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By **Stephanie Tweitto Jacob** Mar 17th 2010 3:10PM

Getty Images

Making friends – even the Facebook kind – as an adult isn't always easy.

"It's important to realize that once you leave high school or college – where people are thrown together and are living in the same place, doing the same thing and sharing similar interests – it takes more work to start and nurture friendships," says Irene S. Levine, Ph.D., author of ["Best Friends Forever: Surviving a Breakup with Your Best Friend"](#) and professor of

psychiatry at [New York University School of Medicine](#).

Studies show it's worth making that extra effort. The benefits of having close friends goes beyond having someone to watch your cat while you're away – friendships can actually help reduce levels of anxiety and [stress](#), ward off [depression](#) and even help you live longer. Levine says they also "enhance our feelings of connectedness to the world around us and help us be the person we want to become."

Sounds like a win-win to us. We asked Levine to share her best real-life strategies for making new friends.

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1. Re-evaluate your expectations. First, let go of the myth that best friends are forever. Women are raised to believe in fairy tales and TV shows like "[Sex and the City](#)," but the reality is that most friendships, even good ones, don't last forever. Instead of shopping around with unrealistic expectations, work on polishing the skills needed to make new pals.

2. Be yourself. It may sound cliché, but the best way to connect with other women is to pursue your own interests and become a person that others want to befriend. Doing things you enjoy – participating in a book club, [Pilates](#) class or cooking session; joining a civic, political, volunteer or religious group or getting involved with an online meet-up group like [meetup.com](#) – instantly puts you in situations that offer opportunities to meet like-minded individuals who share your interests.

3. Look around. You may have a colleague in the next cubicle, an acquaintance from your yoga class or a friend of a friend who you're fond of. Every new relationship starts with a smile and interest in the other person. Don't expect too much too soon, but once you feel comfortable sharing things about yourself, they will likely respond in kind. Ask them to join you for coffee after work or class. If that goes well, suggest meeting for lunch.

4. Log on. The Web site [girlfriendcircles.com](#) takes a cue from speed dating and plans events in various cities where you can meet three or five potential new friends at a coffee shop. Another site, [girlfriendsocial.com](#), aims to help women develop new connections by allowing them to browse profiles and send messages to others. It also holds monthly get-togethers where you can expand your circle of friends.

5. Be open to new friendships. A smile, compliment and sincere expression of interest in another person are the initial tools used to build relationships. They break down barriers between people, and you might be surprised to find you have something in common: a shared community, a mutual friend or kids that go to the same school. That common ground gives you something to talk about and immediately makes a stranger or acquaintance seem more familiar.

6. Overcome your shyness. If you're bashful, you may feel a visceral response when you're thrown together with new people. Knowing this about yourself will help you overcome it. Talk yourself into doing the right thing – the smile, the compliment, the sincere interest in others – until it becomes habit. Force yourself to be in situations with other people and to make a conscious effort to learn about them by asking questions (not invasive or probing ones) and responding appropriately. If that goes well, ask for a phone number or e-mail address or decide to meet for coffee or at the bookstore.

7. Shift your focus. Focus on the other person, rather than on making a friendship per se. Slow down, listen and get to understand the people around you. Practice unexpected kindness – send a casserole to the mom who is home with three sick kids.

8. Make time for friendship. It's important to decide how much time you have for friends – whether it's a lunch hour each week or a few hours on a Saturday afternoon – and block out that time on your calendar. That way you can commit to making lunch plans every Friday afternoon with the friend you want to keep, set aside dates for a girls' weekend with out-of-town friends or know in advance when you'll have time for new ones.

9. Go easy on yourself. Don't delude yourself into thinking that every match will work. Many won't pan out. Web sites like thefriendshipblog.com offer a place for people to discuss their problems and recognize that most friendships are imperfect and take work.

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