

Keeping Relationships Strong as We Age

1st September 2021

Many people find that their relationships change as they grow older. This is natural for all adults. In midlife, you may want to strengthen your ties to family and friends and make new acquaintances. This can help to keep you healthy and ensure that your relationships stay strong all through life.

How relationships change in later life

Your relationships may change in many ways in midlife or later. You may have more time to spend with friends or more opportunities to visit family members who live far away. Or you may need to make adjustments when you embark on new chapters of your life. Such as:

- beginning a new job
- downsizing
- caring for an ageing parent
- moving to a different community
- getting a divorce or remarrying
- adapting to children leaving home
- retiring

Here are some of the many things you can do to keep your relationships strong as your life changes:

Look for new ways to stay connected. Ask yourself if your old ways of keeping in touch with family and friends are still working. If not, make changes that will help you to stay connected. You could send text messages or quick emails instead of calling, or video chats if you're unable to visit.

Reset your priorities. If you've been focusing on friends or relatives who live nearby and you want to reach out to others, decide what changes you'd like to make. Then set goals for your relationships and work out a plan for achieving them.

Respect the needs of your family and friends. Keep in mind that your friends or relatives may be going through changes of their own. Be willing to compromise and adjust to other

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people's needs.

Be open to relationships with many kinds of people. In midlife, you may find that your needs or interests have changed or that you don't see some friends or relatives as often. Be open to developing relationships with people of all ages. Having friends who are both younger and older than you will enrich your life.

Anticipate how leaving work may affect your relationships. Develop friendships with people who don't work with you; by doing so you'll have a support system if you retire or switch to a different type of work.

Your family relationships

Siblings often develop stronger ties to each other after the death of a parent; therefore, siblings may play a greater role in one another's lives as they age. Whether with your siblings, adult children, or extended family members, there are many ways to deepen your relationships.

Let relatives know that they are important to you. Tell them why they are special to you and what you admire about them. If relatives live far away, let them know that even though you can't see each other often, you think about them and feel close.

Let go of old grievances. At this stage of life, you and your family members may have many more similarities than differences. Be willing to take the first step to let go of an argument or misunderstanding from the past.

Respect lifestyle differences. Avoid making judgments. Instead, learn as much as you can about your relatives' lives. This may give you a better understanding of their choices.

Revive your childhood rituals. Send your brother a packet of his favourite sweets and a note sharing a memory of time spent together. Or celebrate the 50th anniversary of your sister's starring role in the school play by sending her a copy of a funny photo of her on stage.

Communicate often. Send emails, digital photos, letters, and postcards. Call often if you

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can. You may find friends and relatives to be in touch with on social media.

Attend reunions and similar gatherings. Reunions reinforce close ties to favourite family members and build relationships with relatives you don't know well. Consider having a "virtual reunion" by organising a video chat to catch up with relatives and friends. You could also consider creating a family blog or website.

Remember birthdays, anniversaries, and other special days. Send virtual or paper notes, cards, or small gifts. Remember that many people may have strong feelings on the anniversary or the birthday of a loved one who has died.

Be there when relatives need you. Make an extra effort to stay in touch with a family member who hasn't been feeling well or who has had a loss. Support relatives on happier occasions, too. If you can't attend an event, find another way to send best wishes or congratulations.

Pay special attention to the needs of grown children. They still need to know that you love and care about them. Stay in touch. On birthdays and other special days, share a memory of celebrating the occasion with them when they were younger.

Preserve some of your favourite family stories. Start a family scrapbook that you can add to over the years. You may also want to consider doing oral histories by interviewing family members to preserve family stories in audio or video recordings.

Maintaining strong friendships

You'll gain many benefits from keeping your old friends and making new ones all through life. Studies show there's a link between good health in later life and strong friendships. Research has found that three things help people make friends at any age: proximity; repeated, unplanned interactions; and the chance to be yourself and confide in each other.

Find ways to stay in touch with people you've known for a long time—friends, neighbours, colleagues—while also reaching out to new acquaintances.

Make friendship a high priority. Put time and effort into your friendships. When you were

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younger, you may have made friends naturally—through school, work, or clubs. In midlife, you may need to be more deliberate to maintain or build friendships.

Accept that your friendships may change. In midlife, some of your friends may want to have a different relationship with you than they had when you were younger. This is a natural part of human growth and development.

Share rituals and traditions. Shared rituals and traditions are ways of expressing deep values and staying close to people you love. You and your friends may want to develop your own rituals to celebrate events such as birthdays, festive occasions, and promotions.

Take extra steps to stay close to friends who move away. Plan for how you'll stay in touch after a friend moves to a new community. Can you visit regularly? Have a weekly or monthly telephone conversation or online connection? Continue to celebrate some important events together?

Get involved in community activities. These are a great way to strengthen old relationships and build new ones because they allow you to spend time with people who share your goals and interests. Consider volunteering. Or check the calendar of events online to find out about meetings of local organisations that may need your help.

Join a group of people who share your interests. Visit [MeetUp](#) to search for existing groups of people who have the same hobby, passion, or values, or tell others that you want to start a group.

Take courses at an adult learning centre. Adult learning courses can focus on personal development or career orientated skills. You may want to take courses on your own or strengthen ties with a friend by learning together.

Renew old friendships. Attend a reunion or find other ways to get reacquainted with old friends. Social networking sites like [Facebook](#) and [LinkedIn](#) are a great way to reconnect.

Adjusting to changes as a couple

If you're in a long-term relationship, you'll need to reach some understanding over the years

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about how both of you want to pursue your shared goals.

Focus on the present, but plan for the future. Talk about the goals you'd like to reach soon and those you'd like to achieve years down the road. These may relate to work, travel, health, finances, or your relationship. Write these down individually and then share them together; you may be surprised at what you learn.

Explore the opportunities provided by an empty nest. Once children leave home, the empty nest can offer you a chance to renew your relationship and rediscover interests or activities that you put on hold while raising a family.

Accept that your roles may change. In midlife, either or both of you may switch to part-time work, go back to school, or decide to make lifestyle adjustments due to health concerns.

Allow for separate interests and activities. In later life, one of you may develop interests the other doesn't share or a health condition that may rule out certain activities. Explore different options in order to meet both your needs. If you need more time for your own activities, talk about this with your partner. Then make plans for both individual and shared activities.

We go through many changes throughout our lives. The best way to handle these is to keep relationships strong enough that they can survive—and even thrive on—the challenges of a new stage of life.

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