

The American Counseling Association's "Counseling Corner" Weekly Columns

Want A Longer, Happier Life? Make Friends

from the American Counseling Association

Women, in general, tend to be more sociable than men and tend to make more and deeper friendships. But for men, developing close friendships with other men often seems difficult to do.

And yet, according to researchers, this matters. The 2005 Australian Longitudinal Study of Aging found that family relationships had little impact on longevity but that friendships appeared to increase life expectancy by as much as 22 percent.

So why is it harder for men to undertake something as seemingly pleasant, and apparently health promoting, as making good friends? Experts cite a number of reasons.

One is that men traditionally tend to be more caught up in their careers. Today they may also want to be more involved with their children than their own fathers were. The result can be little time left to develop close friendships with peers. And as men get older and leave the work force, they also tend to leave behind most of the work friendships they have enjoyed.

Another problem is that men seem to have been taught, whether consciously or otherwise, that talking about personal matters with other men simply isn't "manly." In our society, women are more at ease drawing other women out, talking about feelings and emotions, and sharing their inner lives. Men tend to avoid the personal and instead base friendships on common interests such as sports or work.

The bottom line is that men certainly can develop good and strong friendships, but it may take a bit more effort as well as overcoming some of the traditional barriers.

One starting point, especially for older men, is to get into situations where they can meet other men and where the atmosphere is right for making conversation and sharing experiences. It might mean participating at a senior center, taking courses at a local college, or volunteering with a local charity. Book clubs, walking groups, exercise classes - all are places where men can meet other men like themselves.

It then also means being willing to open up and share one's feelings and emotions. A man may have to make a real effort, at least at first, to share what he's feeling or concerned about, but when he does so that's when he's building the foundation for a real friendship.

Put in a little effort and sharing and you'll create friendships that will enrich your life, and maybe even prolong it.

Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to ACAcornet@counseling.org or visit the ACA website at www.counseling.org.

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