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Greet the Neighbors: 5 Practical Tips for Making Connections Close to Home

Old-fashioned social networks — person to person, not virtual or anonymous — are more valuable than we may have realized. Studies show that staying socially connected can boost the immune system, reduce anxiety and depression, and even increase lifespan. Conversely, for older adults prolonged isolation can be as bad for you as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

It's important to connect with your neighbors, at any age. Here are some practical tips for reaching out:

1. **Start a conversation.** If you regularly see someone on the street when you're out walking or running errands, smile and say hello. When you see a neighbor, introduce yourself. Chat about things you have in common, or get them to talk about themselves. If you both have gardens, try asking how they care for theirs. If they have a pet, ask about its name or breed. If you've seen them carrying a bag of yarn, ask whether they knit or crochet. Ask about their children (or grandchildren). Even talking about the weather can be the beginning of a connection.
2. **Ask someone to join you on a walk.** Taking a walk is a great way to get exercise and get to know a neighbor. It's free, it doesn't require either of you to play "host," and the places you pass along the way will provide topics for conversation.
3. **Offer your help.** Maybe you're a retired teacher. Why not volunteer to tutor a neighbor's kids? If you drive, ask neighbors who have mobility issues whether you can give them a ride somewhere or pick up groceries for them. Bring a neighbor's trash cans back from the curb, or offer to walk their dog. Sometimes simple actions create the strongest connections.
4. **Join an exercise class.** A walking club or yoga class in your community can help you stay healthy and agile while introducing you to like-minded neighbors.

5. **Host a casual gathering.** You don't need to wow anyone with your hosting prowess. Keep it simple. Invite a few neighbors over for coffee and pie. If the weather is nice, break out the lawn chairs and serve lemonade and cookies in the front yard.

Making a concerted effort to connect with neighbors will have a transformative effect on their lives — and yours.

The AARP Foundation spearheaded **Connect2Affect** to create a deeper understanding of loneliness and isolation, draw crucial attention to the issue, and catalyze action to end social isolation among older adults.

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