

# Wide circle of friends key to mid-life wellbeing for both sexes

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The midlife wellbeing of both men and women seems to depend on having a wide circle of friends whom they see regularly, finds research published online in the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*.

A network of [relatives](#) is also important—but only for men—shows the study of more than 6500 Britons born in 1958.

The authors base their findings on information collected from the participants, all of whom were part of the National Child Development Study (NCDS), when they were aged 42, 45 and 50.

At the age of 42, participants completed a validated questionnaire (Malaise Inventory) to gauge their psychological wellbeing and provided details of their partnership and job status, as well as the age at which they left full time education.

Most had left school at the age of 16, had a partner and were in pretty good psychological health.

Their responses were used to predict the size and make-up of their friend and family networks by the age of 45, when they were asked to state how many friends and relatives they met up with once a month or more.

One in seven said they had no contacts with relatives outside their immediate household and around one in 10 said they had no friends.

Four out of 10 men and around one in three women said they had more than six friends whom they saw regularly.

Employment had no bearing on the size of social networks, but education did.

Men who left full time education between the ages of 17 and 19 were 45% less likely to have a larger kinship network, while those staying on until 20 or beyond were 60% less likely to do so. The comparable figures for women were 17% and 60%, respectively.

Staying on in full time education after 16 also reduced the size of men's friendship network, but it increased women's—by 38% if they left between 17 and 19, and by 74% if they left after the age of 20.

Having a partner was associated with a larger kinship network. Being single reduced that probability by 31% for men and by 26% for women. But it had no impact on friendship networks. When participants' psychological wellbeing was assessed at the age of 50, the results showed a significant association between the number of friends and psychological wellbeing, the impact of which was greater for women.

Compared with those with 10 or more regular contacts, smaller networks of friends at the [age](#) of 45 were associated with significantly lower levels of psychological wellbeing for both sexes.

These findings were consistent irrespective of whether they had a partner/job or had had a mental health issue in the past.

Psychological wellbeing was also influenced by the size of kinship networks, although to a lesser extent than friendship—but only for men.

Psychological wellbeing was especially poor among those with no

relatives or friends: among men this was 2.3 points lower if they had no relatives and 2.6 points lower if they had no friends compared with those with 10 or more regular social contacts.

For women, lack of friends had an even greater impact on [wellbeing](#). This was 4 points lower if they had no [friends](#). But a lack of relatives had no emotional impact.

**More information:** Friends are equally important to men and women, but family matters more for men's wellbeing, Online First, [doi:10.1136/jech-2012-201113](https://doi.org/10.1136/jech-2012-201113)

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