

Practical Tips for Older Adults Interested in Replenishing their Friendship Network

By Janet Wolfe, Ph.D.

Several studies have shown the significant contribution of friendships to health, happiness, and even longevity. Here are some tried and true guidelines on where older adults can meet people, how they can initiate conversations and maintain connections. These guidelines were created to directly address older adults as the audience.

Places to meet people: Even if your mobility may be somewhat limited, you can encounter people everywhere, including your own building, doctor's office, coffee shops, classes, exercise groups and even grocery lines. It's also helpful to change your everyday routine by walking into a new coffee shop, recreational center, or sitting on a different park bench than you normally do. It's also helpful to wear something (like an interesting pin, political button, or hat) that might catch someone's eye and spark them to make a comment.

Practice in advance: Greet, make eye contact and smile at people to start working on your skills. You can practice on people you see every day, such as the mail carrier, doorman, grocery clerk, or even people you pass on the street.

Overcome your fears of rejection. Even if 9 out of 10 people don't respond to your conversational overture, you have nothing to lose. One of the nice things about having lived for a few decades is that you (hopefully) have learned not to get embarrassed over the small stuff or take things as a measure of your self-worth.

"PUSH yourself to approach someone or a group of people at a place or event where you don't know anyone and credit yourself for doing so." – Dr. Janet Wolfe

Opening and Extending Conversations

Suggestions for sparking conversations with others: You don't have to have traveled widely or have had a lot of unusual experiences to be an interesting conversationalist.

- **Compliment someone** on a piece of apparel, their pet, or something nice you observed them doing. Offer to help a person with something they may be having difficulty with.
- **Request information** by asking someone for a restaurant or hair salon recommendation.
- **Be observant** and notice what others are reading and take in your surroundings at events, lectures and parties. Then you can ask questions like: "How are you finding the book you're reading?" "Have you attended events here before? Which are the ones you've enjoyed the

most?" "What do you suppose is in that green dip?" "I love that painting – it really moves me." "You made a really interesting comment during the lecture, and I'd like to hear more about it." (Note: Try to avoid questions that are likely to elicit one-word or yes-or-no answers, such as, "Do you know the time?")

- **Engage with others who are near you and conversing:** "I'm sorry to interrupt, but I really agree with that comment you just made." Or "I overheard you mention that new Tom Hanks movie. I was thinking of seeing it--do you recommend it?"

Suggestions for extending the conversation: If the person seems the least bit open, don't just exit; prolong it until you can get a better sense of whether this might be a good friendship prospect.

- **Listen with interest.** Lean toward the person, nod periodically, and make good eye contact (though don't keep your eyes glued to them). When people feel listened to, they feel happier and are likely to associate you with these happy feelings.
- **Ask follow-up questions:** If the person mentioned she was a bookkeeper, for example, ask, "How did you get into that line of work?" "What did you do before then?" Take advantage of information they may drop, such as the fact that they lived in Cleveland, or were in a book discussion group and then ask follow-up questions and make connections.
- **Ask creative questions.** For example, "What is the most popular misconception that people have about your former job?" "If you could spend a week anywhere in the world, where would you choose and what would you do there?" "I wonder what would happen if they banned private cars in the city for one day?"

Share Something about Yourself

Self-disclose. You don't need to start out with the most intimate details of your life.

Possibilities include:

- Share an experience from your own life that's related to something the person has mentioned.
- Mention that although many of your friends have died or moved away, you've gotten to know some younger people and have been learning a lot about pop culture.
- Talk about some activities and events that you've enjoyed, or some funny comment you heard the other day.

In preparation:

- If you're going to an event, read the daily paper and note down a couple of things you found interesting. You can even carry a card with you as a reminder. Keep up-to-date with local and international news or interesting upcoming events.

Maintaining Connections

Once you've done all of the hard work of engaging people in conversations, it is important to attempt to keep these connections going so that you can foster friendships and support that will last over time.

Suggested ways to maintain connections:

- Don't just count on running into the person again. Say, "I've really enjoyed talking with you." Or "How about we meet tomorrow on the same bench (or after exercise class) and continue our conversation?"
- Invite the person to join you for lunch, a social event, or other activity.
- Give out your phone number, address, or e-mail address and ask for theirs.
- Send an article or inform the person of an event.
- Call (or set up a meeting with) someone you haven't seen for a while.

About Janet Wolfe, Ph.D.

Janet L. Wolfe, Ph.D. has served for over 25 years as Executive Director of the Albert Ellis Institute in New York City, and currently has a private consulting and therapy practice in New York City.

*Dr. Wolfe has conducted hundreds of workshops and has helped spawn numerous programs in schools, clinics, and agencies based on REBT/CBT principles. She has written extensively in professional books and journals and is co-editor of *The Resource Book for Practitioners* and author of *What to Do When He Has a Headache: Renewing Desire and Intimacy in Your Relationship*.*