

FLASH PACK

Friendships are a central pillar of self-care – here’s how to make the most of them



By [Anna Brech](#) 17th Nov 2021

Imagine you have a Fitbit for friendship. It nudges you every time you haven’t seen someone for a while, reminding you to get out there, have a laugh, get that social step count up.

It might seem absurd to put socialising in the same category as fitness or diet; and yet, it is every inch as important to our emotional and physical health. According to one of the longest-running surveys of all time, the [Harvard Study of Adult Development](#), close relationships have a huge impact on lifetime happiness and wellness – outweighing factors such as money, fame, IQ or even genes.

“Taking care of your body is important, but tending to your relationships is a form of self-care too. That, I think, is the revelation,” says Harvard psychiatry professor Robert Waldinger, of the 83-year body of research.

Friendship: the vital spice of life



If friendships are important, however, we have a pesky knack of side-lining them. Even before the pandemic, and [the “alarming” increase](#) in loneliness caused by lockdown, social connections were often put on the backburner.

“I think that in this frantic, always-on world we live in, we’ve somehow lost the art of friendship,” says Radha Vyas, CEO and co-founder of Flash Pack. “Having a close group of people in your corner is vital to how you relate to the world – and yet, it’s all too easy to think of friendships as yet another task. You think, ‘oh I’ll hang out with so-and-so when I have more time.’ Inevitably, that time never arrives.”

Cultivating a rich friendship *does* take time – [at least 40 hours, in fact](#) – in an effort that must compete with family, work demands and [a frenetic culture of overtime](#); not to mention the average four hours per day we spend on [our phones](#).

“We tend to have less friends when we get older,” says Karin Peeters, a life and career coach and psychotherapist at [Inner Pilgrim](#) and Vitalis Coaching & Therapy. “Life is busy enough as it is, and there is simply not enough time or energy to maintain all social connections.” But friendships “create a space to come home to yourself. To offload what’s been happening, to forget about the day-to-day stresses”.

In an age of burnout, this anti-stress effect is vital. The relationships we have throughout life act as a [buffer to life’s ups and downs](#), helping to boost mood and build resilience to wider events, such as divorce, job loss or bereavement. This bolster act may explain why, according to [a 2010 review of research](#), the effect of social ties on life span is twice as strong as that of exercising, and equivalent to that of quitting smoking on overall wellness. On the flip side, loneliness has the same impact on mortality as [smoking 15 cigarettes a day](#).

Making time for connections that count



Friendship, then, is a key coping mechanism for life's tougher moments – so much so that it impacts our physical, as well as emotional, wellbeing. It's closely linked to other core happiness principles, too; for example, developing a [sense of purpose and belonging](#).

We humans are social animals, but we typically underestimate the positive impact of connecting with others. [BBC research](#) shows that just an incidental conversation with a stranger – for example, on a commute into work – leaves us happier than we would assume.

If you had to choose between having lots of connections in life or a few close friends, however, the latter will always be preferable. Science shows that [quality not quantity counts](#) when it comes to creating the kind of cosy intimacy and belonging that will sustain you through life.

So perhaps it's no bad thing that the number of friendships we have tend to peak [in the late teens and early 20s](#): it gives us space to craft more meaningful connections from that point in.

“The friends we made at a later age are often very deep,” explains psychotherapist Karin. “We know better who we are, what we stand for in life, and what matters to us and we quickly recognise when we meet ‘someone like ourselves’. If we are lucky, we even find a spiritual family, a tribe in which we feel we truly belong.”

The spirit of group travel



So, it's fair to say that the meaning of true friendship does not lie in 500 Facebook pals (indeed there's plenty of evidence to suggest that [social media has made us lonelier](#) than ever.) Instead, it's about finding 'your' people, for a bond that revolves around integrity, caring and fun: the [three essential traits](#) of a lasting connection.

The fact that many of us live in [dense urban areas](#) with a lack of community ties makes this quest harder, as does the reality of life in your 30s and 40s – a time when many people splinter away, distracted by family or job commitments. But among these challenges lies a powerful and often overlooked antidote: travel.

“I came up with the idea of Flash Pack because all my friends were busy settling down and I had no-one to travel with,” says Radha. “In the years since, we've found a formula not only for bringing people of a similar age and mindset together, but also setting into motion the groundwork for really deep, lasting friendships.”

Why is this? Well, when you travel the world together, you get away from your screens and into real life: you have room to really spend time with others, apart from the hubbub of everyday life.

Add to that the magic of sharing a life-changing adventure together – abseiling down Table Mountain in Cape Town, say, or skiing through the Finnish wilderness – and you have all the ingredients for a lifelong friendship.

A future of adventure-born friendships



Flash Pack travellers have the opportunity to connect with people from all walks of life, and break out of their comfort zone together. It's the thrill of a passion shared, or a new experience tried, that sets into a play a series of small, tight-knit communities all over the world.

“We thought the main draw of Flash Pack would be travel – but the friendships are right up there, too,” says Radha. “Time and again, we get feedback that people are the best part of the trip; Flashpackers form friendships quickly, and reunions have become a big thing. That ability to connect is so rare and important.”

“Being around friends is an important part of self-care,” agrees Karin.” In this ‘space’ you can let go and relax. Being able to be truly yourself calms down the nervous system. It’s a healthy break from the non-stop thoughts in your head and brings you back into the here-and-now, and back into your body.”

So, if you’re feeling a little disconnected right now; if you love travel but have yet to find “your” people, try being part of the Flash Pack community. As the world opens up once more, it could be the beginning of a brand new chapter in life. A chapter in which the friendship Fitbit – that essential sauce of happiness and belonging – takes centre stage.