



THE ANATOMY OF ADULT FRIENDSHIPS

The unique challenges of making friends when you're older and how you can overcome them



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Kenan Deen, founder, Social Circle



by ANUPRABHAKAR

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Sara wants to remain anonymous in this article because she is about to confess something that her husband is completely unaware of. “I am unable to make new friends,” declares the 36-year-old. “And frankly, it’s embarrassing.”

She quickly qualifies the statement though, by adding that she thinks of herself as a friendly person and she does, in fact, have several friends. “But I met them all in school or college and we have been friends for decades. And lately, I’ve struggled to form new and meaningful friendships.”

The former public relations professional moved to Dubai from India a year ago, when a once-in-a-lifetime job opportunity convinced her husband to make the shift. The couple also has two young kids and while the rest of the family thrived, Sara struggled to cope without her usual support system of friends, and family and decided to be a stay-at-home mom. “But after speaking to my friends and reading up online about this, I was relieved to know that it’s common for adults to find it hard to meet and befriend like-minded individuals — you only need to go on Reddit to know this, where there are so many posts dedicated to this topic!”

She tried to remedy the situation by striking up conversations with mothers at playdates and the kids’ school and getting coffee with them. “It’s a bit like dating,” she laughs. “You either hit it off, or you don’t.”

Work and family versus friends

A 2018 study titled ‘How many hours does it take to make a friend’ which was published in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* and conducted by Jeffrey A Hall, a professor of communication studies at the University of Kansas, concluded: “At the least intimate type of friendship, the chance of identifying someone as a casual friend rather than an acquaintance is greater than 50 per cent when individuals spend about 4 hours together in the first three weeks after meeting.” And an article on the online university Universitat Oberta de Catalunya’s website, which explained the findings of a 2016 study by Aalto University in Finland and Oxford University, reported that we reach the maximum number of social connections at age 25 before losing them rapidly due to work and family responsibilities.

All of this highlights the unique challenges that adults face while making new friends.

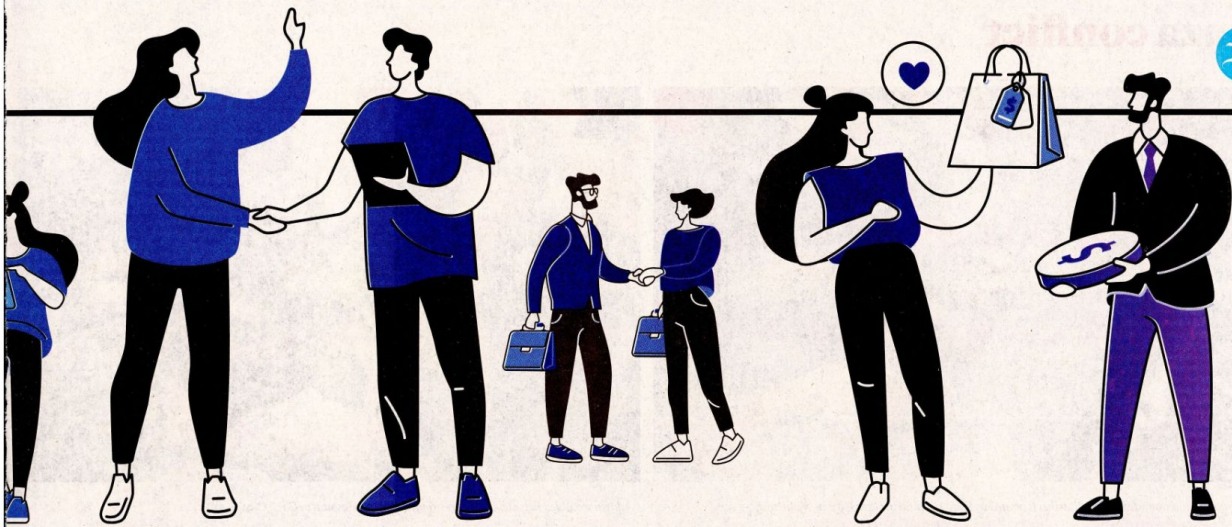
Zuha Zubair, a psychologist at Thrive Wellbeing Centre, explains that most adults find it embarrassing to put themselves out there and revert to the ‘Will you be my friend?’ days. “I seem so effortless for children to walk up to one another at the park and start talking and playing together. For adults, that process seems intentional and goal driven, so it can feel extremely awkward.”

“The game changes completely when it comes to making friends as adults — you know yourself better, there is more of a realistic view of the world, which translates into mistrust, fear of rejection, being vulnerable and lesser opportunities to meet people,” she continues. “The logistic and emotional burden of fostering new friendships in adulthood is far greater than those made earlier in life — it requires consistent, intentional effort.” Zubair also explains that it’s hard when people move to a global city like Dubai, Singapore or New York at the peak of their adulthood, where there is a prevailing sense of life, work and relationships being temporary and transient and points out that feeling alone is “alarmingly common” among her adult clients.

Although one can’t generalise, Dr Melissa Alves, clinical psychologist at the German Neuroscience Centre, explains that the resultant loneliness can be more frequently associated with some profiles, such as people experiencing social anxiety or low self-esteem, stay-at-home parents, professionals working long hours or travelling for work and new expats who recently moved to the UAE. “Adults often have more commitment such as career and family, which can leave less time to build new connections,” she explains. “Cultural differences can also be a challenge and require keeping an open mind to connect without misunderstanding each other.”

