

Returning to Single Life Following Deployment

Overview

Returning to single life after a deployment.

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Coming home after a deployment can feel great, but it is also a time of adjustment. When you're single, you face a different set of re-entry challenges than married service members do. You don't have a spouse or, in many cases, nearby family members to support you through the process. Here is information about what to expect following a deployment and ways to find support to make the adjustment easier.

What to expect

It's important to think of your return to single life following deployment as a process rather than a single event. Just as it took time to adjust to your deployment, it will now take time to adjust to being home. You may have to get used to different foods again and a different time zone. You'll also have to make some emotional adjustments. Here are some ways you may feel:

- *Tired, less motivated than usual, or discouraged.* There may be no single reason for these feelings. You may feel sad about the things you missed while you were gone. You may feel out-of-step or out-of-place. These feelings are a normal part of the adjustment process.
- *Lonely.* Once you've been back for a few days or weeks, you may start to feel like you can't relate to your friends or relatives. Or you may feel that no one understands what you've gone through. This might make you feel isolated and make it harder to adjust. Try to reach out to friends and family members even if you feel awkward or uncomfortable about doing so. Chances are they may be feeling awkward, too. If you still feel lonely, you may want to talk with a counselor or therapist.
- *Angry.* It's normal to feel angry because others were able to stay home while you were on duty or because things have changed while you were gone. Anger can be another part of the process of adjusting to being home. It might help to talk with members of your unit, a trusted member of the clergy, or a professional counselor.
- *Culture shock.* Even parts of your life that you thought would feel familiar and comfortable may feel foreign to you at first. Give yourself time to adjust to all of these changes.

Settling back in

Many service members feel different after returning from deployment -- as though they have changed and don't fit into their old lives anymore. Old routines and ways of doing things may not seem to work -- at least at first. Here are some ways to make this adjustment period easier:

- *Try to establish a new living situation as soon as possible.* Many service members move out of an apartment or dormitory before a deployment, and need to find housing again when they return. Try to take care of this as soon as you can so that you feel more settled.
- *Sort out your finances.* It can be tempting to spend extra money when you first return from a deployment -- by going out with friends, shopping, or setting up a new home. But it's important to take a realistic look at your budget as soon as possible, especially if your rate of pay has changed.
- *Limit your use of alcohol.* For many people, celebrating means drinking with friends and family. Overuse of alcohol can increase feelings of depression and loneliness. It can also lead to impulsive and risky behaviors. Go easy.
- *Think about the next steps in your career.* If your prior work history was good, chances are your previous employer will welcome you back. Or perhaps you've learned new skills during your military service that are applicable to a new career. Be sure to discuss your interests with your employer or any potential employer.

Reconnecting with friends and family

It can be hard to reconnect with friends and family after a deployment. You may not know how to describe your experiences or you may not want to talk about them at all. It also can be hard to accept that life has gone on for friends and family while you were gone. Things may not return to normal right away.

- *Try to avoid a tightly scheduled reunion, with lots of visits with friends and family.* You may find that you'd prefer to take some time to yourself or that you're just not ready to visit with everyone you know as soon as you get back. Give yourself time to relax and to return to your life at your own pace. It's also a good idea to let friends and relatives know how you'd like to celebrate your return. For example, if you would prefer a quiet family dinner instead of a big party, gently let people know that you're not ready for a large gathering yet.
- *Realize that different people may react differently to your deployment.* Some people may want to know all about your experiences while others may not want to talk about them at all. The same might be true about your travels to other countries or areas. Try to be respectful of other people's feelings and ask that they respect yours if they want more information than you would like to give.
- *Understand that people or circumstances may have changed while you were away.* It's important to take the time to understand how things may have changed while you were away and to be open to these changes.

- *Be prepared for some awkwardness in your personal relationships.* Remember that you are not the only person who has to adjust to life following a deployment -- your friends and relatives are adjusting, too. It's common for couples or family members to feel awkward with each other after being separated for a significant period of time. People may wonder how you've changed and what you've gone through, but they may hesitate to ask you. And you might not know what to talk about because you're not caught up on the local news or what's going on in everyone's lives. Talk about how you're feeling and encourage friends and family to do the same.
- *Be patient with yourself and with others.* Give yourself and others time to adjust to your return instead of trying to make up for lost time as soon as you get back. The adjustment to being back home doesn't happen overnight; it may take days, weeks, or months. Eventually you will settle back into your life -- it just may not be exactly the same life that you had before the deployment.

