

Did You Know?

A Little Help From Your Friends **Nurture Friendships for Health and Happiness**

From "Golden Girls" to "Sex and the City" pop culture has often celebrated women's friendships. In the real world, women connect through girlfriends' getaways, bookclubs, and endless conversations. Women know that friends matter and research confirms what you might have suspected - friendships can not only make you happier, but also make you healthier.

Why friendship matters: Friendships are an important source of happiness throughout life. Feeling connected to a person you like, trust and respect - and who returns the sentiment - fosters a sense of belonging, self worth and simple enjoyment of life. As a bonus, the bonds of friendship can: reduce stress; reduce risk of depression, anxiety and other mental health problems; lower your risk of dementia; help you weather traumas, such as divorce or serious illness; encourage healthy behaviors, such as exercising; and help you live a longer life.

Building and sustaining friendships: Making new friends and keeping up with old ones takes some work, especially if you are short on time or feel intimidated when meeting people. To meet new friends: walk your dog or go to a dog park and strike up a conversation with a fellow dog lover; join a gym or fitness class, accept invitations to parties, dinners and other social gatherings; volunteer or support a cause; attend sporting events, poetry readings, plays, concerts, and art shows; take a class; join a church or faith community; ask a friend to introduce you to others; reconnect with old friends via Facebook or other social media sites or at class reunions.

To keep your friendships healthy and strong:

- * Build your own self-esteem by treating yourself well and developing interests.
- * Listen and share equally, without chiming in with unsolicited advice or dominating the conversation.
- * Stay in touch, but don't overwhelm friends with phone calls or emails.
- * Avoid competition over who has the best clothes, house or kids.
- * Limit complaining - adopt a positive outlook.
- * Set boundaries or limits over issues such as the amount of time you spend together and the type of activities you do together.
- * Appreciate your friends - take time to say thank you, express how important they are to you, and do something nice for them.
- * Accept imperfection - practice forgiveness and allow yourself and your friends to be wrong sometimes.
- * Find ways to resolve problems, such as by talking with your friend about how *you* feel.
- * Have fun together.

A valuable resource: Relationships change over time and with shifting life circumstances, but it's important not to give up on keeping old friends or making new ones. Whether you have known a friend since kindergarten, or are getting to know a new neighbor, take time to appreciate friendships. They will remain a valuable health resource throughout your life.

How many friends should I have?

As the old saying goes, "You can be lonely in a crowd, or feel content with just a couple of good friends". People vary in their need to belong and feel connected to others. In general, a larger social network provides more opportunities for support. Many people have a best friend and two to four other close friends. But it's up to you to determine the best number for you.