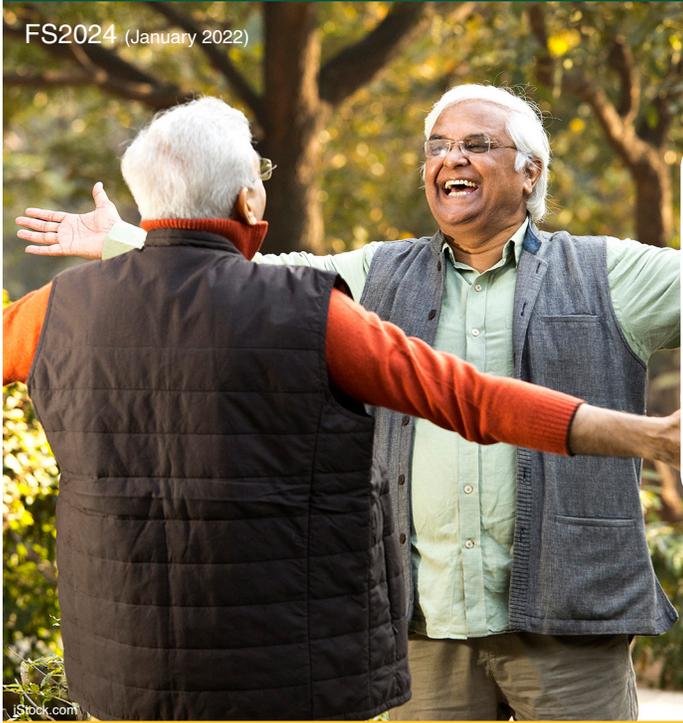


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Strengthening Late-life Family Connections

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Connections to Same-age Loved Ones

- **Our ability to interact with and connect to family members is central to quality of life and sense of belonging, especially for those individuals in the second half of life.**
- **Peer connections are increasingly important as people age and are vital to well-being.**
- **Peers refer to individuals around the same age as you. This includes spouses/partners, siblings, cousins and close friends.**

In late adulthood, social networks can include family relationships with friends, adult children, romantic partners or spouses, siblings, parents, grandchildren or extended family members such as cousins. Of these relationships, older adults are more frequently in contact with their peers — romantic partners, siblings or friends. With their peers, older adults are more likely to confide in them and share life stories, and are likely to engage in shared hobbies or leisure time. Due to sharing similar life experiences, peers often are able to relate to one another and discuss perspectives on a level that can be personally validating and rewarding. These significant relationships with peers impact how well individuals are able to age successfully.

Additionally, conflicts among same-age family relationships tend to decrease. This tendency for lower conflict may help foster greater bonds and connections.

The goal of this informational brochure is to provide background on the significance of three key same-age relationships in later life: siblings, romantic relationships and friendships. In addition, you will find strategies to help improve and maintain strong bonds with your same-age relationships in later adulthood.



Sibling Relationships

? Did you know that the sibling relationship is often the longest relationship we have in our lives?

Siblings share a lifetime of memories and tend to be permanently shaped by their shared childhood experiences.

Often, siblings tend to be similar in age, which allows them to relate to each other's experiences in a way that many other relationships cannot. Siblings similar in age were more likely to be raised in the same environment with similar influences.

Siblings may grow apart through time as they experience major life events such as marriage or becoming parents or grandparents. Despite this, the sibling relationship remains one of the most significant and valuable bonds in later life.

The strength of sibling ties depends on a variety of things such as personalities, age differences, the number of siblings and gender of siblings. For example, sisters tend to report the closest relationships.

Siblings who live in closer geographic proximity to one another tend to develop stronger bonds due to greater opportunities to spend good-quality time together. Even without living close in distance, siblings have other ways to maintain this important sibling bond, such as scheduling time to speak on the phone or planning vacations together.

Strategies to Foster Strong Sibling Bonds

- **Make time to connect by phone, texts, email, handwritten letters or in person.**
- **Stay connected through planning special moments and shared events (e.g., travel, family reunions, concerts).**
- **Be supportive and listen to them when they are confiding in you. Be available to provide advice and encouragement.**
- **Resolve previous disagreements and make amends through conversation.**
- **Reminisce about your parents and shared childhood memories.**
- **Stay involved with each other's families.**
- **Laugh together.**
- **Remember and honor special days together.**



Romantic Relationships: Spouse/Partner

Older romantic relationships are complex and have a strong influence on quality of life, health and well-being.

Romantic relationships vary, ranging from long-term or more recent, marriage or partnered cohabitation, heterosexual or same-sex relationships, remarriages or living apart together relationships. Late-life romantic relationships can be diverse and dynamic.