Finding support

If you are having trouble adjusting, there are places to turn for help. These include:

- *Trusted friends.* Talk with other service members who were deployed with you or talk with other close friends. Sometimes just talking about how you are feeling and what you are experiencing can help you feel better. It's especially helpful to talk with someone who has been through it or is going through the same process.
- *Religious or spiritual communities.* Many people find support through religious or spiritual communities.
- *Military sources of support.* The military offers many sources of support for service members both before and after a deployment. One helpful Web site is the Army site <http://www.hooah4health.com> (click on "Deployment" and then on "Family Matters").
- *A professional counselor.* A professional counselor or therapist can help you cope with stress, feelings of sadness or confusion, and other issues related to your adjustment back home. You can find a counselor by talking with your health care provider or by contacting your employee assistance or employee resource program.

Building Your Self-Esteem as an Adult

Overview

Ways to build self-esteem.

- [What is self-esteem?](#)
- [The building blocks of self-esteem](#)
- [Ways to have more faith in yourself](#)

You've probably heard a lot about the need to build self-esteem in children. But self-esteem -- the ability to feel or think positively about yourself -- is just as important for adults.

No matter how old you are, self-esteem can help you set and achieve goals and take setbacks in stride. Here are some ways to build self-esteem at any age.

What is self-esteem?

Self-esteem is a feeling of self-worth, or the ability to have faith in yourself even if you sometimes make mistakes. Adults with healthy self-esteem accept responsibility for their own actions. They are motivated, set challenging goals for themselves, and take pride in their accomplishments. They have tolerance and respect for others and are able to forgive themselves and others. For most of us, our self-esteem will fluctuate throughout our lives. One study found that for both sexes, self-esteem typically is high until about the age of 9. Then it declines in adolescence, goes up afterward, rises throughout adulthood (peaking in the mid-60s), and goes down in old age.

In addition to these fluctuations, most of us experience other shifts that reflect our unique experiences. You may feel very good about yourself when things are going well at home and at work, but find that harder to do if you develop serious family, health, or job problems. Your circumstances can affect your self-esteem.

That's why it's important not to assume that because certain things happened to you, you will always have "high" or "low" self-esteem. Even if you're having trouble feeling good about yourself, there are things you can do to strengthen your self-esteem.

The building blocks of self-esteem

Most of us feel more confident in some areas of our lives than in others. You may know you're a good and loving parent, but worry about how you're doing at work. Or you may feel confident about your athletic or musical abilities, but less certain of whether you can provide a secure future for yourself and your family.

These feelings are normal, because few of us are equally good at everything we do. But problems may arise if you lack confidence in *most* areas, or in a few extremely important areas, such as your ability to work or to have satisfying relationships with others.

For this reason, one of the best ways to build self-esteem is to develop a variety of strengths. If you know that you do a number of things well, a setback in one area is less likely to cause problems you can't handle, or damage to your overall feeling of self-worth. Some experts believe that there are five building blocks of self-esteem, or things that you need to have to feel good about yourself:

- *A sense of security*, or the knowledge that you will be safe and treated in a fair and consistent way by others.
- *A sense of belonging*, or the knowledge that you have people who love and care for you.
- *A sense of identity*, or the knowledge that you are unique and that you have strengths and abilities that others don't.
- *A sense of purpose*, or the knowledge that your life is worthy and valuable and that you can make a

contribution.

- *A sense of competence*, or the knowledge that you have the skills needed for your tasks, and the ability to achieve goals.

Most people have some of these building blocks by the time they are adults. So you'll probably want to begin by figuring out which of your blocks are strongest and which ones you would like to improve. Then you can work out a plan to improve those areas. If you have a strong sense of belonging to a family or group of friends, but lack confidence in your skills at work, you might upgrade your skills by taking a few courses at an adult education center. If you have confidence in your skills but lack a sense of purpose or direction in life, you may want to get involved in a volunteer project that lets you make a contribution to your community.

If you have trouble identifying your strengths and weaknesses, you might want to talk to an adviser, such as a job or career coach or counselor. A professional can help you identify the areas of your life that could use a boost and the best ways to provide that.

Ways to have more faith in yourself

Building or rebuilding self-esteem is often a process of trial and error. You may need to experiment with several approaches to find the one that works best for you. Here are some general tips.

