

VTech Guest Article

Golden Friendships: How to Keep Lifelong Connections

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Growing older comes with many transitions, some of which can leave individuals feeling lonely. Whether it's moving to a new community, transitioning into a home with family, or even staying behind while others leave, often times people become isolated in small increments without realizing how limited their social lives have become. It's important to form new social habits, make a plan, and commit to friendships to feel happier and healthier.

Staying connected can be particularly hard for individuals who avoid senior centers or planned community activities. They can shift into loneliness without awareness.

Make Socializing a Health Habit

Socializing gives us a decided "survival advantage," both mentally and physically. Data has shown individuals with rich social networks lived at least 1.6 years longer than their peers.¹ Those experiencing social isolation, however, might not live as long, or be as healthy as those who are social. Examples of this health impact include a study in [Amsterdam](#) that documented the effects of loneliness and social isolation on the elderly and their risk of dementia. A second example is a study from John Cacioppo, social psychologist at the University of Chicago, who found that loneliness can be tied to hardening of the arteries, inflammation in the body, and problems with learning and memory. Socializing is as important as good nutrition and exercise for your health.

Start a Stay-Connected Plan

If you find your social network unraveling, make reaching out a habit. The easiest pipeline for communication is the telephone. There are no networks to join or passwords to remember. Since telephone service is likely already in your home, consider ways to enhance the experience. There are phone products, such as the [VTech® CareLine™](#) system, that aim to help seniors live independently, make connecting easy and integrated with your daily activities. CareLine includes spots for four pictures of friends or family for push-button dialing. You never need to look up or remember their phone numbers by heart. Feature enhancements such as; larger buttons and volume boost, help those who need a little extra hearing or dialing assistance. Just make the call and stay connected.

Want to use email, but don't know how? [Generations Online](#) is dedicated to simplifying the Internet and email for seniors. You don't need any computer experience to learn, and classes are available for free at many senior centers.

Make a Written Social Commitment

Consider ways to plan your social activities to keep you on track. A great idea is to use a calendar to write down when you will make calls, write letters, and send emails. A good goal might be one friendly outreach a day. If you live far from a friend, schedule holiday visits, or create a "friendship holiday" for visiting. You can use important dates like birthdays and anniversaries as reasons to start the conversation. Your friends and family will appreciate your thoughtfulness.

Become a “Friend Detective” and Search for Old Friends

Is there a friend from high school who you haven’t contacted in years? Social networks, like [Facebook](#), can make re-connecting easy and fun. A family member can help you with a little digging or use a mutual friend to connect you. With a little luck, you can re-live old memories and create new ones. If you miss your work buddies, the best network to use is [LinkedIn](#); it’s designed to help you connect with people for business or social purposes. You also can do detective work online through the [White Pages](#). All you need is a snippet of information like a name, ZIP code, or address to make that search.

These efforts are not just fun; they are absolutely essential to making socializing a habit, and are crucial for good health. And don’t stand on ceremony for getting in touch. If you are more likely to make that phone call than your friend, or if using technology comes more easily to you, go the extra mile for them. There's nothing more important than staying connected.

ⁱ Findings by Swedish researchers, British Medical Journal, August 2012; Social and Productive Activities as Predictors Of Survival Among Elderly Americans, Thomas Glass, Carlos Mendes de Leon, Richard Marotti, Lisa Berkman, Harvard University, Rush Institute, Yale University, 1999