

# Struggling to make friends as an adult? Why you should try looking to older generations

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Credit: Belle Co from Pexels

While loneliness can strike at many points throughout our lives, there are times when it is especially acute. Big transitions like leaving university, changing jobs or moving cities can make us feel isolated and socially

excluded from the people around us.

It can be difficult to meet people without the built-in social network of student housing or a graduate scheme. According to [researchers](#), people between the ages of 16–24, and young people who rent are particularly at risk of experiencing loneliness, isolation and depression.

When making [friends](#), we usually look for people of similar ages, assuming they will share our worldview and life experiences. But this is not always a reliable indicator for forming [friendships](#).

Connections are made with like-minded people, regardless of age. Intergenerational friendships, formed between two or more people from different age groups, are one antidote to loneliness that can also help fight ageism in society.

In our [recent research](#), social scientist Riikka Korkiamäki and I explored the topic by interviewing older and younger participants who had at least one friend from a different age group.

We found that friendship between older and [younger people](#) can promote [social inclusion](#) and belonging, while also being enjoyable, interesting and beneficial for both parties. As one participant remarked, "People are people, we don't wear our birthday cards around our necks."

We learned from older and younger friends that there are plenty of reasons to make a friend from a different generation. Here are four of them.

## **Embrace difference and learn from each other**

While you will likely share interests, values and views with your intergenerational friend, differences can be interesting and useful too.

Older people have had a longer time to gain [personal experience](#) and develop skills and "know-how" in the workplace and beyond.

Your older friend will likely share these experiences with you. As the younger friend, you are more likely to be a digital native and can help keep your older friend up to date on technology, pop culture and more.

Give-and-take is a key characteristic of intergenerational friendship. Being not only the recipient, but the benefactor of support makes people feel good about themselves as an equal and supportive friend.

As one research participant confided, the give-and-take between friends was important "from a personal satisfaction point of view just feeling needed and useful and in demand—you know, just in that friendship sort of way."

## **Like any friendship, it's fun**

Fun and laughter are an essential element of these friendships. One participant remarked that having the same sense of humor and sharing jokes was an enjoyable element of their friendship with their older friend.

Another commented, "I don't really feel any older than her. We have a great bit of a laugh, you know. Chatting and laughing, telling jokes ... I could say anything to her."

## **Find new networks of support**

Friendship between different generations is a powerful and often overlooked source of support, caring and inclusion in different ways from friendships with peers.

Younger participants spoke about the "bridges" that their older friends provided to networks and support that their friends of similar ages could not provide. This is a useful characteristic if you are in a new city or country, or even a new workplace.

## **Do your bit to counter ageism**

According to the World Health Organization, [one in three](#) people report having been a target of ageism, with younger people in Europe reporting more perceived age discrimination than other age groups. Ageism can be detrimental to well-being, causing isolation and mental distress.

Intergenerational friendship can reduce stereotyping and prejudice about different age groups, and help to counter ageism as people get to know and understand each other and form friendship bonds regardless of age.

## **How to meet older friends**

Try joining clubs and enjoying leisure pursuits where people of all ages gather, or maybe just grab a coffee with an older work colleague.

Friendships between older and younger people can also be formed in the most unexpected places. One of our research participants began a lifelong friendship with a woman she narrowly avoided running over in a shopping center car park.

As they went for a coffee to recover from the near miss, they discovered that they enjoyed each other's company and shared a passion for sea swimming, and so their friendship began.

Opportunities to make friends with people beyond our own age, and the wonderful benefits they bring, are all around us if we look beyond the

usual clichés and stereotypes.

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