- *Get feedback.* Many people lack confidence because they don't know how much others admire them or appreciate their efforts. So you might start by talking to someone you trust and know well, such as a close friend or clergy member. Ask questions like, "What do *you* see as my strengths?" or, "What are some of the things I could do to build on my strengths?"
- *Do something every day that makes you feel good.* Feeling a lot better about yourself overall often begins with feeling a little better every day. Depending on your interests, you might exercise, listen to music, say a prayer or recite an inspiring poem, cook a wonderful meal, read a story to your children, spend time with a pet, or pursue a rewarding hobby.
- *Get involved.* Contributing to your community can be a very rewarding way to boost your self-esteem. For example, participate in Habitat for Humanity, Meals on Wheels, or fund-raisers for the American Cancer Society. Or assist with youth activities, such as helping to coach a Little League team, leading a Girl Scout troop, or serving as a church youth group leader.
- *Take inventory.* Identify negative thoughts or feelings that you experience about yourself as well as the situations that cause those feelings. Then determine a more positive way to react to those situations next time they occur. Remember that self-talk affects the way you feel. So be kind to yourself! Eliminate calling yourself names like "stupid," "idiot," or "loser." When you catch yourself talking negatively to yourself, tell yourself to stop. For example, if you make a mistake at work and your supervisor brings it to your attention, instead of saying, "I'm such an idiot. How

could I have been so stupid?" say, "I made a mistake and I'll learn from it."

- *Set realistic goals.* Building self-esteem takes time, and you may get discouraged if you don't set a few goals that you know you can reach. It's a good idea to have both short- and long-term aims. If you'd like to have a stronger sense of belonging to a family or group of friends, your goals might include calling your favorite sibling once a week, going to monthly meetings of a social or sports club, and making plans to attend a school or military reunion that's coming up next year. Write your goals down or tell someone about them. Having a way to hold yourself accountable will provide an additional source of motivation to achieve your goals.
- *Keep track of your progress.* Use a notebook or calendar or set up a system on a computer to record what you've accomplished. If you'd like to get more involved in community activities, make a list of things you could do to achieve that goal: "Spend an hour at the recycling center," "Call the Big Brother program for information," "Talk to the choir director about the rehearsal schedule." Then check off these things as you do them. Take a look at your accomplishments periodically and keep adding to the list. Re-evaluate your goals and make changes as necessary to reflect your desired outcome.
- *Don't look for "quick fixes."* Some experts suggest that people with low self-esteem repeat a phrase such as "I am terrific" frequently. It *can* help to remind yourself of your strengths. But just telling yourself that you're "terrific" may not help if the problem is that you have few friends or lack the skills needed to get raises and promotions at work. In such cases, you'll also need to take some concrete steps to reach your goals.
- *Associate with positive people.* You will feel better about yourself when you're surrounded by happy people who have positive energy. Minimize interactions with negative people. For example, try not to get dragged into long discussions with a co-worker who continually criticizes you and others. Make a neutral response, then say that you have to get back to work.
- *Focus on your own unique set of strengths.* Don't compare yourself with others. Make a list of your positive qualities, strengths, and accomplishments. Read over your list and add to it often.
- *Develop a support system.* In addition to building or maintaining a support system of family and friends, some people find it helpful to talk with others who want to increase their self-esteem too. Some communities have support groups for people with low self-esteem. You may be able to find such groups by calling your employee resource or employee assistance program, the community-relations department of a hospital, looking up community service phone numbers in the front of your local phone book, or searching the Internet. Or consider joining a group for people who share some of your specific concerns, such as an organization for people who are separated or divorced. Such groups often have regular lectures or programs with titles like "Rebuilding Self-Esteem After Divorce."

Finally, try to take an upbeat approach to developing more faith in yourself. Your self-esteem may be a little low, but you also have strengths that you can build on and expand. If you make an effort to stay

confident and enthusiastic -- and project these qualities to others -- you may begin to feel as good as you sound.

Dating in Midlife

Overview

Tips on midlife dating

- [The challenges and joys of midlife dating](#)
- [Tips on midlife dating](#)
- [Ways to meet new people](#)
- [Staying safe and having fun](#)
- [Dating when you have children](#)

Dating in midlife is a lot like dating as a teenager -- there are times when it's exhilarating and times when it feels hopeless. If you haven't dated in a while, you may find that getting back into dating takes time and isn't easy. If you've been dating for some time, you may find that meeting new people is a challenge or that fitting dating into your already busy life takes work.