Empty nesting, retirement and the death of parents are significant life transitions that may occur during mid to late adulthood that can impact one's romantic relationship.

Research on long-term relationships suggests that some means to success are honesty, open communication, respect, positive attitudes and shared goals of companionship. Growing evidence indicates that late-life romantic relationships may be one of the happiest times for romance. Late-life romantic partners report similar levels of relationship satisfaction as young newlyweds. Older adults report fewer arguments and disagreements than younger couples, particularly due to understanding one another's values and mutual goals, which can include optimizing each other's emotional and physical well-being.

The number of social roles and outside demands often are reduced in later life as many older adults are retired, meaning older adults are free to choose how they want to spend their leisure time. Romantic relationships have proven to have a positive impact on one's physical and psychological well-being. Research suggests that a strong romantic relationship plays a role in improving older adults' health, and reducing their loneliness and reports of depression.

Strategies to Foster a Strong Spousal Bond

- **Prioritize communication and make time for intimate conversations.**
- **Express affection through touch and words.**
- **Show appreciation for your partner. An unexpected compliment brightens anyone's day.**
- **Make time for hobbies, both together and individually.**
- **Accept the strengths and weaknesses of your relationship. Continue to develop coping strategies for the ups and downs encountered throughout life.**
- **When challenges arise, focus on how you can work as a team to solve problems.**
- **Acknowledge the passage of time by acknowledging the changes you experience as you get older.**
- **Reminisce about the memories from your shared journey together.**



Friendship

Many older adults report that they have close friends who they consider to be just like family. Friendship is a relationship that can endure across the entire lifespan, serving a vital role for sustaining social connection in late life when other relationships may become unavailable. Sometimes friendships become so important and central to our lives that we consider them to be **Chosen Family**, which is a close relationship with someone who a person considers to be family but who doesn't have blood or legal family ties.

Chosen Family • a close relationship with someone a person considers to be family but does not share blood or legal family ties

Friendship is an integral part of social life and through the years has been shown to have important benefits to well-being for individuals of all ages. Studies consistently show that friend relationships are as important as family ties in predicting psychological well-being in adulthood and old age. In fact, people with a best friend may even live longer!

Connections with friends have the potential to improve one's physical and mental health. Having someone other than a family member who you can turn to as a confidant is a resource that can be relied upon throughout all stages of life, but most notably in late life. This is especially important because other relationships may have changed or be less available. Men and women benefit from having close friendships in late life.

Close friends can be an exceptional source of emotional support and are less likely to be stressful in nature as many family relationships can be. Seeking ways to maintain old friendships and foster new friendships in older adulthood has important and positive implications for successful aging.

Strategies to Foster Strong Friendship Bonds

- **Make time to connect over the phone, by text or email, or in person.**
- **Participate in shared interests together such as exercise, gardening, crafts or games.**
- **Be mutually supportive and listen to each other during times of stress. Friends are often the best confidants.**
- **Stay involved with each other's families.**
- **Laugh together and celebrate the fun moments in life.**
- **Plan special moments, events or trips.**
- **Be available for advice, emotional support and companionship.**



Your Own Reflections



Sibling Relationship:

Think back to a favorite memory you share with your sibling(s). Why do you think this is your favorite and most memorable?



Romantic:

What is the most important element to a successful romantic relationship in your opinion? Why do you think this is important to you?



Friendship:

Do you have any childhood friendships that are still strong today?

Resources

National Council on Family Relationships: www.ncfr.org/ncfr-report/focus/family-focus-aging

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Langer, L., and Love, M., (2019) The ties of later life: aging siblings, *Educational Gerontology*, 45(9), 573-576, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03601277.2019.1679400>

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Ace of Family Game

Who can play?

Anybody! This is a game to talk about family relationships that helps you explore your relationships with siblings, spouse or romantic partner, and close friends — those same-aged family relationships.

Number of participants needed:

Unlimited number
(minimum of two people)

What you will need:

- Standard deck of playing cards
- *Ace of Family* questions sheet

What relationship type each suit refers to:

♥ **Hearts** = romantic

♠ **Spades** = siblings

♦ **Diamonds** = friends

♣ **Clubs** = yourself



How to play:

1. Gather a group of family members or friends (at least two of you). **Note:** You don't have to be together in person to play. This game works just as well if you want to play over the phone, Skype, FaceTime, etc., as long as you explain the object of the game and someone has a set of playing cards.
2. Shuffle the deck of cards (including the two jokers) and set them in a pile facing down; have your *Ace of Family Questions Sheet* in front of you.
3. The youngest player goes first, following in order from youngest to oldest.
4. The first player draws the top card and places it face up for everyone to see.
5. Match the face-up card with the correct question next to the card pictured on the *Ace of Family Questions Sheet*.
6. Read the question aloud and the individual who drew the card answers the question to the best of the person's ability. Not all cards and categories may apply to you, so think about how the question can be revised to fit your situation.

