Lifestyle

Independent Membership

FIRST PERSON

Prue Leith regrets not making friends – I did too

It wasn't until her marriage ended that **Denise Taylor**, at the age of 60, realised she didn't have any real close friendships of her own. Here is how she started to build a social circle in later life and her advice on how you can too



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Prue Leith makes five-word admission on health as she opens up about marriage

When Prue Leith admitted that one of her few regrets at 86 was not making more friends, I understood how easily that could happen. The former Great British Bake Off host's first husband had been her best friend. With a happy marriage and a busy working life, she hadn't felt the need for other close friendships. It was only after he died that she realised what was missing.

I can relate. I've been married twice, and in both marriages my husband was also my best friend. We shared interests, activities and a social life, but I didn't have particularly close friendships of my own.



Denise Taylor: 'I wasn't lonely or wishing for more. I had the companionship I thought I wanted' *(Sam Aldridge Photography)*

It wasn't a conscious decision to neglect friendships. My life felt complete as it was. I suspect this will resonate with many women of my generation, for whom marriage could become the centre of their social lives, with a husband being a companion, confidant and closest friend. During my first marriage, between working and bringing up children, there was little time to develop friendships beyond the people I knew through work. By my second marriage, I was building a successful consultancy business, so much of my time and energy went into that, and the activities my husband ed together.

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I met people with my husband through dance classes and a historical society. We socialised regularly, but these acquaintances didn't become close friends. I wasn't lonely or wishing for more. I had the companionship I thought I wanted.

Over time, though, we drifted apart. We stopped doing some of the activities we'd previously enjoyed together and had different ideas about how we wanted to spend the next stage of our lives.

It was only when that marriage ended at 60 that I realised I didn't have a social circle entirely my own. I decided to change that.

RECOMMENDED

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- Young people are lonelier than ever – this is what helped me make friends
- I'm 60 and I've always been single: I don't want to go through my whole life without ever meeting 'my person'
- I had become so lonely in my 'perfect' marriage – I had to walk away

It wasn't straightforward. I tried dance classes, a gym and meet-up groups. Some experiences were uncomfortable; others simply weren't for me. Eventually I found Band Buddies, a music group where I met people who shared my love of contemporary music, particularly alternative rock, punk and electronic music. One introduction led to another.

Nine years later, at 69, I have around three close friends who really know and understand me, a wider circle of people I enjoy seeing, and plenty of time alone. I'm content with that balance.

Knowing lots of people isn't the same as having close friends

As a psychologist, I think one mistake we make is assuming more friends must always be better. You might know dozens of people at a party but have nobody you'd feel comfortable ringing when something goes wrong. Equally, two or three close friends might give you all the support you want.

Close friendships allow us to share uncertainties and be ourselves. But casual connections matter too. "Weak" or "loose" ties as some call them. People we meet through volunteering, interests or everyday connections like the person who serves us regularly at the post office or dry cleaners, or

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our neighbour who takes in our parcels, know just enough about us to bring pleasure and a sense of belonging without becoming confidants.

Why connection matters for our minds and bodies

Research suggests social relationships matter for more than companionship. A major 2010 review of 148 studies published in *PLOS Medicine* found that people with stronger social relationships had around 50 per cent higher odds of survival over the periods studied.



Denise: 'Being alone isn't the same as feeling lonely' *(Ilona Gierach)*

The World Health Organisation has highlighted associations between loneliness, social isolation and poorer physical and mental health, including cardiovascular disease and depression. The 2024 Lancet Commission also identified social isolation as a potentially modifiable risk factor for dementia. These are associations, not proof of cause and effect.

And being alone isn't the same as feeling lonely. Loneliness is also the unwelcome sense that our relationships don't meet our needs. I enjoy going to the cinema alone, walking in nature and occasionally having a day when I don't see anybody. For someone else, that might be distressing. We shouldn't assume someone with fewer friendships is always missing something.

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Another mistake is expecting one person to meet all our friendship needs. My closest female friend, Kate, is 13 years younger than me and far more outgoing. I prefer meeting one-to-one rather than going to the pub in a big group, but we enjoy sound baths, galleries and gigs together. We don't need identical personalities to enjoy a close friendship.

My friend Geoffrey is about six years older and loves discovering new music. We also go to concerts and share an interest in nature. Meeting up doesn't have to be planned. I particularly enjoy it when somebody asks whether I'd like to accompany them shopping or drive to an appointment. An hour or two in the car provides a wonderful opportunity for conversation, time together just to talk.

Some friends share a hobby; others help us think through a problem, bring fun and joy or challenge our assumptions. No single friend has to do everything. Different relationships can enrich our lives without all being equally close.

> *Not every acquaintance becomes a friend, and that's fine. And it's not equally easy for everyone: hearing difficulties, mobility, caring responsibilities and money can restrict opportunities*

And it's important to know that friendships change as we age too.

My mother is 93. Over the years, her friends have died, and she's had to develop new relationships. She lives in a complex for those over 55, where many newer residents are much younger. She's also hard of hearing, making it more difficult to get to know people.

Yet, through being out and about, she's developed a small circle of women who meet twice a week for tea or coffee. Sometimes, when she's walking to the shops, one spots her and invites her in. These ordinary moments of companionship mean an enormous amount to her.

Her experience reminds me that we can't assume longstanding friends will always be there. Bereavement, relocation and changing circumstances reshape our social worlds. Friends of different ages bring fresh perspectives too; we needn't limit ourselves to people born in the same decade.

Making friends takes time

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At 60, I learned that simply joining a group doesn't guarantee friendship. Some groups have established friendships and aren't particularly welcoming to newcomers. And sometimes it simply isn't the right group for you. Finding something I genuinely loved, music, gave me a reason to return. Repeated encounters allowed conversations to become connections.



The lesson from Prue's comments isn't to panic – it is to be open and to value relationships, even if they end *(PA)*

Sometimes you have to take the initiative: suggest coffee, accept an invitation or ask someone to an event. Not every acquaintance becomes a friend, and that's fine. And it's not equally easy for everyone: hearing difficulties, mobility, caring responsibilities and money can restrict opportunities. Telling people simply to get out more ignores that.

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I don't regret being close to my husbands. Those relationships mattered, and I was happy with the companionship they brought. But I'm glad that [illegible]anged, I built a different social world.

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The lesson from Prue Leith isn't to collect as many friends as possible. It's to value the relationships that matter, stay open to new ones and recognise that our needs may change.

Dr Denise Taylor is a chartered psychologist and author of 'ThriveSpan: Walking Gently Into What Matters Now'. She writes about ageing and later life at denisetaylor.co.uk

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