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MintStyle with Rachel Weingarten: The New Style of Socializing

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When you were younger, your entire social life consisted of playing with family and friends. As you grew up, you started to have more choices as playmates, schoolmates, teammates and camp friends came into the mix.

Then came college, followed by work and things like the gym and professional groups and associations. Your very concentrated friend pool expanded and contracted as you added new friends and lost touch with others. There was a consistent order and rules for work, friendship and for socializing and just about everyone played by those same rules and priorities.

As life ebbs and flows, you can find yourself with smaller more concentrated groups of friends. Major life changes can sometimes leave people wondering how to go about making new friends, or trying to figure out how to have more fun with their core group.

“Making new friends can be one of the biggest challenges in adulthood,” says Cynthia Edwards, a professor of psychology at Meredith College. She continues “It takes courage to let your walls down and experience life but there are plenty of ways you can do it.” Edwards advises being more deliberate and more assertive in seeking social contact as well as being open to friendships with people of varying ages.

Another great tip is figuring out what your interests are and seeking out avenues to build those interests into relationships.

Work and Socializing/Work on Socializing

With what feels like 24/7 communication, prioritizing your social life is more challenging than ever. “People are pressured to work harder and faster than ever before, and friendships often seem somewhat discretionary in that context” Says Irene S. Levine, PhD, author of *Best Friends Forever* (Overlook).

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Levine feels that being responsible to employers and family members seems to take precedence over friendship, which often is viewed as a selfish indulgence. “If there isn’t time for everything, which there often isn’t, friendships often take a backseat,” concludes Levine.

Or as Edwards puts it, “A lot of us get emotionally stretched by our jobs.” When that happens, we might end up rejecting even our friends in favor of spending time alone or trying to unwind.

So how do most of us unwind these days? With myriad methods of tech communication and less discretionary dollars to spend on entertainment, a lot of people are creating social lives online.

Modern Culture Expert Damon Brown, penned his most recent e-book *Damon Brown's Simple Guide to Twitter* (Amazon Digital Services) in part due to the urging of less social media savvy friends and colleagues. As Brown sees it, sites like Twitter “don’t replace face to face relationships. It’s not the same as coffee or conversation.”

What it does though, is help to keep some friendships going or as Brown believes “It keeps you connected to people in between times spent together.”

So social media sites can not only connect and reconnect you to friends past and present, but act as a bridge to keep you connected to those separated by distance, budget or schedule.

Not All Socializing Styles are Sociable

In her book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* (Crown), Susan Cain disputes the popular notion of sociable people being the ideal, if not more successful and fulfilled. Instead, Cain says that introverts are not anti-social, but “differently sociable.”

To that extent, there are so many different ways to express the need to interact with friends and enjoy a social life on your own terms and budget.

Create Your Own Fun

A few years ago, the board game industry began encouraging game night to appeal to both parents and children. The reasoning being that it was a fun and inexpensive way for friends and families to interact and unwind.

While board game sales have dropped slightly in the past year, it is still a \$1.1 billion industry, according to David Riley of consumer market research firm NPD. So for all the word games being played online, there is still a real interest in the more classic diversions including spending time with friends and just playing a game.

Holly Jesperson of Darien, Connecticut, recently hosted two separate game nights for friends. Despite the fact that she loaded her apartment with games, not too many people actually ended up playing- because they were having too much fun talking and getting to know each other.

In Jesperson’s case, the social activity lead to socializing- but not much of the intended activity.

Publicist Liz Lapidus belongs to several targeted socializing groups. One group meets monthly with the intention being having a good time and being turned on to different experiences. She explains, “We set a date when twelve extremely busy women can be together and share what’s going on in their lives.”

Another group that Lapidus belongs to, is a gourmet club with very organized menus and themes. The members each prepare a dish and then gather to enjoy a multi-coursed meal with specialty cocktails.

When Lapidus's father passed away recently, she was comforted by the stream of friends from her gourmet club stopping by with dishes made just for her. "It wasn't the dishes as much as the meaning behind them."

If you don't know of an existing group that satisfies your need to socialize, consider starting your own. It doesn't have to start big either. Pick a theme, invite some friends and keep your expectations manageable. Consider a quirky theme like foods made in muffin tins.

No, really. *The Muffin Tin Cookbook* by Brette Sember (Adams) features recipes that are fun enough to spark both conversation and creativity.

Committed to Socializing

Todd Leopold, whose *real* job is with CNN.com, has a secondary and unofficial job hosting a live weekly trivia show at Manuel's Tavern in Atlanta. But it isn't only the trivia he's committed to, Leopold met his wife and some of his best friends at trivia night.

Leopold says that while it's "meant as a social activity, people take it seriously. The players are some of the smartest and toughest in the best possible way. And they don't suffer fools."

Sergeant Neil Gussman of the 2-104th GSAB Army Aviation is a self-described "thrill junkie" who enjoys flying Chinook helicopters and bicycle racing and keeps a spreadsheet of his frequently broken bones.

As he puts it, "In each of these I do things with other people that are difficult and sometimes dangerous—then talk about them afterward in the way that only people who have shared hardship and excitement can." It's the shared experience that makes it that much more fun.

There's no longer one right way to make, keep, or discard friends. With the proliferation of social networks, there are myriad new ways to keep friendships going or form your own micro social networks based on hobbies or shared passions. As Levine puts it, "Perhaps, the term "friend" has broadened as a result of technology."

I know that the hundreds of people I interact with on Facebook aren't all friends in the traditional sense. Levine says, "There may be an added layer of complexity but the basic rules of friendship entailing loyalty, reciprocity, intimacy and respect have not changed."

In days gone by, women socialized out of necessity at quilting bees which have evolved into the more modern *stitch and bitch* sessions popular with crafters.

So whether your book club has been being replaced by a bake club (like the Clandestine Cake Club so popular in the U.K.), there are always opportunities to make new friends at any age and any stage and even from the comfort of your computer.

Rachel Weingarten is very tempted to go to the adult spelling bee held at a local pub. She's a style expert, marketing strategist & personal branding consultant for CEOs, politicians and celebrities and the creator of MintStyle. She is the award-winning author of *Career and Corporate Cool* and *Hello Gorgeous! Beauty Products in America '40s-'60s*. Rachel writes for top media outlets including CNN, Fortune, Forbes Life, MSN, USA Today, Yahoo Finance and many others. She is a regularly featured expert on TV shows including Good Morning America and The Today Show. Visit her online at <http://racheletc.com> or on Twitter @rachelcw

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