Variation: Everyone can answer each question if you choose.

Winning:

This isn't a game of winning and losing; the object of the game is to get to know your family and friends better and share some special memories together. Maybe you found out that you enjoy the same memories as your siblings growing up. Whatever you learned, we hope that it was enjoyable. Challenge others and have fun.

Ace of Family Question Sheet

Print this sheet and use it when playing the game with your family.

A♥	Where would you like to travel with your romantic partner in the future and why?
2♥	What is a key element to a romantic relationship in your opinion?
3♥	Where is your current favorite place to go/visit with your romantic partner and why?
4♥	What was your first impression about your romantic partner when you met vs. how your impressions have changed?
5♥	What is your favorite memory with your romantic partner and why?
6♥	On a scale from 1 to 10, how similar are you and your partner's interests? Do you have interests you don't share?
7♥	How would you describe your romantic partner to someone else?
8♥	Which parent is your romantic partner more like?
9♥	What is your favorite day to spend with your romantic partner and why?
10♥	What do you hope never changes between you and your partner as you both grow older together?
J♥	Where would be your dream location to live with your romantic partner? (Close to family, in a tropical location, suburb/rural?)
Q♥	How do you and your partner best get through difficult situations together (arguments, loss of a loved one, dilemmas, etc.)?
K♥	What does a successful romantic relationship look like to you?
Jokers	If you draw a joker, congrats! Ask the group any one question you would like to know about them.

A♠	What is the first memory you have of your sibling(s) when you think about your teenage years?
2♠	Do you ever argue with your siblings? If so, about what?
3♠	Name a favorite quality of each of your sibling(s). Why is this your favorite?
4♠	Do you hope to continue/improve your relationship with your sibling(s) in the future?
5♠	How far do you live from your siblings? How do you stay connected to them when they are farther away?
6♠	What is one thing that has changed about your sibling relationship as you've grown older?
7♠	Name something you have in common with one of your siblings. Name one thing that makes you different.
8♠	What did you do for fun when you were growing up with your siblings?
9♠	What is something that you find the most annoying about your siblings?
10♠	Are you closer to one of your siblings? Why is that?
J♠	Name a favorite memory of your siblings when you were young children, teens or young adults.
Q♠	Do you and your siblings have nicknames for each other? If yes, what are they?
K♠	Are you closer to your sibling(s) now or when you were younger?
Jokers	If you draw a joker, congrats! Ask the group any one question you would like to know about them.

A ♦	If you had to be trapped on an island with one of your friends, who would you pick and why?
2 ♦	Do you have any childhood friendships that are still strong today?
3 ♦	If you could go on a vacation with your friends in the future, where would you like to go?
4 ♦	Do you consider any (or all) of your friends to be fictive kin (like family)?
5 ♦	List three qualities that you find important to have in your friendships.
6 ♦	Do you have any long-distance friendships? How far?
7 ♦	Are you close friends with anyone you knew in elementary school?
8 ♦	What would be the perfect day with your best friend?
9 ♦	Are your friends someone you talk to or see every day?
10 ♦	Would you rather spend time doing things with your friends(s) at home or out on excursions with them?
J ♦	Which movie or characters best describe one of your friendships? (Woody and Buzz Lightyear from “Toy Story”)
Q ♦	Do you feel that your friends are supportive of your decisions or do you feel that they persuade you to choose to do things differently?
K ♦	What is something that you and your friends could give a 30-minute presentation on without any preparation?
Jokers	If you draw a joker, congrats! Ask the group any one question you would like to know about them.

A ♣	What is your all-time favorite family memory that makes you smile every time you think about it?
2 ♣	Would you rather be able to see one year into your future or be able to go back one year into your past at any time. Why?
3 ♣	How do you define family in your own words?
4 ♣	What are two things that you look forward to or make you happy when you think about your family?
5 ♣	What is one thing in your life (good or bad) that has helped shape you to be the person you are today?
6 ♣	If you could travel anywhere in the world, where would it be?
7 ♣	If you won the lottery, what would you do with that money?
8 ♣	If you had the chance when you were younger, would you have wanted to know who your romantic partner would be in the future?
9 ♣	What would be your perfect vacation? Would you prefer to travel by car, plane, train or other transportation?
10 ♣	What is your biggest fear about? Why?
J ♣	Which hero or role model has been the most influential to you and has helped shape you to be who you are today?
Q ♣	Would you rather go back to when you were 5 years old with everything you know now or now know everything that your future self will learn?
K ♣	What does love mean to you?
Jokers	If you draw a joker, congrats! Ask the group any one question you would like to know about them.

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