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25 ways to celebrate friendship

4th August marks International Friendship Day. Initially founded in the 1950s by the card industry as a way of getting people to send cards, the advent of social media has seen a revival in some parts of the world as a simple celebration of that most precious of gifts: friendship. It could be said – and it has been said – that we are actually more disconnected in this modern world of social media, when we can ping over a quick text or an email to cancel a meet-up, or vaguely ask how someone is.



Meaningful contact can tend to get thin on the ground. That’s why we’ve thought of 25 ways to help you celebrate your friends and friendship, not just on International Friendship Day but on every day of the year:

- 1. Plan a special day out with your friend.** Contact her partner and arrange for them to take over childcare so you can really surprise and treat your friend. Perhaps you’ll go for a long walk followed by coffee and cake, or a trip to the cinema or an art gallery, or, say, indoor climbing or scuba diving... Whatever tickles your (or her) fancy, just make sure it’s a day for the two of you to be together.
- 2. Write your friend a letter.** If you, like me, spent most of your time in lessons at school penning secret letters to your friends, then you’ll likely mourn the demise of letter-writing as much as I do. I recently sent a letter to a friend on the arrival of her second child – not a card, a letter (I prefer them!) – and she admitted she was really surprised I had ‘found so much to say’! Cards are useful, but they do mean we hand over a lot of the sentiment choosing to the card companies. Letter writing affords you the chance to put into words why your friend is special, what they mean to you and share a funny story or two. Failing a proper letter (but imagine her face when it falls out from between the bills and bank statements!), send an email.
- 3. Reach out to a friend in need.** A friend recently told you that a mutual friend was really struggling because her father had passed away at the same time her partner had taken on more work and she was basically parenting alone. You were shocked and vowed to pick up the phone. But the weeks and months went by and then you bump into her in a supermarket and share a big, teary, messy hug in the frozen food aisle with you thinking ‘I wish I’d reached out to

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her sooner'. This happened to me not so long ago, and I made an inner commitment to make that call as soon as I hear the news. That way, you can help out when it's really needed.

4. Go through your inbox and reply to those messages from friends you've been meaning to for months. Since Hotmail introduced those red flag symbols to mark an important must-reply email, I now have a clutter of them at the top of my personal inbox. Emails from friends with dates for meet-ups I haven't got around to checking, lovely photos of friends' children, emails from old friends I haven't spoken to in ages and ages... Set yourself an hour where you tackle them all, one by one. The sense of liberation from nagging guilt to a lovely realisation of connection makes it totally worthwhile.

5. Visit an old haunt together. There's no doubt a place you used to go to every time you met up. With one of my friends, it's a grotty greasy spoon in our home town, where we used to wait for our photos to be developed in Boots. With another, it's Pizza Express, a place I wouldn't normally step foot in outside our friendship. Why not revisit those old haunts for a trip down memory lane. It's amazing what stories and laughter are triggered by familiar locations. Don't forget to take your camera with you! Comparing photos of yourself beside the local landmarks then and now is a nostalgic pleasure too.

6. Send your friend an old photo of the two of you. Sorting through that box of old photos always turns up some hilarious moments, when you both thought you were the cutting edge of fashion and no one was quite as cool and street as you were. Old photos are treasures of a bygone era and deserve to be shared, rather than languishing in drawers or the loft. Unearth some classics, scan them and email them to your friend today – I bet you can almost hear her laugh!

7. Give your friend a no-obligation voucher. If a friend does us a good turn, it can make us anxious that we need to return the favour. Particularly anxious if we can't feasibly see when we'll fit it in for the foreseeable future. Why not make your friend a voucher this World Friendship Day – you might offer to take her kids out for the afternoon so she can hang out with her partner, or make some extra food so she can take the evening off preparing food – and offer it as a completely no-obligation gift, just because you love her. Giving altruistically like this also frees you up from expectation, and allows you to nurture your friend in a totally present and loving way.

8. Go through your diary for the last six months. How often have you seen your friends or made time to catch up on the phone? Make a pact with yourself to prioritise friendship in the coming months – you could schedule particular days to connect in some way with friends. Or maybe you're an all or nothing kind of person: why not do a friendship week where you spend as much time as possible with loved friends. You're likely to emerge supercharged from so much connectivity. If you come out the other side feeling exhausted by the company of certain friends, it's time for a life laundry (see 18). Ultimately though, you're better placed to see which friendships nurture and which don't.

