sanity in a totally insane world.”

Indeed, many a person has survived adolescence, buoyed by the support of a friend. While adults often shift focus to family as they begin to raise their own, people are starting to prioritize pals once again later in life.

Why the social shift? “Often kids are focused on their own jobs and family,” says David J. Puder, M.D., medical director of the MEND partial and intensive outpatient program at the Loma Linda University Behavioral Medicine Center. He also cites divorce, adult children moving away and the death of a spouse, older parent or loved one as other common reasons people pivot back to friendships.

Friends: The Secret to Aging Well?

A good friend, as we know, can offer many gifts: laughter, encouragement, wisdom and support. But the impact of friendship extends to the health of our body and mind, too — particularly as we age.

“Having a few close friends is positively associated with higher self-esteem, less substance use/abuse and a reduced rate of depression and anxiety,” says Courtney Bolton, Ph.D., a Nashville-based psychologist who specializes in friendship skill development.

Friends may boost physical health, too: According to a pair of 2017 studies published in *Personal Relationships*, placing high value on friendships later in life strongly predicted a person’s health and happiness — more so than one’s own family relationships. Moreover, having a strained relationship with a friend was linked to higher reports of chronic illnesses such as diabetes and arthritis.

In fact, having strong friendships later in life can even reduce one’s risk of early death. In an analysis of 148 studies with a total of more than 300,000 individuals, researchers found those with strong social ties had a 50% higher chance of survival — putting a lack of relationships on par with smoking and obesity.

How Friends Keep Us Healthy

1. Friends can buffer the blow of stressful events. Divorce, chronic illness, caring for a spouse or parent — life’s stressors can certainly pile on as we age. While stress can ramp up your risk of arthritis, heart disease and other chronic ailments, friends can help weather the storm and steer you toward healthier coping strategies (ex. swimming vs. smoking).

2. Friends help us maintain healthy habits. Whether it’s losing weight, cooking healthier or kicking bad habits, friends can offer a powerful dose of support, encouragement and accountability. They can also boost your self-esteem and sense of control.

3. Friends keep our brains busy. “Social connectedness is good for mental health and cognitive function,” says Puder. Indeed, multiple studies have linked social activity with better brain health and functioning. Find fun ways to stay connected and engaged, whether it’s weekly phone chats, rounds of golf or brunch dates.

