

What to do if you find it hard to connect with others

Sometimes friendships can feel tricky, or you might find it hard to identify a friend you'd like to invite on a mate's date. Dr Lucy Maddox, consultant clinical psychologist, offers some info and tips:

1. **Remember that worrying about what other people think is common.** One obstacle to connection is social anxiety, when worries about what other people think get so big that they get in the way of our lives. This affects about 1 in 10 people to a level where it has a big impact, but like many things, it's a spectrum – everyone worries to some degree about what others are thinking. So if you find yourself doing this a bit – remember it's not unusual.
2. **Try to shift your focus away from yourself.** Worries that people think we're boring, or stupid, or that others are noticing normal physical reactions to stress, (like sweating, blushing, or shaking) can make us so preoccupied with ourselves that we pay less attention to others. This can get in the way of making and chatting to friends. Try to shift your focus from yourself to those around you.
3. **Look for evidence that people are enjoying what you say instead of evidence they aren't.** And remember people don't always smile while they're listening, but it doesn't mean they don't like you.
4. **Try not to let worries about what others think stop you from spending time with them.** Usually, the more we go into social situations, and the more we look up and around while we're there, the comfier we'll feel.
5. **Regularly making a small effort can go a long way.** Making new friends can be hard but consistently putting in the effort to have shared experiences, and to ask for help and offer it, will often nurture relationships.
6. **Try not to beat yourself up if you've lost touch with old friends.** Sometimes life can get in the way. A text or a postcard can help to stay connected.
7. **Remember no one's a mind reader.** Experiment with directly saying what you mean and asking what someone else means. Often, the more you do this the easier it gets.
8. **Make sure you're taking care of your relationship with yourself.** Spending time and energy on you, can make it easier to feel replenished enough to connect. It's hard to feel open and engaged if you're tired or depleted.

You can read more about keeping connected, and other ideas from the therapy room to help with everyday life, from Dr Lucy's book 'A Year To Change Your Mind'.

If social anxiety feels like it might be a problem that's getting in the way of your life, you can ask your GP for a referral to talking therapies or discuss other types of support.

¹ NICE guidelines, Social anxiety disorder final scope