



Open doors to open hearts

Surprise visits from friends, family or neighbours can be disconcerting but they also present an opportunity to escape into a world gone by, to be more spontaneous and to build relationships. Here's how to embrace the pop-in visitor...

Unexpected visitors. Shudder. The idea is enough to make most people dive behind the sofa and pretend they're not home. And a quick internet search unearths plenty of advice on coping with, and discouraging, uninvited guests, which suggests that the habit of popping in on friends unannounced may be dying out.

This inspires a sigh of relief from me. Since moving into my own home, I've lived in fear of an unexpected knock on the door. As a borderline introvert and anxious host, being caught off-guard – without a supply of guest biscuits and vacuumed carpets – is the stuff of nightmares.

I'm not the only one quaking in the hallway when the doorbell rings. When I asked people on social media how they felt about friends popping round unannounced, the responses were fierce.

'I had a neighbour who knocked once and said she'd come to visit,' recounted Alana from Cornwall. 'I was horrified! I said it was lovely of her but I was about to do a night shift and needed to get some sleep. I wasn't. I didn't want to encourage her to make a repeat attempt, though, so I nipped it in the bud.'

Likewise, Kym from Cambridge isn't keen: 'I hate it. It's not the way I was brought up. If you're not invited, don't turn up. I couldn't bring friends home unless I'd spoken to my parents first, and I wasn't allowed to ask them in front of my friends.'

But why does the idea of an unexpected visitor strike fear into hearts of so many? Perhaps it has something to do with being in charge of the situation. 'It's hard when guests show up unexpectedly because it disrupts the feelings of safety and control we have in our personal space and predictable routines, which creates stress,' explains life coach and author Karen Anderson. 'A lot of this is instinctual. Our homes are our territory and our territory is where we feel most in control.'

Fear of being judged

Being caught off-guard also leaves people feeling vulnerable to judgment. 'Social media has exacerbated the natural tendency most of us have to present our best selves,' says psychotherapist Hilda Burke. 'We curate how our lives look in the virtual world and this is reflected in our homes for many of us.'

Social media isn't the sole factor here. Almost a century ago, TS Eliot observed our tendency 'to prepare a face to meet

the faces that you meet' in his poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. 'He wasn't just talking a smudge of lippie,' explains Hilda. 'Many of us feel we have to get into character to meet "our public". And we will act differently, slip into different guises depending on who we are with. I think this is why many feel flummoxed when people arrive at our doorstep unannounced.'

A fear of being judged seems to haunt many people who responded to my query. 'I like a few days notice to give [the house] a good surface clean,' confesses stay-at-home mum Jo Heslop. 'With three children, chaos descends hourly. No way could I allow anyone to drop in unexpectedly. The only area I keep pristine is my hallway in case anyone local knocks.'

Even those who aren't riddled with angst at the thought of unexpected guests find it difficult to accommodate them. In an age of increasingly busy lives, it seems quality time with friends needs to be carefully scheduled.

'I moved 20 years ago and was disappointed to find no one really pops in,' says Karen Boshier, 50, a business director at a London pub company. 'I think it's harder because everyone is so busy. It's more about time than anything: there's fewer stay-at-home people these days.'

Special connections

Karen describes a childhood in Wales full of visitors popping in. What is being missed out on by not creating an open home, though? 'Community, friendship, aunts... I had lots of "aunties" when I was growing up. Open doors and open hearts. Rarely would you knock on a "pop in". Just open the door and warble to let those inside know you'd arrived,' she says.

Mandy Wright, 48, from Amersham in Buckinghamshire, has arthritis and says visitors help her feel less alone. 'My friend calls by any time without warning and takes me as she finds me. But the kettle will always go on and I'm grateful for her visit. It's amazing how much better it makes you feel in yourself.'

The informal nature of pop-in visitors makes for more authentic relationships according to some. Lesa Welch, 42, an artist and coffee shop owner at Coffee Cake Create in Polperro, Cornwall, believes embracing the 'pop in' brings new levels of intimacy to friendships: 'We have such a reliance on social



'Nobody can be as agreeable as an uninvited guest'

KIN HUBBARD

1 Set healthy boundaries

Life coach Karen advises setting healthy boundaries ahead of time – the clearer you are about what you value, what's okay and what's not okay in everyday life, the easier it is to welcome surprise guests on your terms.

'There's nothing more effective than knowing and honouring our own boundaries,' she says. 'So often we think of boundaries as a way to keep people and their unpredictable behaviours out. Truly healthy boundaries show others who we are and what we want more of in our lives.'

Setting time limits can be a good way of doing this, Karen suggests. When faced with an unexpected guest, try: 'What a surprise! Great to see you. I'm heading out soon, but have time to catch up... can I offer you a quick cup of coffee?'

2 Be kind to yourself

Judith Belmont, a motivational speaker and author of *Embrace Your Greatness: 50 Ways to Build Unshakeable Self-Esteem*, believes the key to enjoying pop-in guests lies in being kind to yourself. 'When dealing with unexpected guests, it is important to not be too hard on yourself and think things need to be perfect. Needing approval and having a fear of being negatively judged leads to excess stress. Self-empowerment and healthy, compassionate self-talk will help lessen this.'

For Judith, the condition of your home should not be used as evidence for your self-worth: if you apologise for your home not being 'guest ready', you're apologising for being human. Positive self-talk, along the lines of the following, can help:

'They are coming to visit me, not inspect the condition of my house. What others think of me is far less important than what I think myself. The approval of others is not as important as my approval and acceptance of myself.'

3 Stay mindful

Elizabeth Su, an executive coach and mindfulness expert, believes mindfulness can help to navigate visits from unexpected guests without judgment or preconceived notions.

'There is a lot of societal pressure to have it all together all the time and if you don't, somehow you have failed,' she says. 'Research shows simple mindfulness practices can make a big difference and lead to reduced stress. As with anything unexpected, take a deep breath, ground yourself, and remember you are doing the best you can.'

The next time the doorbell rings, I'll be resisting the knee-jerk urge to rush around cleaning and offer auto-pilot apologies for my empty biscuit tin. Instead, I'll be welcoming my guests inside – because with them come spontaneous moments of real connection, self-acceptance and fun.

Words: Judith Hurrell

media and texting. There's a belief that if you text every day, that makes you a good friend,' she says. 'But you can't see the tear in my eye and my need for a hug when I reply to your text with "I'm fine" because the words are too difficult. A "congratulations" text isn't the same as jumping up and down with me and saying "cheers" with a cuppa when I have good news.'

Real connection

The opportunity for more genuine connection is also important to Buddhist Joshua Tomas Langford Coxon, 29, from Chesham, Buckinghamshire. 'Our modern culture is so wrapped up in work routines, shift rotas and having everything planned to a schedule,' he says. 'Real friends have time for each other even when busy: that's real human connection. The world needs more openness and compassion.'

Likewise, Joshua sees an opportunity for fun with spur-of-the-moment guests. 'Life is an adventure. We can't control who we meet, click or fall in love with. Why not continue in this vein as relationships develop? Who knows where we might end up by taking a risk and being spontaneous with friends or even strangers. It works for me.'

For Hilda, embracing the pop-in visitor can be a lesson in self-acceptance. 'By having an open house, we can learn to be more confident in ourselves just as we are, no matter if there are items out of place or washing-up to be done. It's powerful to feel we won't be judged on the basis of those things. Or, if we are, we can be okay with that.'

Opening my eyes to these opportunities for growth, fun and real connection feels revolutionary. I make a decision not to be ruled by my inner fear next time the doorbell rings. But what practical steps can I take in order to become more comfortable opening my home to an unexpected visitor?



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