9. Clean up your Facebook or social media page. If you're one of those people with 500 or so 'friends' on Facebook, it might be time to have a purge. I have a rule that if I wouldn't cross the room to say hi and have a conversation with a person if I saw them out and about, then they're not a friend. Say goodbye to those friends of friends you once had a drunken chat with, and the people from school you can't really remember. Use the modern phenomenon of social media to your advantage by only connecting with real friends. That way you'll feel happier about the information that gets shared, and it will be more like a cosy chat with people you know and trust. On that note, check your privacy settings too. Share photos, events and day to day musings only with people you'd share that stuff with in 'real life'.

10. Make new friends by joining a club. We go through different phases of our lives, and often get to a place where we have outgrown certain friendships. If you've entered a new chapter, moved to a new place, or just feel like you could do with more mates to share things with, one way to meet new like-minded folk is at a club or group. Far from being just for OAPs, interesting groups covering lots of different areas are springing up everywhere, from transition town movements to allotment groups, to reading and crafting get togethers. Have a look online or in your local newspaper for listings – if you can't find anything, you might like to set up something yourself. Start small, meeting in each other's living rooms, and as you grow you could look at renting a local space such as upstairs in a craft shop, or village halls often offer cheap rates.

11. Book a break to see friends. At your friend's leaving do before she moves with her family to Berlin, she urges you to 'come and visit – make a holiday of it!'. You say you will, but never quite get around to it. Have a think about the friends you have been meaning to get back in touch with; at the risk of sounding mercenary, is there holiday potential in a catch up trip?! We have friends in the



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New Forest and make a little mini-break of going to see them, staying at their place for some of the time and in local accommodation so we don't overstay our welcome! If you always offer a place to stay to friends visiting from overseas or a different county, it usually works the other way too. Think of it as a kind of house swap with the added bonus of hanging out with good mates.

12. Bake a load of cakes and invite friends to share them. Who can resist a cake and coffee splurge? There's nothing like hanging out with friends over a brew and a slice of something tasty. Better yet, raise money for charity by hosting a bake sale – if all the baking is a bit too much for just one, get everyone to bring a cake.

13. Host a monthly meet-up in each other's houses. If you have a regular scheduled get together with a group of friends, you're more likely to keep to it. Maybe it needs to be bi-monthly if you're all busy, but having the meet-up arranged for the second Saturday of the month, say, gives you something to look forward to, and ensures you keep in touch with friends. It also means you take turns doing the hosting/cooking etc. rather than one friend ending up always having the others over. If cooking a big meal seems like too much work in an already busy day, make it a cocktail evening or drinks and nibbles.

14. Plan an informal picnic with friends. I know someone who hosts a Friends and Friends of Friends Picnic every year in a London park, and I've always thought what a lovely way to gather people together. Hosting a picnic takes the onus off you to be the hostess of the mostest, instead get everyone to bring a dish. Outdoor feasting allows kids to roam free and you get time to catch up.

15. Play friend matchmaker! Do you have two friends who you really think should meet? Every time you're with them, you can't get over how alike they are? They even look the same! Why not arrange a get-together in a low-key kind of way, such as casually arranging to meet in a café in a park. That way, if they don't get on, no one is obliged to 'make it work' and can exit without too much fuss. Don't raise everyone's expectations by saying 'oh, you must meet so and so, you two are like two peas in a pod!', instead make it look a bit more accidental. The pleasure of seeing them hit it off is wonderful, as is being instrumental in creating a friendship that might last a lifetime. On the other hand, if you get it totally wrong, you can at least finally let go if that inner voice that reminds you of their similarities!

16. Make a friendship bracelet. Who can resist the charms of a homemade gift? It doesn't have to be a friendship bracelet, but there is something pleasingly old-skool about such a gift! I decided last year to only craft my friends' birthday presents and it worked quite well because I was really getting into knitting (though quite what my friend who lives in Australia does with her wrist warmers is anyone's guess). It doesn't necessarily save you much cash, as you end up having to buy all the bits and pieces for your particular craft, but a home-made present shows that you have made the time to really honour that friend.

17. Looking for new and exciting ways to spend time with friends? Sometimes when we get together with an old and familiar group it can be all too easy to fall into habits of moaning about this and that, or just leaving with a feeling of not having really connected. Why not start a group with your friends – you could try a reading or writing group, gardening, wine-tasting, crafting, painting, cooking, film-watching, whatever tickles your fancy! You'll discover new things about one another and give your friendship a kick-start.

