

# Forever FRIENDS

IT'S OFTEN EASIER TO GET ALONG WITH PEOPLE OF THE SAME GENERATION, BUT THERE'S A LOT TO BE GAINED FROM HAVING PALS OF ALL AGES, AS CHRISTABEL HASTINGS FOUND



When I was young, my mother joked that I was ageing prematurely because I drank Yorkshire Tea instead of fruit juice and refused to watch the 'childish' Disney films my peers loved.

As the years went by, I was the child talking to the oldest relative at a wedding, the one making friends with teachers at break time and the one going to Women's Institute coffee mornings in the summer holidays.

Little by little, I cultivated a taste for conversation with people from all walks of life.

By the time I was in college, I'd developed a network of older friends. There was Jean, my 80-year-old penpal, who would post me a letter every week detailing tales of rebellion from her nursing home in Somerset.

What started as a rainy day activity, aged eight, turned into 11 years of correspondence; my heart skittering every time a new letter dropped on to the doormat. I catalogued each story carefully in my mind: the fundraising for diabetes awareness, the goings-on at music appreciation afternoons, the wild tomat that she let into her room when her carers weren't looking.

Then there was Sue, a 40-something charity shop manager, who I became good friends with while volunteering at a branch on the Norfolk coast in the spring of 2009. We bonded instantly over the less-than-desirable donations that had made their way into our sorting piles – false teeth, Halloween costumes and endless pairs of nylon tights – and when closing time came on my first shift, our friendship was well under way. Two weeks later, I'd befriended Sue's stylish 70-year-old friend, Margaret, who would take me out for tea on my lunch break.

## STRETCH YOURSELF

In my 20s, I became more aware that my friendships with older women weren't typical behaviour for someone of my age. Intergenerational mingling didn't fit with the usual patterns of social networking I observed around me, in which people stuck with their own age group – the ones with the same hopes and fears – no matter what.

'We experience a lot of our formative moments as we transition through our education and into the working environment, so it's only natural that the people we share those

moments with form part of our core friendship group,' says Hilda Burke, a psychotherapist, life coach and couples counsellor.



*Tess says*

**'One of the people who inspired me most was the late writer Quentin Crisp, who was in his 80s when we met. He was wonderful company and had enjoyed so many experiences in life that spending time with him was an opportunity to share that and learn from him.'**

## A real boost

FRIENDSHIP IS LINKED TO LIVING A LONGER, HEALTHIER LIFE, AND YOUNGER FRIENDS INVIGORATE YOU.\*

And while it's normal that there are more opportunities for people to meet and socialise with others of their own age, their inclination to branch out and form new friendships can dwindle as routine sets in.

'There is a tendency for people to feel most comfortable with those who "look like them" when it comes to a wide range of factors, such as age, race and sex,' explains Irene Levine, a psychologist, friendship expert and thefriendshipblog.com founder.

'It requires a bit of a stretch to befriend people who look different.'

## NEW CONNECTIONS

It comes as no surprise to me that recent research from the University of Kent has shown intergenerational friendships increase positive attitudes towards older adults. The study, published in the *British Journal of Social Psychology*, has found that younger adults who experienced good quality contact with older adults, or who knew of a friend who had a friendship with an older adult, ultimately made such relationships more widespread and acceptable.

The findings struck a chord: the more time I spent hanging out with Sue, writing to Jean, or chatting to Margaret, the more my worries about popularity, Facebook gossip and career prospects evaporated, and I gained permission to be my authentic self.

'When we limit our friendships to people of our own age group, we can easily become competitive, comparing where they are professionally or personally with what we've achieved,' Hilda points out.

In contrast, my older friends offered refreshingly different perspectives, and I started to see life as a journey of experiences, rather than a list of accomplishments to tick off.

'Having older friends can help us to see that people can fulfil their goals at different points – it doesn't have to be as linear as we can sometimes imagine,' says Hilda.

