



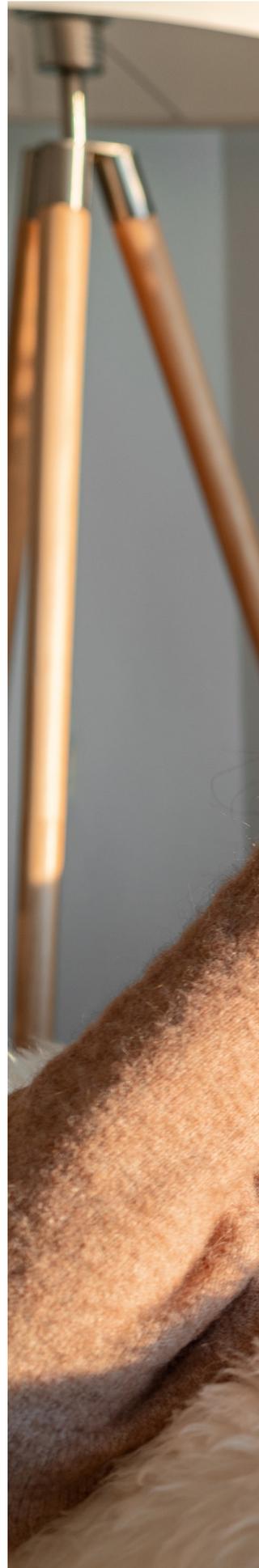
AS THE WORLD OPENS - RECONNECTING WITH OLD FRIENDS



As the World Opens: Connecting With Friends— Tips for Adults

When you think about what your life will look like for the remainder of this year, how do you feel? As the contours of our daily life are quickly redrawn, you may experience emotions ranging from eagerness to anticipation to anxiety. Whatever emotions you may be feeling are natural and normal. Most of us have experienced some form of isolation and stress over the last year, and isolation and stress can impact our social skills, happiness, and sense of self.

Research indicates that isolation brings changes to the volume of our brain and can increase loneliness, which in turn can impair our ability to interact well with others (Gorvett, 2020). Even if you were not particularly lonely during the pandemic, the lack of in-person socialization meant you missed out on the benefits of social interactions: an increased sense of value, stronger social skills for more positive interactions, and reduced anxiety and depression (Gorvett, 2020; Baylor College of Medicine, 2021). Even if you are eagerly anticipating your first in-person coffee meetup in over a year, the experience may be different than you remember.





Luckily, our social muscles are resilient. We can regain our footing in social situations relatively quickly (Ro, 2021). Consider the following approaches to ease into life post-COVID and have fruitful social interactions with friends, family, colleagues, and strangers.

- **Acknowledge what has changed.** Keep an open mind and remind yourself that everyone experienced this collective, life-altering event. It's inevitable that experiences that were once typical, like meeting friends for coffee, have taken on new depth and meaning. The pandemic may have altered your energy for socializing, and it's okay to set new boundaries that will meet your needs now, rather than the needs you had pre-COVID (Tagle & Schneider, 2021).
- **Start small.** Keeping your social circle somewhat restricted, at least to start, can help you ease back into socializing. Being selective about who you hang out with can provide physical and psychological comfort, and gradual exposure to situations that may be uncomfortable, such as social situations post-COVID, can help us build up a tolerance. This gradual exposure with a small group of friends allows us to ease back into a more social life at a pace that works for us (Ro, 2021).





- **Plan ahead.** Make a mental list of open-ended questions before you socialize. This takes the pressure off of you in the moment and allows you to work on active listening. You can also plan time-bound social interactions, which can ease the anxiety of having to continue a conversation for an extended period (Tagle & Schneider, 2021).



- **Reach out.** Studies show that people tend to underestimate the positive impact that reaching out to others can have, and all parties involved tend to feel better after a positive social interaction (Conick, 2020). Even if some of your social bonds have atrophied over the last year, remember that your friends—old and new—want to hear from you! If meeting up in person feels like too much initially, start with a call and see where it goes.

As we acclimate to a life where strict social distancing will, hopefully, become a distant memory, we must be kind to ourselves and others. We can take care to greet our friends and family with warmth and remain open to the ways in which they may have changed while giving ourselves grace and remaining optimistic.

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