But there are many ways to create a satisfying new social life for yourself in midlife. The key is to trust your instincts and be open to meeting new people.

The challenges and joys of midlife dating

One of the best things about dating in midlife is that you know yourself much better than you did when you were younger. You probably have a better idea of what makes you happy and what you like in people.

You also have years of experience that can help you understand what you're looking for in friends and companions.

But meeting new people can be hard at any age. You may be older and wiser, but you still may feel insecure when it comes to dating. You may worry about the fact that your body isn't what it was 20 years ago, or that you've been "out of commission" for so long that you don't even know what to say or how to act on a date. This may be especially true if you are entering the dating scene after not having dated for years.

Your relationships and life experiences mean that you're smarter and more interesting than you were decades ago. However, past experiences and relationships may make you wary or hesitant to date, or affect whom or how you date.

But if you try to stay confident and keep yourself open to meeting new people and trying new things, you may be surprised by how exciting and rewarding dating in midlife can be.

Tips on midlife dating

You'll still worry about the same things you worried about when you were younger, such as how you look, when a date will call, or what the other person thinks of you. Oddly enough, it can be reassuring to know that you've had these feelings before.

These suggestions may help:

- *Date when you feel ready to date.* Don't worry if you don't feel ready right now. Give yourself time. It's better to wait until the time is right than to rush into a new relationship.
- *Keep an open mind.* Try not to get stuck in old relationship patterns. Be open to new experiences and new people -- these are what can make dating in midlife exciting. For example, don't limit yourself to dating people who are similar to people you've dated in the past. If a date suggests doing something you've never done before, such as hiking or eating Thai food, be willing to give it a try.
- *Know that some things about dating today are different from dating years ago.* Don't make assumptions about who will pay, who will drive, or even about who should initiate the date. Dating norms have changed.
- *Talk with friends.* Other friends can offer advice, support, and help you meet new people to date in your community.
- *Find ways to fit dating into your life now.* You may have children, a demanding job, or aging parents to worry about. Most people in midlife have busy, complicated lives, and sometimes dating is the last thing they have time to worry about. But remember that dating is also fun and exciting, and a wonderful break from everyday pressures and routines. Don't give up on dating just because you feel as though you're too busy. Instead, make meeting and spending time with new people a priority. You may want to set aside one night a week as a "date night" or try to plan dates that include other activities, such as exercise. By going for a bike ride or walk with a date, you'll be spending time getting to know someone else while getting some exercise.
- *Remember that it's OK if you're not sure what you're looking for.* You don't have to know exactly what you want out of a date to enjoy it. Just make sure that you're honest with the people that you meet and then let your feelings guide you.
- *If you want to date but feel stuck, talk with trusted friends about what you're going through.* If you feel like you're stuck in old patterns or that you just can't get out and meet new people, talk with friends about your concerns. You may want to talk with a professional counselor if the pattern persists over time. A counselor can help you understand why you don't feel ready and may also suggest some things that can help you move forward.

Ways to meet new people

It can be difficult to meet new people to date in midlife. But meeting people isn't any different than when you were younger -- it just might take a little more thought and planning. The best way to meet new people is to keep your options open and to be willing to explore possibilities that you might not have considered in the past. You might:

- *Rely on your friends for connections.* If you're divorced or widowed or haven't dated in a while, your friends may not realize that you'd like to start going out again. Let them know that you're ready to meet people, but don't push too hard for people to fix you up. Remember that if you'd like to have more dates, it's your job -- not your friends' -- to make this happen.
- *Take part in activities you enjoy.* Pursuing activities you like makes it likely that-- even if you don't meet potential dates -- you'll make some great friends. You might consider devoting more time to a favorite sport or hobby, doing volunteer work, or taking classes at an adult-ed center. If you don't know anyone who shares one of your passions -- whether it's the Civil War or classical music -- search the Internet for national organizations for people who have similar interests.
- *Check your community newspaper for activities.* Even in a small town, you might be surprised by the number of activities listed in the paper for people your age or in your situation. You might find meetings for single parents or for unmarried people who are tall or over fifty. You might also meet other single people through activities like hiking, skiing, theater groups, dinner clubs or "masters" running or swimming events (usually for people over fifty).

