

Friends are good for you!

Supportive friends can help you to live longer, healthier, happier lives – it's official. So how can you build up your friendship base?

When I first became interested in the therapeutic benefits of knitting and stitching I was struck by the number of letters and emails which said, 'I feel so alone', or 'I feel I'm the only person going through these things.' It's one of the reasons I started up Stitchlinks because it was obvious from the letters I received that people weren't 'on their own'. There were many, many others who were having similar life experiences and it seemed logical to me that each would benefit from 'making friends' with the other.

Healthy friendships

Research is consistently showing that isolation and loneliness are related to poor health and that a good supportive network of friends makes you healthier and happier. It's even been argued by some that those who suffered the gruelling conditions of Prisoner of War camps in Germany and

Vietnam were more likely to survive if they developed close friendships within the camp. A study, which looked at why some prisoners survived the horrendous conditions at the Andersonville camp in South-Central Georgia during the American Civil War found that they probably did so because of the friendships that they had built up. Friends provided moral support, protection, extra food and clothing if needed, and generally looked out for each other. Indeed social isolation or solitary confinement has always been used as a tool of torture and punishment.

Another of the issues which prompted me to set up Stitchlinks was the isolation of the people I encountered on my rounds as a community physiotherapist. Many simply existed behind four walls and often the only people they saw were healthcare workers or carers.

Several surveys over the last five years have attempted to highlight the

large numbers of lonely people and the effect that this isolation has on their well-being and health. It's thought that 30% of people over the age of 65 are unhappy with their quality of life. A survey by Help the Aged here in the UK has found that television is the main source of company for nearly half of the over 65s. Another survey by NOP World has found that three million older people in the UK feel out of touch with modern life with 820,000 feeling cut off from society.

Affecting us all

This isn't just a problem in older people. Many of the letters and emails I receive are from people under 40 and come from all over the world, so it's a world-wide problem. In many cases it's worse for the under 65s who live with long-term illness or who are housebound, because luncheon clubs and activities are usually set up for the older age group. Often, if you're younger

there are no such opportunities available.

It's been wonderful to see those of you who use our Stitchlinks Forum blossom and develop. Good, firm friendships have been made and members are welcoming to all. If you haven't yet joined for a chat, you'll be warmly greeted and find others who can help you find your feet if you've never used a Forum before!

Why are we isolated?

People can become isolated for many reasons and it's clear from our work that this contributes significantly to the downward spirals of depression, chronic pain and the inability to cope with a host of conditions from dyslexia to dementia and even the normal stresses of everyday life.

Isolation can occur as a result of illness or pain, and with more people being cared for at home, their carers may also become cut off from society. It can also occur for a number of other reasons, such as moving to a new area, becoming a new mother, or living in a city. Fewer people attend church; communities and extended families have dwindled; divorce rates are high; mothers return to work, so don't meet at the school gates. The need to rush home at the end of the day makes them unable to meet socially with work colleagues either. Men and women work

long hours and commute in silence rarely chatting to the person travelling beside them. And with increasing numbers permanently plugged into MP3 players this social isolation looks set to increase.

Few of us know all our neighbours and only the very lucky can still pop around to borrow a cup of sugar. Those who are ill with complicated conditions such as ME, fibromyalgia or eating disorders, for example, tell us they can even feel isolated within a caring family, who may have difficulty understanding their illness.

All this contributes to the diminishing supportive network surrounding us. But **we can do something about it.** To build up a supportive network of friends you have to be proactive. If you sit back and expect friends to appear or people to support you when times get bad, you will be disappointed. To find a good friend you have to be a good friend, give what you can to the relationship and be there for them when they need help too. Good friendships need nurturing from both sides.

It's also important to recognise that as you grow and age, your friends will change, so you should always be looking to increase and diversify your friendship base. A friend is someone we can turn to in a crisis, but it's vital we don't see them solely as this. It's

important to maintain contact when times are good as friends should enjoy fun together, too!

Joining a knitting or stitching group is an excellent way to make friends as you'll already have lots in common with other members of the group. This helps to break the ice of that initial meeting. These groups help to nurture a sense of community once more. If you're housebound, then the internet and Forums will give you worldwide access to groups of all kinds.

Being proactive can be difficult, particularly if your social confidence is low, but using the Stitchlinks Forum is a great way to get going. Just remember, if you're trying to pluck up the courage to get in touch via our Private Messaging facility the person you want to contact is probably sitting at home just as shy as you are, waiting for you to write! I can guarantee they'll be happy to hear from you!

Keep in touch!

When you can't get out and about it's even more important to make the effort to maintain contact with the outside world, to keep your world as open as possible. It's very easy to lose social confidence, particularly if you are elderly or ill and don't get out a lot. The fewer social contacts you make the less confident you become and it all becomes a vicious circle.

Start by inviting some neighbours around for coffee. If you have children or grandchildren ask them around for a meal, ask them to bring a friend. When they visit try to be positive, take care not to complain as this may drive people away.

One of the observations I've made about the Forum is how those who were initially very nervous of using it have grown in confidence and are trying out new activities such as posting photographs. Every time they try something new or chat to someone different, confidence and self esteem rise. And good friends don't mind if you make a mistake.

Friends understand

Friends raise our confidence, self esteem and security; they make us feel wanted and important. When we're part of a group of friends we get a sense of belonging. Knowing we belong makes such a difference to our quality of life and well-being. A common quote about the Forum is "It's so good to talk to friends who understand." All this enhances life, but more and more evidence is emerging that not only do friendships play an important part in our psychological well-being, but in our physical well-being, too.

There are a few reasons for this. The main one is believed to be that good friendships bring down our levels of stress and anxiety. Stress causes major problems to our health. It's thought that persistently high

levels of the hormones adrenaline and cortisol cause or exacerbate 90% of medical conditions, and have a significant effect on heart disease. They even affect our immune system and rate of healing. Researchers at Ohio State University have discovered that supportive social contact even makes wounds heal faster.

Another study has found that diabetic ulcers healed quicker in those with a supportive network behind them. Again it's cortisol that's thought to be responsible for this slower rate of healing. In addition, situations such as this can so easily develop into downward spirals of increasing isolation and depression; the ulcers stop people from socialising and going out, so contact with the outside world can often be limited to doctors and healthcare workers. It's so important at times like this to be proactive and not only to maintain contact with your friends, but also to make new friends who might understand your position a little better. Even if your outings are limited to clinics and support groups, try to strike up conversation with the person next to you – the chances are high they might be just as in need of a good friend as you. If you are able, meeting up for a walk or joining a group together is great and makes it much more difficult to cry off.

Friends may also recognise if you become ill before you realise it, and will encourage you to seek help

and not put off going to the doctor. They can support you through illness, recuperation periods and in so many other things such as giving up smoking, or losing weight. Be prepared, though, as you'll find your friendships will change during illness, as some will find it easier than others to support you. It would be easy for this to cause your confidence to plummet even more, but this is normal human behaviour and if you can recognise this and move on, you'll find it much easier to deal with.

It's also thought that friends are more successful at preventing suicides than the medical profession, as they're often the first to notice changes in behaviour. It's known that many people suffering from psychiatric symptoms and depression tend not to seek medical advice, so friends are vital in these relationships, both in day-to-day support and in reassuring and encouraging sufferers to seek help for their problems.

Friends are good for you

A study at Flinders University in Adelaide, Australia found that those with the strongest network of friends were more likely to live longer. In fact they were 22% less likely to die over the next decade than those with no social network. That's a big difference! So there are lots of reasons why friends are so important, not only to your happiness and well-being, but they can actually help you live longer, too.