



Photo credit: Paula Solloway

Developing Friendships

Time to Shine toolkit
September 2019

Time to Shine participants, volunteers and staff know that good friends are vital to reducing feelings of loneliness. The sort of friendship that feels comfortable and homely, the sort of friend you can rely on and feel at peace with.

We expect to make new friends as a child or young adult but as we get older our expectation of our ability to make friends can decrease.

What can we do about this? It's by no means easy but perhaps we need to be open to making new friends as we age. We could try doing things differently to create the right environment for people to meet, socialise and develop new friendships.

This toolkit contains tips and ideas from a range of people involved in the Time to Shine programme.



What can organisations do to help people develop friendships?

Host dedicated social events which are open to all members of an organisation

This helps people who attend different groups or activities, on different days, to meet new people.

Build in opportunities for socialising when planning a new activity

Allowing enough time before and after an activity gives space for people to chat to others who share a common interest. Ask people to make their own hot drinks before an activity as the best parties often happen in the kitchen.

Be clear and direct on your publicity

Add 'stay and socialise after the class' or 'meet new friends' on to your leaflets or flyers to make it clear that it's a sociable activity.

Create opportunities for older singles to meet and find a partner

Hosting events and activities for older singles demonstrates an understanding that some older people may be looking for a romantic relationship instead of, or as well as, platonic friendships.

Design social groups for people to engage with others from their community

Groups designed with and for particular communities, for example LGBT+ older people or Chinese elders, can give members a sense of connection that general interest groups may not offer.

Offer some new activities which take people out of their comfort zone

Taking part in challenging or unusual activities as part of a small group helps people bond over their shared new experience.

Mix up the type of activities and volunteering opportunities you offer

A shared interest attracts people to an activity but friendship and support from peers keeps them involved. Some people find it easier to talk shoulder to shoulder, some prefer face-to-face conversations and others like to chat whilst focused on the task in hand.

Have clear procedures to 'sign off' volunteer befrienders and participants who wish to be friends outside the volunteering role

Befriending can work really well if people share similar interests and want to invest time in getting to know each other. This can lead to friendship outside of the volunteering role. Create a straightforward letter outlining the difference between a friendship and a volunteer role for both parties to read, sign and return to the organisation. Encourage either person to talk to a member of staff if they have any concerns about this change in the status of their relationship.

Be aware that people have different definitions of friendship

Participants may consider staff as friends so clear boundaries are needed, particularly when the staff member changes jobs or the project comes to an end.

What can organisations do to help people develop friendships?

Find ways to help people strengthen existing friendships and relationships

Supporting people to develop confidence in using public transport or using walking aids outside can be the catalyst to them engaging more with family or old friends. Teaching people to use email, Facetime, Skype, or social media helps to reconnect people who may not live close by.

Build up trust with people and help them deal with underlying issues to boost confidence

There could be reasons why people don't feel able to make friends. Having a private conversation and offering emotional and/or practical support can make all the difference.

Make a point of introducing people to each other and share general information

Mentioning hobbies, where people live or other activities they attend, could spark a conversation and be an icebreaker when new people are introduced to each other.

Use people's names regularly and create good quality name badges for everyone to wear

Forgetting names can be embarrassing. This helps people to remember names and feel confident to have conversations with acquaintances. It feels good to address someone using their name.

Create talking points at social events

A quiz can get people who don't know each other to interact with the people nearby. Bespoke placemats, coasters or table decorations can be used to introduce new conversation topics.

Give space for banter, camaraderie and spontaneous fun to develop

Long tea breaks within a session or having unstructured time during a visit or activity gives people a chance to have a laugh and make their own fun.

Find ways to help people share their skills in a welcoming and supportive setting

Being asked to do something, having a purpose and working as part of a team helps people, particularly volunteers, to connect with each other as a basis for friendship.

Link people who you think may get on well with each other

Organising social opportunities in a small group on neutral territory, perhaps over a meal, helps people find others who share common interests or experiences.

When a short course ends, encourage people to continue learning

Search for alternatives and share this information with the group. Members may decide to organise themselves to continue their learning and lay the foundations for independent friendships.

Ask people for their ideas

Getting good feedback helps staff to see if the group or activity is meeting peoples' needs. Asking people why they don't attend socials may identify practical issues, such as transport or location, which could be addressed quite easily.

What do project staff and volunteers need to consider?

Be sensitive to people's needs and consider carefully whether or not to intervene

Some people are content just to be part of a group without needing to make new friends.

Talk openly about transport options to and from an activity

If asked, participants may be willing to car share, or take a taxi or public transport together to attend the group, giving plenty of opportunity to chat on the journey and develop friendships.

Be aware of the balance of a group which contains new and existing members

It can be daunting to join in a conversation, particularly when others seem to know each other well. Regularly encouraging all members to be kind and welcoming to newcomers (and challenging negative behaviour) helps new people to feel at home and have the confidence to talk to others.

Be proactive and suggest that people use social media to keep in touch between sessions

Sometimes it just takes one person to suggest something and then others jump on board. When technology is involved make sure someone is available on a one-to-one basis to help people use it.

Don't try too hard to help people make friends

Accept that some people will never become friends for one reason or another. Encourage people to meet up as a small group in a public setting so that the first independent social event feels less formal. Staff need to be aware of, but not stifled by, safeguarding procedures.

What can I do to develop new friendships of my own?

Do it for yourself, do it for your loved ones

Widening your social circle may bring new things to talk about with loved ones and this could, in turn, strengthen your relationship with them.

Find something you want to do and invite others to join you

One person often needs to take the first step and this motivates other people to join in. They'll be pleased you asked, particularly if you don't know them well.

Try a variety of activities until you find like-minded people who could become friends

It's unlikely that the first person you meet will become your best friend but you'll have fun trying.

Persevere: it takes time to make friends that you can rely on

Making the transition from acquaintance to good friend can require commitment but the rewards far outweigh the effort in the longer term.