Newer ways of connecting that you might want to explore include:

- *Internet dating.* Internet dating is the most popular of the new ways of connecting with potential dates. Most Internet dating services use roughly the same approach. You pay a modest fee -- typically, \$25-\$50 -- for a membership that usually lasts from one to three months. You then pick a screen name and fill out a questionnaire that the dating service posts on its Web site. Most services suggest but don't require that you post a photo of yourself. Your fee entitles you both to place your own ad and to respond to other peoples. Many services let you post your ad either in a general listing or with the ads of others in a specific category -- say, nonsmokers, people over forty or fifty, or Christian or Jewish singles. People send their responses to the dating service, so you don't have to give out your private e-mail address. Some dating services also sponsor activities, such as parties or moonlight cruises.
- *Personals ads.* In most large cities and many small towns, you can place a brief personals ad in a local magazine or newspaper for a small fee, often less than \$25. Responses to your ad are sent to the publication, which forwards them to you. You may respond to

other people's ads by writing a note or calling a number that costs a set amount per minute. One of the main differences between Internet dating and the personals ads is that you can read -- and post -- much more information on the Internet than you can in a brief newspaper ad. But the personals ads remain very popular with people who don't use computers or who would prefer not to answer a lot of questions about themselves in an online questionnaire.

- *Personalized matchmaking and introduction services.* Many matchmaking services have introduced new ways of connecting that are designed for people with busy schedules. These include "speed dating," which allows you to meet a lot of people in a short time. A matchmaking service might arrange for you to meet a half-dozen people at 20-minute intervals in a coffee shop, or host lunches or dinners at which all guests change tables frequently to meet many others. These activities tend to be more expensive than Internet dating and the personals, because they involve additional services. In many communities, you can also find newer forms of traditional matchmaking services. For a fee, a matchmaking service sets up one-on-one dates for you with people screened by its staff. These services, which tend to be the most expensive way of meeting people, may cost from a few hundred dollars to \$1,000 or more.

Each of these ways of meeting people has advantages and disadvantages, so the best one for you will depend your needs, interests, and budget. If you'd like to try one but aren't sure which fits your needs, you might start by placing or responding to a free or very low-cost service -- for example, by sending a brief note in response to an ad in a weekly newspaper.

Staying safe and having fun

Dating in midlife can involve as many risks as it does at any other age, particularly if you're meeting strangers through the Internet or the personals ads. So you'll want to take a few precautions.

- *Use a screen name on the Internet and give your first name only when responding to other ads.* Don't post or send your last name, phone number, address, or anything that might identify specifically where you live (for example, a photograph of your house or apartment building).
- *Don't invite somebody to your home on the first date, or get into a car with a stranger.* Meet instead in a public place, such as popular coffee bar or restaurant at a busy time of day.
- *Follow the same rules for safe sex that you'd follow if you were younger.* Regardless of your age, you can still get sexually transmitted diseases.
- *Carefully study any contract you sign with a matchmaking service.* Make sure that the contract spells out exactly what you can expect to receive, such as a set number of dates

with people who meet certain criteria within a specific period of time. Be sure, too, that the contract specifies that your money will be refunded if the service doesn't deliver on its promises. There are many reputable matchmaking services. But there are others that make promises they can't keep or prey on lonely and vulnerable people. If you're paying a substantial sum, you may want to check out a matchmaking service with the Better Business Bureau or a consumer watchdog agency in your area.

Dating when you have children

Few aspects of dating in midlife are more complicated than figuring out when and how to introduce your children to someone you're dating. These tips can ease the situation.

- *Be up front and honest with your date about your children.* It's best to be up front and honest with the people you meet about your children and how any relationship might fit with your family's needs and priorities.
- *Avoid introducing your child to someone you don't know well.* Children of all ages may have strong reactions to meeting someone their parent is dating. You may be able to avoid some stress or conflict if you hold off on introducing your child to someone you are seeing until you are sure he or she is going to be around for a while and that your child is ready to handle this step.
- *Remember that your children aren't your dating confidantes.* Every relationship has its emotional ups-and-downs, and you may feel a strong desire to talk about these with the people close to you. Save confidences about your love life for close friends. Hearing too many details of your relationships isn't good for younger children or teenagers.
- *Prepare your child for any meeting with somebody you're dating.* You don't need to give a long explanation of your relationship. Just try not to surprise your child with a new person.
- *Think carefully before inviting a date to spend the night.* This is one of the biggest challenges for parents who date. Having an overnight guest in the home can have a strong effect on children, especially if they haven't fully accepted a parent's status as a single, dating person. If you have teenagers, remember that you are modeling dating behavior. Don't rush overnight visits, and be sure that your child is emotionally ready to handle the idea before you invite someone to spend the night.
- *Make sure you have enough "couple time."* If your children live with you, or if you have complicated custody arrangements, it can be difficult to arrange to spend private time with someone you're dating. But the two of you need time without your children in order to allow your relationship to grow and develop on its own.

