

It used to be so simple – hang out near the monkey bars, discover a mutual love of tropical Fruit Boxes and Burger Rings, and voilà, an unshakeable bond is born.

Or, perhaps if you're more the quiet, shy type; you kicked pebbles on the sidelines until a kindly extrovert adopted you.

Either way, making friends was a relatively natural process at school.

As an adult? Not so much. Between clashing schedules, moving to a new location, a skewed work/life balance, family responsibilities, and sometimes limited opportunities to get out and about, it's tricky enough to hold onto our current pals, let alone expand our social circle.

Support from family or other people in our life such as colleagues is important, but friends play a special, separate role to enrich our lives, says clinical psychologist Renee Mill.

"Friends help us feel better about ourselves and remind us that we have many facets and our worth does not have to come from work or status or any standards our families may have set for us," she says. "They can expose us to new and novel experiences and ideas, which helps us grow as people."

THE MAGIC NUMBER

Exactly how many friends does a person need, though? According to research by Professor Robin Dunbar at Oxford University, our brain's maximum capacity to handle platonic relationships is around 150 people. Within this number, there are various levels of friendships. We usually have five closest friends, along with 10 friends who are slightly removed from our inner circle, but we'd still likely catch up with on birthdays. From there, we'd often have 35 less-close friends, and the remainder would be considered acquaintances.

These numbers might seem overwhelming and unnecessary. While you might be tempted to put all your eggs in one or two baskets, friends-wise, having at least a few close pals is a good idea so you're not left bereft if one friendship falls away.

Having several to lean on in tough times also takes the pressure off each individual friend. We'll often have various pals that gel with a different side of our lives or personality. One friend might be great at discussing career goals and acting as an



EXPANDING YOUR CIRCLE

Whether through a falling-out with former pals, moving away from your regular support network, or simply wishing to expand your horizons, the quest to find new friendships after school or university can be tough.

WORDS BY REBECCA DOUGLAS

agony aunt for your workplace dilemmas, while another might make an ideal gym buddy but couldn't care less about your professional aspirations.

"Different friends fulfill different functions, which is a good thing because friendship fatigue is when we expect one friend to be all things to us," says Mill.

"There is the confidante whom we share our struggles with and call when we are sad. There is the strong friend – great at giving advice, not so good at empathy. There is the party friend, sport friend etc."

If you're in the market for a new friend, how do you even do it without giving off weirdo vibes, though?

“THERE ARE RED FLAGS TO WATCH OUT FOR WHEN THINKING ABOUT UPGRADING SOMEONE TO A FRIEND.”

Mill says there are two critical factors that will enable a platonic connection between two people to blossom naturally.

“Friendships exist when there is proximity, i.e. you live close by, are at school or work together,” says Mill. “The other main criterion of forming a friendship is shared values and/or interests. That is why it is easy to make friends when you are school-going age. At school with other children all day, playing soccer together, and hating the teacher at the same time is the perfect environment to forge a friendship. When that person moves to another city and decides to play chess, the friendship will wane.”

By joining a group that meets regularly, you'll put yourself in an orbit of like-minded people; and if you pursue a friendship and meet up with someone outside of the group, you'll have an automatic topic to fall back on during any lulls in conversation.

Choosing a local group means you'll likely meet people who live or work nearby, which will make it easier to stay in touch outside of the group.

You might like to join a sports team, book club, church, or volunteering organisation. Other activities to try include: community events, language lessons or classes at the local library. Hit it off with one or more other attendees after several sessions? Perhaps invite them out for a coffee or a meal to chat a bit more.

ONLINE AND OFFLINE

It's okay to meet people online and connect with them, but forging quality friendships takes a genuine investment of time and effort, rather than simply clicking and adding a person to a list, says Associate Professor Lauren Rosewarne, social scientist at the University of Melbourne.

“Probably attributable (at least in part) to Facebook, we use the word ‘friend’ quite generically – everyone is a ‘friend,’” she says. “Realistically, the 500 people we're ‘friends’ with on Facebook aren't actual friends in that they're not going to bring you chicken soup when you're sick.”

Social media can help us meet people, however, and maintain a surface level of friendship when physically meeting in person can be difficult.

“In some cases, social media has been an enormous benefit for friendship; the platform makes us feel social even if we don't really want to leave our home and pajamas,” Rosewarne says. “It keeps us in contact with people we might not necessarily see regularly – we can keep up to date with their lives without much effort.”

Of course, a connection that begins online could morph into a real-life friendship after meeting in person. Platforms such as Meetup (meetup.com) and Bumble BFF are specifically designed for this purpose. Alternatively, you might like to take a bond you've forged with someone on social media offline.

In these situations, it pays to be mindful of catfishing, which is where someone pretends to be someone they're not online. This can happen not only with romantic relationships, but friendships as well.

A TWO-WAY STREET

Whether you first met a person on the internet or in the real world, there are early red flags to watch out for when thinking about upgrading someone from a casual acquaintance to a full-blown friend, particularly where they seem to be moving at breakneck speed.

“Someone who ingratiates themselves too quickly, who is taking liberties (like asking for money) or seeking personal information too soon are warning signs,” says Rosewarne.

It pays to listen to your gut. This new person should make you feel calm and happy most of the time when you interact with them, rather than bringing out unpleasant emotions.

“Other warning signs are people who spark negative feelings in you,” says Rosewarne. “Do they make you feel jealous? Boring? Poor? Whatever it might be, a ‘friend’ who triggers negative feelings in you isn't someone who is going to add value to your life.” A new friend doesn't always need to be sparkling and rosy when you meet up with

them, but you shouldn't be left wondering what their intentions are, what games they're playing, or whether their words have a double meaning, after every interaction.

“When you spend a lot of time thinking about or talking about what they said, what they could have meant, or why they did not include you, be aware the friendship is becoming draining and not replenishing,” says Mill.

Of course, this is balanced by understanding that we must bring something to the relationship as well, and a friend who is overall beneficial for our happiness and self-esteem might slip up from time to time.

“Having a good friend is a precious thing and needs time and investment,” says Mill. “It also needs forgiveness as people inevitably ‘mess up’ and if we hold people to unrealistic standards we will not have any friends.”

“For example, if your friend forgets your birthday, as an adult we should be able to cope with that. How many birthdays have you forgotten? It happens. It is not serious enough in my opinion to derail a 20-year friendship.”

The aim should be mutual enjoyment and support rather than expecting one person to be the be-all and end-all in your life.

“Don't expect your friend to be your psychologist or saviour,” says Mill. “Be responsible for your own happiness and see your friends as part of that in the sense of sharing enjoyable experiences.”



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Friendships are key to our health and happiness, but when a friendship becomes detrimental to our wellbeing, it may be time to consider cutting ties and making new, more fulfilling connections.

mindfood.com/friend-cleanse

TOP FRIEND-FINDING TIPS

Social scientist Lauren Rosewarne's recommendations for expanding your circle:

- Work out what kind of friends you want: Are you looking for people to hang out with casually or do you want a best friend? If you want a best friend, remember such relationships require a lot of time and investment. Acting as though a new acquaintance is your bestie might scare them away (exactly what might occur in a fledgling romantic relationship).
- Think about the kind of social things you like to do where there might be people who are interested in the same things as you –

activities such as sports, craft, cooking, book club, singles' holidays etc are all places where people go to actively be social.

- Take advantage of online platforms which, like dating sites, work to help you find friends with similar interests.
- Realise you need to make an effort. Friendships in adulthood don't just magically ‘happen’ but require input and maintenance. Ask yourself whether you're being the kind of friend you'd want and if not, think about what you could do to change that.