

# Making new friends as you age: It's tough, but worth the effort

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Lydia Pawlowsky got a part-time job at a Queen St.W. retailer in hopes of connecting with other women, which helped her meet some new friends. (Vince Talotta / Toronto Star)

By [Lauren Pelley](#) Staff Reporter

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Three years ago, Lydia Pawlowsky was living the postgrad dream.

After graduating from the University of Guelph in her early 20s, she landed a job at a Liberty Village start-up company and moved into an apartment right across from Trinity Bellwoods Park in one of the hippest neighbourhoods in the city.

But since she didn't know anyone in Toronto — besides her co-worker pool of roughly seven guys, all a decade older than her — the trendy young creative was missing one big thing: Friends.

"That first summer, I didn't even go into Trinity Bellwoods because I didn't have anyone to hang out with there," says Pawlowsky, now 24.

The struggle of finding friends is a familiar scenario many people can relate to as they age. Maybe you've moved back home after graduating university or college, or you've landed a job in a new city. Maybe all your friends are

having babies and you're single, or vice versa — you're the one with kids.

A bit of self-consciousness can develop over time when it comes to making friends, says American psychologist Irene S. Levine, a professor of psychiatry at the NYU School of Medicine.

“When you're young, you have no problem going over to another child and asking to be friends,” Levine says. “In high school and college, everybody's thrown together in similar circumstances — doing the same things, at the same place, at the same time — but after that, it requires more initiation.”

The thing is, typically, we all want — and need — friends. One [University of Virginia study](#) suggests we're hard-wired for empathy and friendship, and mentally associate people close to us with ourselves. [A decade-long Australian study](#) found older people with a large social network were more than 20 per cent less likely to die during the study period than people with fewer friends. And, [according to Harvard Medical School](#), “dozens of studies have shown that people who have satisfying relationships with family, friends, and their community are happier, have fewer health problems, and live longer.”

The evidence is clear: Friends are pretty great. So how do we make new ones as we age?

“You schedule dentist appointments and hair dresser appointments — you need to find a way to weave friends into your life,” Levine says.

That means setting aside time for new relationships (and the ones you've already got.) It also means joining activities you're passionate about — be it a team sport, choir, book club, cooking class, you name it — which could be potential sources of friends with similar interests.



Clubs and organizations where people show up automatically, like your local church or a new moms group, can be

particularly good for fostering friendships since you'll see people regularly, says Shasta Nelson, author of *Friendships Don't Just Happen!*

"I always use affirmation to break the ice and start the conversation," adds Nelson, who also runs [GirlFriendCircles.com](http://GirlFriendCircles.com), a women's friendship matching site in more than 60 cities, including Toronto.

That means listening for something you and a potential friend have in common, and running with it. "She says something about a movie, and you say — 'Oh, it's been so long since I've been to a movie!' It's trying to find something that's an extension of something you're talking about," Nelson explains. (This goes for men and women, by the way.)

Levine says people also need to be more assertive. And yes, that can be scary — and a bit like asking someone out on a date.

But that boldness worked for Pawlowsky. She first took a part-time job at a Queen St.W. retailer in hopes of connecting with other women, which helped her meet some new friends to bring along to art shows and concerts.

"Honestly, since then, I've had a lot of luck and positive experience just reaching out to people just via Twitter and Instagram," she adds. If she spots someone doing work she enjoys, or taking photos she likes, Pawlowsky says she'll get in touch to tell them how much she likes their work — then asks them out on a casual "friend date," like grabbing coffee.

"I've never had anyone turn that down," she says.

And it makes sense. One thing that often holds people back is the myth that everyone already has their friends, says Levine. "Nothing could be further from the truth," she says. "Friendships are dynamic and changing. Just like you could be losing some friends or the nature of your friendships are changing, you have to act on the presumption that other people are in the same situation."

So what are you waiting for? Go make a new friend.

"If someone has the same sense of humour as you on Twitter, for instance, or lives in your neighbourhood — there's no reason why you shouldn't reach out to them," Pawlowsky says.

## **Making friends as you age**

Life is different in every decade, and experts say your friendship-making strategies might change, too.

### **In your 20s**

You're likely still in touch with school friends or people from your hometown. But you might also be living in a new city and working in one of your first jobs. Your office is likely a fertile environment for making new friends and acquaintances. Keep in mind that most people are in the same boat — so it's an ideal time to make friends at various activities, clubs or social events, or through social media.

### **In your 30s**

At this age, lots of people are pairing off and starting families. If you're attached, you can start linking up with people from parenting groups or other moms and dads at the playground (or tap into the social network of your partner.) If you're single or don't have kids, your strategies might be different — and maybe it's time to add friendship dating-style websites and apps, like [GirlFriendCircles.com](http://GirlFriendCircles.com) or [Yes New Friends](http://YesNewFriends.com), to your arsenal.

### **40s and beyond**



You'll likely be part of the "sandwich generation" as you age, splitting time between caregiving for your parents and children. Sure, you might still make new friends, but the later decades of your life are a good time to invest in the friendships you already have. If you're coping with big life changes — like retirement or a move to a new city — the same principles apply from your younger years: Find people with common interests and take the plunge.

### **Q&A with a high-tech friendship matchmaker**

Last year, Amy Wood launched a little website called [Yes New Friends](#) — essentially a fun matchmaking service for Toronto women to expand their social circle. It was an instant hit, but the level of sign-ups were beyond what Wood could feasibly handle, and the site took a hiatus. After that, the 29-year-old, who runs a small creative agency, went back to the drawing board. Now, the redesigned website is live again, offering local women a new way to meet friends. We talked to Wood about what the site offers, and how this type of tech can help people connect.



Amy Wood's matchmaking service "Yes New Friends" was an instant hit. (Rene Johnston/Toronto Star)

How does Yes New Friends work?

There's a simple set of questions that you answer, mostly to do with age, location, what you do for work and fun, and a few questions probing what you're looking for in a friend. All of the matches are hand-picked. A dating site, from my limited knowledge, allows you to sort of pick the people you would message. But you can't see anyone's profile on Yes New Friends — it's meant to give you a new, weird experience by doing the matching for you.

Where did the idea come from?

I think it was inspired by a phenomenon a lot of people experience — it is sometimes hard to make friends, particularly in Toronto. It's an idea I had, because people use online dating, so why don't people do that to make friends? It struck me as strange that it hadn't taken off as a concept. I posted on Facebook asking if people would

use it, and people really responded positively. There's a genuine, earnest interest in friendship that hasn't really been brought to the surface.

Why is it so hard to make friends in Toronto?

It's a huge city and there's so many of us, but I can see how people get into a social or daily routine that can be a bit isolating. Whether you're in a job and the only people you interact with are the people you work with — and if they're not your friends, then you're spending your 9-5 with people who aren't your friends, and it's hard to break out of that cycle. I think in Toronto — at least in a lot of single lives — the spare time we have where we're craving social company gets filled in with dating.

Has that been your experience?

I feel really, really lucky to have an amazing group of friends and I feel like that's changed my life in a lot of ways. Reflecting on my history with friendships, I think I'm more inspired to do that for other people. My philosophy for Yes New Friends isn't a reaction to loneliness, but if we're all willing to make one new friend ... someone to do new activities with or gets your career or opens you up to a new world — well, everyone could use one new friend.