The complexities of friendship

Dubai-based independent journalist Lekha Menon is a single woman in her 40s. An extrovert, Lekha has a lot of friends but says that over the last few years, she has become choosy about who she gets close to. “I am particular about where I want to



be, who I want to hang out with, and what I want to do.” She explains that while she can be friendly, she doesn’t remember the last time she made a close new friend. “I also find it difficult to relate to people whose lifestyles and world views are different from mine. So yes, I can’t contribute to conversations around marriage, children, in-laws and so on—I feel awkward mingling in such groups.” Instead, she prefers to hang out with her chosen circle of friends who are easy to talk to and are non-judgmental. “The most important element in friendships at this stage of my life is trust,” she adds.

Such clarity makes the whole exercise of making new friends in adulthood both complex and enriching. “It can make the search a bit more time consuming and difficult, but eventually you will find people who you can trust and lean on emotionally, while also enjoying their company,” points out Zubair. “Childhood friendships are built based on convenience and proximity—someone to play with and have fun with. University friendships start getting tapered to people who are more similar, but are also largely based on proximity—the number of people who became really close friends with the person they sat next to on the first day of university is staggering! Adult friendships are more complex than that—they provide emotional support, have shared interests and values, and are essentially people we choose to be a part of our lives.”

How to make new friends

Alves advises that those who struggle to take that first step—like introverted people or those who present with anxiety in social contexts—can “find a medium that would help mitigate an interaction that feels too direct, like joining an activity.” In a setting where people meet to share an activity, the focus is less on the individuals and more on the action. This can help decrease the anxiety some would feel in the initial phase while building a connection at the same time,” she says.

Dubai resident Kenan Deen started Social Circle in 2021 for two reasons: his passion for board games and to expand his own social circle. Although the group started out by hosting events for board games, it has now expanded to include other activities and experiences like laser tag, paintball and escape rooms. “Recently, I started new groups within the community for public speaking enthusiasts and another group for language exchange,” he adds.

He agrees that making friends as an adult is hard. “People usually join such communities to break the monotony, deal with work-related stress and keep loneliness at bay especially if they don’t know anyone in the city,” he explains, adding that the group has about 1,500 members from all over the UAE. “While some people may feel shy to meet someone for the first time, the experience of having a fun activity together, like playing board games or sports, breaks the ice quickly. It’s a very convenient way for people to meet, socialise and make new friends and connections,” he says, adding that he gets several messages from people thanking him for the community.

While friendship apps, hobby groups and online communities are all helpful, they still may not be for everyone. “For example, friendship apps worked much better for one of my clients than approaching people physically while for another client, joining a boxing community and physically interacting with her cohort worked better,” explains Zubair. She also suggests that expats keep in regular touch with their loved ones back home. “It can really help alleviate that feeling of ‘I have no one’. I generally find in my practice that this can provide a great sense of support when venturing out into the stressful world of new adult friendships.”

Don’t push too hard, she continues. “Sticking to already established, enjoyable hobbies, is worth considering as it’s a ‘safe space’ or ‘comfort zone’ which can be explored in a new way with new people. Joining a sport could also be considered an option for those that are athletic, as there isn’t much of a requirement to ‘talk’ or socialise instantly.”

But the most important thing, perhaps, is to be gentle with oneself especially while tackling loneliness that can stem from a lack of such social connections. “The smallest step counts as a win. Polite smiles to the cashier at the grocery store or the reception staff in your building, sending a text message or voice note to an old friend—all of these things can be considered building blocks to get out of the loneliness bubble. Putting too much pressure on yourself can just result in running out of motivation because expectations are too high and the chances of getting hurt or rejected are even higher,” says Zubair.



Why try?

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START NOW

Places to meet people and network around the UAE:

A woman’s table

Luma Maklouf, the woman behind the table, finds comfort in the food she grew up with—Palestinian cuisine. This supper club celebrates the incredible journey of women and men in the world of food. Luma pays homage to her mother by crafting menus from her family cookbook. Explore the world of food with dishes like the Palestinian Farmers Salad, Kafta & Tahini Skillet, and Ouzi. The latter, featuring a delightful marriage of rice, fried meat, vegetables, and roasted chicken, will melt in your mouth. It’s a gathering of love for culinary arts and culture.

Socialising for expats

An expat get together at Souk Madinat Jumeirah is the perfect opportunity to put yourself out there but in a comfortable environment. Women get to attend for free, while men pay Dh50 in cash, which includes one drink and access to an exclusive extended happy hour and reserved area. When: October 14, from 6:45pm to 9:45pm. Where: Belgian Beer Cafe, Souk Madinat Jumeirah, Dubai. For reservations, contact the organiser Rima via WhatsApp at +971 50 4968012.

Padel club

Located in the active neighbourhood of Al Quoz, Club Padel Dubai is an urban hub for fun, fitness, and excitement. With eight spacious, well-equipped outdoor courts and scenic views, along with a training academy and professional coaching, they offer all the amenities you need. Enjoy an invigorating experience at the club by engaging in an active Padel session and socialising with other Padel fans.

Culinary Boutique

For those who enjoy dabbling in the culinary arts and want to learn techniques that will help them become masters of the kitchen, Culinary Boutique offers a unique cookery experience. Here, you can socialise, meet new people, and enjoy great cooking classes. The café can accommodate up to 82 people, creating a warm and welcoming atmosphere that ensures memorable experiences. Where: Jumeirah 1, Villa 56, Dubai

Birdwatching

If you’re an admirer of our feathered friends, consider joining this hobby club for bird enthusiasts. Share pictures of birds spotted around the country and expand your knowledge with their extensive library of bird photos collected since its formation in October 2005. It’s a thriving community where members regularly share their findings, and you can certainly connect with people who share the same interests at popular bird sighting locations. Find out more on uae-birding.com.