

How complete is your friendship jigsaw?

It is a well known fact that people who have no, or few, friends have poor mental health and are at higher risk of depression and suicide.

Friends are precious. They are people you go to in times of trouble and with whom you have fun, go out or play sport. They provide company and support, and help you get through the bad times.

Although people's needs are different, most people require at least one very close friend to share the ups and downs of each day. Some people feel lonely even when they have loads of friends because their expectations of friendship are higher than those people who are satisfied with just one or two close friends. So part of having your friendship jigsaw complete is about reality meeting your expectations.

Look around you – if you think that everyone else has loads of friends and that you are the odd one out, think again. Some people have a wide social circle of people they are friendly with – but it doesn't mean that all these people are close friends.

Gail described herself as lonely – she didn't work because of health problems and her children were at school. But when she found out she had to go to hospital for a major op, she told only her 'close friends' about it. Then she thought – if I count how many people I've told about my surgery then that will tell me how many close friends I have. She found she had twelve close friends! It was then she realised it wasn't the number of friends she lacked, but the frequency with which she saw them.

Looking at Gail's friendship jigsaw, she had plenty of pieces but they were too small to complete her 'puzzle'. By seeing friends more regularly, Gail increased the size of her jigsaw pieces – each piece representing a friend – and was finally satisfied with her jigsaw.

Think about your friendship jigsaw. Are there gaps that need filling?

Are some friendships lacking in intimacy that opening up a little will help put right? Let friends know how you feel and understand your opinions about things. Sharing intimacy is extremely rewarding; it also builds trust. But trust has to grow gradually to make sure that the other person is deserving of it. You can't hurry friendships.

But you can start them at any time. If you lack the pieces to complete your picture, you need to meet more people to make new friends – or look at the people you already know but don't class as friends. Perhaps you could make overtures of friendship to them so that they become part of your jigsaw?

Instead of eating your lunch at home or in the office, go to a café or eat in the park – and be prepared to give a warm welcoming smile and to talk to whoever comes along. When you're out shopping, ask other shoppers if they know where something is kept or whether they've ever tried cooking with something that's more unusual. People are nearly always willing to help and often welcome the opportunity to chat. Join a club or go to the gym – and be ready with a warm smile when someone's gaze meets yours!

When you find someone who likes to talk, say how you enjoyed chatting before you leave. If you see that person again, you will be assured of an even warmer welcome. But if you have the time to recognise a potential friend – and don't limit it to only someone in your age group or background – you could suggest going for a coffee or asking if they go to the gym because you do too and you might see each other there. If the other person is interested she will ask which days you go and at what time; if not, then never mind. Try with someone else – or allow her more time that a second chance meeting might give.

Be friendly in your approach to the people you work with. Don't be sour faced or behave grumpily. Show that you have a sense of humour - and if you don't, try to develop one by watching funny films and reading humorous books. Listening to what others say and how they say it may help you learn what works and what doesn't work.

Have friendly body language – don't cross your arms, and face the person you talk to. Watch how friendly people behave and see what things they do that might suit your personality. Friendly people tend to be popular people - if you become friendlier, you will also be more popular and have a greater chance of completing your friendship jigsaw.

Remember, friendship satisfaction is not just to do with the number of friends you have; it also depends on your level of intimacy. If you put up barriers and keep friends at bay, you are more likely to be dissatisfied with your friendship jigsaw. People who can be open with their friends experience more satisfying relationships and need fewer friends to keep them happy.

Tips for being a friendly person:

- Be prepared to meet strangers' eyes and smile.
- Be ready to laugh at jokes.
- Make yourself available – don't hide away.
- Be open to possibilities – friends don't have to be a clone of yourself.
- Be patient - don't write people off too early.

Márianna Csóti is the author of *Overcoming Loneliness and Making Friends* (Sheldon Press, £7.99).

www.mariannacsoti.co.uk