As you meet and date new people, hold on to your sense of humor and sense of fun. You may have as many bad dates in midlife as you had in your twenties. You may also have as many good ones. Laugh about the occasional disasters. Enjoy the fun times. And don't stop reaching out to new people and trying new activities.

Making New Friends as an Adult

Overview

Tips on expanding your circle of friends, whether you have moved to a new community or lived in the same one for years.

- [Tips on making new friends](#)
- [Reaching out to others](#)
- [Getting involved in your community](#)
- [Talking with new friends](#)

Making friends can be more complicated in adulthood than in childhood. It isn't always easy to get to know new people or develop the trust and affection that make for a lasting friendship. If you've moved recently, or if your old friends seem to be less interested in the activities you used to enjoy together, you may wonder how you can find people who share your interests and values.

It's important to remember that there's a link between friendship and physical and mental well-being. The stronger your ties to other people, the happier and healthier you are likely to be. Some studies have found that solid friendships even strengthen the immune system, because feelings of warmth and caring tend to lower the levels of chemicals associated with stress in the human body. Reaching out to other people -- at work, in your community, or by mail or through the Internet -- can help you gain the many benefits that enduring friendships offer.

Tips on making new friends

Making friends often results from a lucky accident. You may strike up a fascinating conversation while waiting for an elevator or standing in line at the bank. Or while you're watching your child's soccer game, you may meet another parent who shares an unusual interest that you thought nobody had but you. You can't plan for events like these, but you can make yourself available for them. Here are some tips:

- *Spend time outdoors.* Read the newspaper in a park on your lunch hour, not at home, or open your mail on your front steps instead of at the kitchen table.
- *Walk or take public transportation.* Take the bus or walk instead of driving. To boost your chances of seeing familiar faces, stick to a regular schedule or route.
- *Join a carpool.* If you can't walk or use public transportation, join an office carpool, or volunteer for a carpool for your children's social or athletic events.
- *Exercise with others.* Do your aerobic exercises at the YMCA/YWCA or a gym instead of at home, or swim at the same time each day or week at a community pool.
- *Shop selectively.* Buy your sports equipment or CDs at specialty stores instead of by mail, and check their bulletin boards for events of interest to sports or music lovers.

- *Get a dog.* Walk your dog at the same time each day, and you'll probably find that people love talking to the owner of a friendly pet.
- *Use the Internet.* If you have a computer, visit the Web sites for your town and for local colleges to stay up to date on community activities. If you don't have a computer, most local libraries provide free access to the Internet.
- *Remember that you can share solitary activities with others.* If you love to read, find out if your public library or bookstore has readings by local authors or a book discussion group. If you like to draw or paint, take your sketchbook or easel to the park, the playground, or a nature preserve that attracts a lot of visitors.

Reaching out to others

Being willing to reach out to others instead of waiting for them to come to you will bring potential friends into your life and make it easier to get to know them. Here are some ways to let people know that you're open to new friendships.

- *Take a positive approach.* Try to maintain a cheerful and enthusiastic attitude even if you've had a lot of trouble making friends in your community. If you complain about how hard it is to meet people -- even if your complaints are justified -- people may wonder if you're sincere about wanting to get to know others.
- *Ask for advice.* If you're new to a community, let people know when you need the name of a good doctor, auto repair shop, or children's piano teacher. Asking for advice shows people that you're open to ideas and willing to listen. Even if you've lived in your community for years, you may be able to start a conversation by asking a film- or food lover to recommend a movie or restaurant.
- *Be flexible.* Rethinking a few of your ideas about your social life may make it easier to make new friends. For example, if you're married and tend to socialize with other couples, consider reaching out to single people who might welcome an invitation to your Thanksgiving dinner or a Fourth of July barbecue. If you're single, don't assume that married acquaintances always want to do everything together.
- *Make friends with co-workers.* Try to attend company-sponsored social or other events that give you a chance to get to know your co-workers. Making friends may be easier at work than in other settings because you see your co-workers regularly. If you aren't sure how to get started, consider organizing a lunch-hour book group or an after-work softball game, or volunteering to collect donations from employees who'd like to send flowers or a gift to a co-worker who is ill.
- *Connect with someone every day.* If you have a lot of family and work responsibilities, it's easy to get sidetracked from making or strengthening friendships. Trying to get in

touch with one friend -- new or old -- by letter or phone every day will help you keep strengthening your ties to others no matter how busy you are. Sending amusing cartoons or newspaper articles is an easy way to let friends or potential friends know you're thinking about them.

