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CAREER COACHING

a guide to

MAKE FRIENDS. NOT CONTACTS.

How to start conversations, be remembered, and turn acquaintances into real friends as an adult.

Making friends as a kid was easy. You sat next to someone in class every day, and one day you were friends. As adults, we lose the classroom. We move cities, change jobs, have families, and suddenly realize the last new friend we made was years ago.

The good news: making friends is a skill, not a personality trait. You can learn it the same way you learn to interview or negotiate. This guide pulls together what I teach about communication, along with research from social scientists who study how strangers become friends.

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1. Why friendship feels harder as an adult

Sociologists who study friendship point to three conditions that help friendships form: being near each other, seeing each other again and again without having to plan it, and being in a setting where people can relax and open up. School and early jobs gave us all three for free. Adult life rarely does.

Friendship also takes time. A widely cited study by communication researcher Jeffrey Hall estimated it takes roughly 50 hours together to go from acquaintance to casual friend, about 90 hours to become a real friend, and more than 200 hours to become a close friend. That's not a reason to give up. It's a reason to be intentional about where you spend your hours.

> THE TAKEAWAY
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> You don't need more charisma. You need more repeated contact with the same people, in settings where conversation comes naturally.

2. People like you more than you think

After a first conversation, most of us replay it and cringe. Did I talk too much? Was that joke weird? Researchers at Cornell and Harvard studied this and named it the **liking gap**: people consistently underestimate how much their conversation partner liked them and enjoyed talking to them.

In other words, the person you just met probably liked you more than you think. So the text you're hesitating to send ("Great meeting you, want to grab coffee next week?") is far more likely to be welcome than your inner critic says.

3. Start conversations that go somewhere

Most conversations die in the first minute because they run on autopilot: "How are you?" "Good, you?" "Busy!" Behavioral researcher Vanessa Van Edwards, author of *Captivate* and *Cues*, calls the better alternative "conversation sparkers": openers that invite a real answer instead of a script.

A few of my favorites:

- "What's the best part of your week so far?"
- "Working on anything you're excited about?"
- "How do you know the host?"
- "What got you into that?"
- "Any fun plans coming up?"

Notice what these have in common. They're easy to answer, they point toward something positive, and they give the other person room to choose what to share.

4. Ask the second question

Researchers at Harvard found that people who ask more questions in a conversation are liked more, and that **follow-up questions** make the biggest difference. A follow-up proves you were listening.

FIRST QUESTION ONLY

"What do you do?" "I'm a nurse." "Oh, nice." *(silence)*

WITH A FOLLOW-UP

"What do you do?" "I'm a nurse." "What made you choose nursing?" "Honestly, my grandmother…"

The second question is where the story is. As a journalist, I learned that the first answer is the polite one. The real one comes after.

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5. Find the thread

Every person you meet has a thread: a passion, a project, a story they love telling. Your job is to find it and pull. Listen for words that carry energy, like a place they lit up talking about, a hobby they mentioned twice, or a goal they're working toward.

Then share something back. Conversations deepen through back-and-forth openness: you share a little, they share a little more. Friendship researchers call this mutual self-disclosure, and it's one of the fastest ways to feel close to someone. Psychologist Arthur Aron's famous study of "36 questions" showed that strangers who took turns asking increasingly personal questions felt surprisingly close in under an hour.

You don't need 36 questions at a dinner party. Just don't let the other person do all the sharing, and don't do all of it yourself.

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6. Be the person people remember

People forget most of what you say. They remember how you made them feel. Make them feel seen.

- **Use their name.** Say it once early on, and once when you say goodbye. It helps you remember it, and people love hearing it.
- **Remember one detail.** Their daughter's recital, their marathon, their job interview. Write it in your phone after you leave.
- **Follow up on it.** "How did the recital go?" a week later is one of the most powerful sentences in friendship.
- **Celebrate their wins.** Congratulate the new job, the promotion, the race finish. People remember who cheered.

7. From acquaintance to friend

This is the step most people skip. You had a great conversation, said “We should hang out sometime,” and never did.

Make a specific invitation

“We should get coffee sometime” almost never happens. “I’m going to the farmers market Saturday morning, want to come?” often does. Specific plans are easy to say yes to.

Become a regular

Since friendship grows through repeated contact, put yourself somewhere you’ll see the same people again: a weekly class, a running group, a volunteer shift, a book club, the same coffee shop at the same time. Familiar faces turn into friends with very little effort.

Be the host

Invite a few people to a casual dinner, a walk, or a game night. The host is the connector, and the connector is always remembered. It doesn’t have to be fancy. It has to happen.

Keep in touch in small ways

A quick text with an article they’d like, a photo that reminded you of them, a “thinking of you” before their big day. Small, frequent touches matter more than rare grand gestures.

8. If you’re shy or introverted

- **Go early.** Arriving when there are five people is easier than walking into fifty.
- **Take a job.** Volunteer to check people in or help the host. A role gives you an easy reason to talk to everyone.
- **Prefer one-on-one.** Many introverts shine in small conversations. Suggest coffee or a walk instead of a big party.
- **Prepare two stories.** Have two short, light stories ready, like something funny that happened this month or a recent trip. Preparation isn’t fake. It’s generous.
- **Give yourself an exit.** Decide in advance that you’ll stay one hour. Knowing you can leave makes it easier to go.

9. Your 30-day friendship plan

1. **Week 1:** Join one recurring activity: a class, a club, a volunteer shift, or a weekly event. Commit to going four times.
2. **Week 2:** Use one conversation sparker and one follow-up question in every new conversation. Write down one detail about each person.
3. **Week 3:** Send two specific invitations, with a day, a time, and a place.
4. **Week 4:** Host something small: a coffee, a walk, or dinner for three. Then follow up with everyone who came.

Ideas in this guide draw on the work of Vanessa Van Edwards (Captivate, Cues), Jeffrey Hall's research on the hours it takes to make friends, the "liking gap" research by Erica Boothby and colleagues, Harvard research on question-asking by Karen Huang and colleagues, and Arthur Aron's "36 questions" study.

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Book your strategy call

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Two hours, live, with a small group. Practice real conversations and leave with scripts you can use the next day.

Save your seat

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