18. Is it time to have a friendship tidy-out? We tend to fall into friendships because of circumstances and some of them outgrow their importance in our lives. As one of my closest friends always quoted, we have friends for a reason, friends for a season and friends for a lifetime. Look carefully at who you're expending your energies on. Do the friends you see regularly make you feel good about yourself and your life choices? If you think it's time to reassess your friendship groups, you're going to have to delicately extricate yourself from those that don't fulfil you. Be gentle, be kind, and focus your thoughts on where you want to be. Most friendships dissolve naturally if you allow them to do so, and in a year or so you'll be wondering what you were worrying about. Some friendships we go back to over and over again like a moth to a flame, even if they make us feel bad. Time to take a look in the mirror. What are we not accepting or loving about ourselves? When we truly accept and love ourselves, we attract people who do the same.

19. Do you know what's really going on in your friend's life? Does she/he know what's going on in yours? If you find yourself skirting around things because you're in a rush and the kids are distracting you, or you've spent so long disconnected it's hard to find a way back in, then really take time to listen to your friend next time you're together. Make eye contact, repeat back what she/he says to ensure you've understood properly, and resist the urge to

always offer advice. Mostly just being listened to is enough.

20. Be the kind of friend you'd like to have. If you find that people drift out of your life, or you don't make strong connections easily, it might be time to reflect on what you're giving out. If you love yourself, people are drawn to loving you. Conversely, if you tend towards negativity, it might be that people avoid spending time with you because they don't want to get sucked in to that vibe. It's never easy or comfortable to confront ourselves but doing so can open up the potential to change and invite exciting, uplifting new friendships in. If you find yourself about to launch into a tirade about how crap things are right now, stop, and think about the kind of friendship experience you'd like. Laughter, shared warmth, kindness, awareness? Make it happen by giving it out.

21. Release judgement. Just because your friend has a different way of relating to their partner than you, or they make different parenting choices, doesn't mean either of you are necessarily right or wrong. Let go of the idea that to be friends we need to be the same: celebrate your differences by each choosing a way to spend an evening together, and find out something new about your friend and yourself into the bargain. Avoid topics that make you both see red, there's no point rehashing old arguments if you know you hold different opinions. Some friendships help us grow by challenging our long-held assumptions. If you find yourself leaving a meeting with a friend thinking 'huh! What does she know about my life!', try turning it around and seeing the wisdom in her opinion, or look at the world through her eyes. Friendships allow us access to new ways of thinking, seeing and being if we allow them to.

22. Never, ever gossip about your friends. We've all done it, even if it was just in a jokey way. But imagine what it would feel like if you overheard your friend talking about you in a derogatory way, rolling their eyes at your failings... NOT good. In most friendship groups, there's one who tends towards gossiping, avoid falling into the trap by changing the subject every time she starts telling a story until she gets the message.

23. Help your friend's business. Say your friend has just started a cake baking business or is launching her web-based networking site. Do what you can to help out, from baking cakes to emailing flyers for her. It's exciting to see a friend get her business off the ground, and offers great learning potential for novices. There's a sense of sisterhood in growing businesses headed by women too. I helped a friend launch her massage business many years ago, and within a few years I took over her maternity leave. It was a fantastic way for me to get my foot in the door and because I'd seen all the behind the scenes activity, I was able to launch my own business a year later.

24. Mark special events in your friend's life. It means so much when a friend remembers the anniversary of a family death and sends a note or an email. Or when they recall your wedding day or child's birthday. If you're always forgetting dates, start the year with good intentions by setting reminders on your phone, or (and I like this option!) getting one of those old-fashioned birthday books. Even if you never receive a single card in return (and let's face it, with busy lives that's often a possibility), you have that lovely warm glow of choosing and sending a card and holding your friend in your heart as you write it.

25. Be your own best friend. You know the old adage: no one can love you until you love yourself. Take time out to nurture and care for yourself as you would a really special friend. Ask yourself 'what would you like to do today?' and then make it happen. No nasty internal thoughts, no negative put-downs, no cursing yourself for mistakes: spend a whole day – and gradually extend to a whole lifetime – talking to yourself as you would a friend. YES, that dress looks good on you!! YES, you can hang out on the sofa and take a nap, you're exhausted. YES, let's go somewhere completely fun and different today!

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