

It's hard to reach out to old friends, but doing so may help alleviate loneliness

July 22 2024, by Lara B Aknin, Gillian Sandstrom and Kristina Castaneto



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Millions of [Canadians are lonely](#). This is worrisome because loneliness, defined by the World Health Organization as "[the social pain of not feeling connected](#)," predicts both lower mental and physical health.

Research shows that lacking a sense of social connection can pose an [equivalent health risk to smoking 15 cigarettes per day](#).

To combat loneliness, people are commonly advised to seek out social connection. For many, this guidance brings to mind spending time with loved ones, such as close friends, family and romantic partners. But are there other people we can reach out to?

In our research, recently published in *Communications Psychology*, we examined whether people have "old friends"—individuals that they care about but with whom they have lost touch—and [how easily these relationships can be rekindled](#).

We found that certain strategies can help people reconnect—and in new research, we are getting a sense that certain values and [personality traits](#) may make it easier for people to stay in touch far into the future.

Reconnecting with old friends

Across a series of seven studies, we found the majority of people reported having an old friend. Yet, when we asked over 400 participants how willing they would be to reach out to an old friend right now, most said they were neutral or unwilling. In fact, in one study, people reported being no more willing to reach out to an old friend than they were to talk to a stranger or pick up trash.

This reluctance was observable in behavior too. We conducted two experiments in which more than 1,000 people were given several minutes to draft and send a message to an old friend. Only 30% sent the message to their old friend.

Given that reaching out to an old friend could boost [feelings of social connection and happiness](#), we tried designing interventions to encourage

reaching out. For instance, we reminded participants that reaching out to an old friend was an act of kindness and that the recipient would appreciate it more than they realize. We also tried telling participants not to overthink it—to just send their message. Unfortunately, neither prompt was effective at encouraging more people to reach out.

Reluctance to reconnect

Why are people reluctant to reach out to old friends? There may be a number of reasons, including the possibility that old friends feel like strangers after time has passed. In one study with over 500 participants, we asked people to list between three to five old friends, and tell us how close each one felt to them right now. The more unfamiliar an old friend felt, the less willing people were to reach out.

Research has found that when people [practice talking to strangers for a week](#), they become less anxious about it. If old friends can feel like strangers, might a similar strategy encourage people to reach out to old friends?

To find out, we conducted an experiment in which we randomly assigned some people to complete a three-minute warm-up activity in which they messaged current family or friends. Other participants were randomly assigned to a control condition in which they simply browsed social media for three minutes instead.

Afterward, all participants were given an opportunity to write and send a message to an old friend. While only 30% of participants sent their message in the control condition, over 50% did so after warming up, suggesting that practicing the behavior that underlies reaching out may make this act easier.

Personality traits

We are extending this research in a number of new directions. For instance, in some newly conducted and unpublished research, we are examining whether people with certain personality traits or beliefs are more likely to send a message to an old friend.

Responses from over 300 people suggest that people who are open to [new experiences](#)—[one of the five key personality traits studied by psychologists](#)—say they are willing to reach out to an old [friend](#). Despite this inclination, our research found that highly open people do not necessarily communicate with old friends when given the chance.

On the other hand, people's values and beliefs may be important determinants of whether they stay in touch. Our preliminary work shows that people who see friendship as a bond that does not easily break may be more likely to reach out than others.

We hope this work helps normalize the fact that friendships can fade and be hard to rekindle. That said, with some practice, people can overcome this reluctance and hit "send" to potentially open a path to connection and less loneliness.

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