Broadening perspectives may be essential to personal growth, but forging intergenerational friendships remains an especially pressing question in the face of a loneliness >



*Ties that bind*  
 ONE STUDY SAID OLDER PEOPLE ARE MORE COMMITTED TO THEIR FRIENDS, MAKING FOR A STRONG BOND.\*\*

epidemic. According to research highlighted by the Campaign to End Loneliness, 51% of all people aged 75 and over live alone, while two-fifths of all older people (about 3.9 million) say the television is their main source of company.

That's not all – research from the Mental Health Foundation in 2010 has shown 18 to 34-year-olds are more likely to feel alone and depressed than ever before. Forging greater connectedness between older and younger generations may help to stem social isolation, but such friendships are mutually beneficial to both parties, irrespective of age.

**DIVERSE GROUP**

'The essence of a strong, mutually supportive friendship is the ability to "click" with another person – to be able to communicate easily, to feel comfortable enough to be one's self, and to feel understood,' explains Irene. 'This is possible with friends of different ages.'

The moment I let go of the idea that true friendship only occurs with people who share the same birth year, my life improved for the better. Sure, it's good to have friends of the same

age to share common experiences; but it's also important to have friends who are at different life stages, from whom you can gain wisdom, share knowledge, and learn to put your life into perspective.

An older friend, says Irene, can function as a mentor, and may be able to 'foreshadow the future for you, having experienced the passages you will be experiencing in the future.'

A diverse friendship group helped me formulate my sense of self and a better understanding of older people, but the contrast in perspectives works both ways. Hilda says: 'For older people, having younger friends can invigorate them and give them an insight into the reality of growing up today, helping to prevent older people from generalising and demonising the younger generation.'

Hilda's words ring true: my friends may have been decades older, but they were open to accepting a teenager as a friend, and treated me as such – not as a young volunteer, a remote penpal, or a casual acquaintance stopping by.

**HAPPIER SOCIETY**

In an age of increasing distance between generations, we need to create a new definition of friendship, liberated from the parameters of age and similarity. Laying the foundations for intergenerational bonding earlier on in life could give ourselves the chance to become kinder, wiser people – and help create a happier society too.

'Life experience can be a wonderful gift when we feel stuck and unable to find a way forward,' says Hilda.

**MAKE FRIENDS ACROSS THE GENERATIONS**

Do you want to broaden your friendship pool but don't know where to start? Follow these tips for making new pals both young and old...

**1 BREAK YOUR ROUTINE**  
 You're unlikely to meet friends of different ages at the same café, club or after-work events. 'A lot of us get stuck in certain groups, we cling to the familiar and stop trying new things,' says life coach Hilda Burke. 'When you follow your passions and interests, you're more likely to meet people of varying ages.'

**2 BE PROACTIVE**  
 Brainstorm the places where you're most likely to meet new people of all ages, such as choir groups, community gardens or shared public space initiatives.

**3 STAY FLEXIBLE**  
 Older friends may not always want to lend a listening ear, or advise on problems. Likewise, younger friends might not want to always discuss matters of popular culture. Listen and communicate to maintain a stimulating relationship.

**4 FIND COMMON GROUND...**  
 Look for activities that minimise cultural differences and bring people together regardless of age. 'By taking a course, volunteering for a charity or joining a political group you're likely to find kindred spirits,' notes psychologist Irene Levine.

**5 ...BUT APPRECIATE THE DIFFERENCES**  
 Friendships that span the generations endure not only due to shared interests, but because they inspire us with new perspectives. They connect you to where you've been, as well as where you're going.

'By encouraging communication between age groups, we can forge new friendships; whether they exist in penpal letters, at coffee mornings, or in the stockroom of a charity shop, filled with laughter and heaps of clothes.' ●

'LIFE EXPERIENCE CAN BE A WONDERFUL GIFT WHEN WE FEEL UNABLE TO FIND A WAY FORWARD'

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