



Back to Friendships mean more later in life, say senior women

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Barbara Turnbull

Sue Edmiston gets weepy when she talks about the circle of gal pals she's found at the Burlington Senior's Centre.

Twice widowed, 75 and now living alone, Edmiston says her group provides a level of support and companionship she has not known before.

"It's difficult to make friends at 60, 65, 70," she says. "I feel very fortunate to have found this."

A social connection is critical for seniors, but so is the support that comes with it, as daily tasks like cooking, errands and transportation get more difficult, say experts.

"The need gets stronger as you get older," says Toronto gerontologist Margaret MacAdam, who has a PhD in health and aging.

It's even more important for people who have been in relationships and are now single or widowed, she says. Women, who outlive men by an average of five years, are more likely to be single and say it's their female friends they can't live without.



Gerontologists say it is important for seniors to mingle with each other and places like Hearthstone by the Bay offer the opportunity to do so.

Vince Talotta/Toronto Star

“I’ve never experienced this sort of relationship with other women,” says Elsie Berry, 89, adding her friends call each other just to say goodnight. “You’re out on your own, without a husband, empty-nested . . . you need them. It’s like having a warm blanket around you.”

These women say they look out for each other and depend on one another in a way that’s typically nurturing for females, but deeper and richer than friendships from younger stages of life.

“When you’re a senior . . . you have more time for each other, you understand a bit more about relationships and you don’t criticize each other,” Edmiston says. “It’s different from when you’re younger, because at this point there’s no competitiveness. You want to be there for each other.”

There is no more “keeping up with the Joneses,” says Dianne Graham, 71, who lives on her own in a condo, downsizing after her husband died in 2002. “You’re more comfortable in your own shoes and accepting of others.”

At Hearthstone by the Bay, a new retirement condo in Etobicoke, the ratio of single women to men is four to one. The residents have a legion of activities to partake in, but, more important for many of them, regular opportunities to congregate and commiserate.

“We talk about family,” says Mamie Ablamowicz. “We talk about food. A lot,” she adds with a laugh.

“Sometimes we discuss problems,” says Dorothy Robson, 65. “We don’t always come to a solution, but we come up with different ideas.”

They also keep tabs on each other. Anyone MIA for longer than usual gets checked on.

Wherever there are multiple units with several older people, it’s important they be able to mix, McAdam says, but they happen naturally in all kinds of housing environments. The gerontology term is NORC: Naturally Occurring Retirement Community. Many Toronto neighbourhoods are comprised of people who moved in when young, raised their kids and have remained into their twilight years, she says.

“You end up with a higher than normal portion of seniors living in that neighbourhood, and that’s a

NORC,” MacAdam says. “You’ll see that people know each other and take care of each other.”

It’s different from middle-age friendships. “There are physical problems and health problems that make it difficult to do the kinds of things they always used to do,” she says.

Many NORCs are transforming, with younger families moving in and often adding additions or rebuilding larger homes. In the best of the neighbourhoods, everyone keeps an eye out for those who are vulnerable.

The dearth of geriatricians, doctors specializing in aging, make peer connections crucial. And there are few alternatives for low-income women to get ongoing support, McAdams says. “Community centres are hugely important, because they help to break down those barriers between older people and their need for support and their need to be connected to people in their own community,” she says.

Though men’s needs are no less acute, women tend to be more sociable and often do better in senior years than single men do, MacAdam says. “They’re often quite bereft when the wife dies, because it’s very easy to become lonely.”

There’s no taking these relationships for granted, women say.

“I’ve always liked men, but my women friends are so important to me, because they are the ones who are always there at a crisis,” Ablamowicz says.

They are there for good times, as well.

“We have pyjama parties and potlucks and we laugh and giggle,” Edmiston says. “We value each other.”

Reach Barbara Turnbull at [bturnbull@thestar.ca](mailto:bturnbull@thestar.ca) or @barbturnbull on Twitter.