

A close-up photograph of two middle-aged women smiling and laughing together outdoors. The woman on the left has short, wavy white hair and is wearing a blue and white striped top. The woman on the right has blonde hair pulled back, wears glasses, and a grey t-shirt. They are both looking towards the right. The background is a soft-focus outdoor scene with trees and a car.

NO WOMAN IS AN ISLAND

How to find your tribe

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Connect to Live Longer and Happier

Most women thrive on the building and nourishing of friendships; and as we get older, we rely on these essential relationships as a support system to help us navigate the topsy-turvy changes in our lives, such as menopause, career shifts, divorces, new marriages, kids leaving home (or coming back), illnesses, deaths, aging parents, financial upheavals and so much more. And it works!

As scientific studies and anecdotal evidence have shown, people with the strongest social networks have the easiest time adapting to all kinds of changes. What's more, they are measurably healthier, and — big bonus — they live longer, too.



- + According to a study conducted at Brigham Young University, people with strong social connections have a 50% higher rate of survival than those with few social ties.
- + A longitudinal study done by the Centre for Aging Studies at Flinders University in South Australia discovered that a circle of friends could prolong an individual's life even more than close family relatives. In fact, those who had a tight-knit circle of friends lived 22% longer than those who did not!
- + The ongoing Nurses' Health Study, managed by Harvard Medical School, found significant evidence that women with strong social networks are less likely to develop physical disabilities as they get older. The results of the study were so powerful that the researchers described the lack of close friends as being "as detrimental to your health as smoking or carrying extra weight."
- + Reaching out to friends may strengthen two structures in your brain responsible for psychological wellbeing, according to a 2015 study from researchers at the University of Texas at Austin.
- + Studies show that staying socially engaged stimulates the brain in areas critical to learning and memory. The benefits of a strong social network may be one reason that women live longer than men. Social scientists around the world have studied patterns of behavior among each group and concluded that having a supportive circle of friends and family around them — through good times and bad — helps women to better cope with all kinds of stress. Men tend to keep their worries and problems to themselves, while women are more likely to reach out to others (especially girlfriends), which helps us to reduce stress — and reduce stress-related illnesses. This may also partly explain why married men tend to have better health and longer lives than bachelors: They can rely on their wives for emotional support and companionship.

A Family of Friends

Being engaged with family is an important part of staying emotionally and physically active as we get older. Family relationships tend to be mutually supportive, and they keep us in touch with the past and future generations. But although these powerful bonds are biologically structured, they still need attention and nurturing to stay strong.

What's more, while many of us treasure the connections with our close relatives, others do not. In these cases, we can still get the same sense of belonging by relying on friends and more distant relatives to create our own "family of choice."

And many of us do. According to a study from the University of Oxford, almost 60% of those who participated said friends are the most important thing in their lives — above money, career and, yes, family.

The Japanese have a term for the people in our lives who are committed to our happiness and wellbeing, and we to theirs: *kenzoku*, which means "family." The *kenzoku* ties aren't necessarily blood bonds but are so powerful that time and distance do nothing to diminish them. Of my eight closest girlfriends, only three of them are related to me — my sister and two cousins. But I know all of them will always have my back, even if we sometimes bicker. That's why they are permanent members of my "kenzoku circle."

Whether related by blood or affection, we all need people in our lives who love us as we are. Because when things seem darkest, turning to someone who understands you — without needing to explain yourself — is a true blessing.

The only way to
have a friend
is to be one.

- RALPH WALDO EMERSON

10 Small Steps to a Lifetime of Friendships

1. Make time for relationships, even if you have to schedule them.
2. Savor alone time just as much as friend and family time.
3. Learn to listen more and talk less.
4. Give help when asked, and ask for help when you need it.
5. Practice compassion throughout the day.
6. Hug and hug some more.
7. If you love someone, show it.
8. If a relationship doesn't bring you joy, let it go.
9. Welcome new people into your social circle as the years go on.
10. Seek ways to build community, starting within your home and working outward.

No Woman is an Island: Social Connections Increase Longevity

Barbara Hannah Grufferman

1. What is the Japanese term for the people in our lives who are committed to our happiness and wellbeing, and we to theirs?

2. Do strong social connections help individuals manage change in their lives? Yes / No

3. What percentage of participants in the study from the University of Oxford said friends are the most important thing in their lives – above money, career and even family?

4. How does having a strong social network increase longevity?

5. Who are your closest friends and family members? How often do you make time for them?