- *If you don't use e-mail yet, try it out.* E-mail can make it easier to reach out to new friends, partly because messages sent this way let people respond when it's most convenient. If you don't have a computer, remember that you can send e-mail at no cost from many public libraries by using library computers and free e-mail services. You might want to consider investing in a device that has a keyboard and screen designed exclusively for sending and receiving e-mail. (These are much less expensive than a computer.)
- *Give a party.* If you'd like to meet a lot of people quickly, have a party. You might invite the people on your street, the families from your child's school or child care center, or the tenants in your apartment building. If you aren't ready to start entertaining, find out if you can help with a party at your child's school or an organization you belong to, such as a potluck dinner at your church or synagogue.

Getting involved in your community

The easiest way to make new friends is usually by doing something you love. Joining a sports or hobbyists' club -- or taking a class or doing volunteer work -- doesn't just boost your chances of connecting with people who share your interests. It also gives you a way to stay involved with others until the new friendships develop. You may find it much easier to make friends if you:

- *Become a volunteer.* Offer to help out at a social, political, professional, or similar organization in your community. Even if you have an extremely busy schedule, you may find that you can help out on a limited or short-term basis -- for example, by working one night a month at a soup kitchen, handing out leaflets during the week before an election, or volunteering once or twice a year at your child's school.
- *Join a club.* Watch the calendar of events in a local newspaper for meetings of interesting groups, or ask a librarian to help you track down the kind of club that you'd like to join. If you're new to your community, find out if your city or town has a newcomers club for people who have recently moved to the area. You might be able to find out about clubs for new residents at a community center or YMCA/YWCA.
- *Sign up for a night class.* Take a class in tennis, conversational Spanish, flower-arranging, or another subject that interests you. Besides attracting people who share your interests, these classes will probably help you find out about related community activities that you might also like to try.
- *Start a group.* If you can't find a group that interests you, consider forming a club for the kind of people you'd like to meet, such as a walking club or a group for new mothers. Put

a notice on a community bulletin board (or in a community newspaper) describing the kind of group you'd like to form and how people can reach you.

- *Attend religious services.* Visit several churches, synagogues, or other houses of worship before you make a decision about which to join. You may find that some of these seem much friendlier than others, or have many more of the kind of activities that interest you or your children.

Talking with new friends

At first, talking with new friends may seem very different from having a conversation with people you've known for years. It may take a while for you to feel completely at ease with someone you've just met. Sharing your thoughts and feelings tells people that you care about them and want to know them better.

- *Be a good listener.* Encourage your new friend to talk about what's on his or her mind, whether it's a tough assignment at work or a child's part in a school play. Making clear that you want to listen to good news or bad encourages people to confide in you.
- *Share a confidence.* If you're shy or aren't used to opening up to others, start with small confidences and work up to the things that are more important to you. Sharing a confidence -- big or small -- is a way of saying that you trust your new friend.
- *Ask questions.* Make a special effort to ask follow-up questions on important news that your friend has told you. Inquire about the results of tests, a meeting with a child's teacher, or the results of a bowling tournament. Asking thoughtful questions shows that you've been listening and makes a friend feel valued and understood.
- *Look for shared interests.* Ask your friend about hobbies and vacations or just how he or she spent the weekend. Learning more about these things may suggest ideas and activities that you can explore together, or just give you ideas about how you can be a helpful and considerate friend.
- *Praise your friend.* Show that you appreciate your acquaintance's strengths or achievements (and be sure to pass along any compliments about your friend that you've heard from others). Say how much you admire a new outfit or the helpful comments that your friend made at a meeting at work. Giving a lot of praise will reassure your friend that -- even though the two of you don't always see eye to eye -- you still feel the trust and respect that are the foundation of a good friendship.

Remember, too, that your employee resource program or employee assistance program may be able to provide helpful information and resources.