

## OFF CAMPUS

# Why friendships feel different in adulthood

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When I used to imagine friendships in adulthood, it was either a scene from *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* or somewhere like Central Perk in *Friends*—where my friends and I would be huddled together with oversized coffee mugs and embarrassing boy stories. Apartments would be next door, plans would be impromptu, and friendships would feel like everyday sleepovers.

Freedom arrives, but with a cost: a shift in what friendships begin to mean. Some fizzle out without any formal goodbyes, while others are faces you never see again after graduation. Even deep, meaningful ones turn into missed calls you keep meaning to return. Connections that used to be separated by classrooms and neighbourhoods are now scattered across cities and continents, and what was once so spontaneous now requires intention to maintain.

For some, the dedication to stay in touch becomes the only thing holding people together. This was something Imraina Alam, a master's student at the University of Maryland, reflected on. When she moved to the US, months and years would pass without speaking to her friends in Bangladesh thanks to time differences, but their effort to check in regularly kept them close.

Adulthood is marked by many transitions in life, moving from school to university and from university to the workplace, and each milestone introduces a new understanding of human behaviour. In childhood, we look for people who mirror our likes and dislikes. As adults, the goal isn't finding affinity or chemistry. Some friendships are rooted in daily routine and shared cubicles, others in convenience.

In a conversation with someone well into her professional life, I questioned why she maintained friendships that didn't seem naturally compatible. She explained that in school, socialising is often confined to closed circles where differences rarely expand one's worldview. Adulthood changed that. It pushed her to become more open to people she might not have naturally chosen earlier in life.

That conversation made me notice how differently people approach friendships once structure disappears. I was reminded of some Facebook posts I've seen, especially during festive seasons. They began with a polite introduction and a search for friends to hang out with. Some mention their shyness, while others admit they have struggled to find friends and have turned to social media as a way of making connections.

One of the authors behind these posts shared their sentiment about missing the feeling of being part of a group during festive seasons. She mentioned that she forgot how it felt to meet people from different backgrounds and values.

The longing for company never really disappears, whether you're a doe-eyed kindergartner or a blazer-clad corporate employee. However, people often seem to forget to look past the performative layer of social media and the way it adds a lens to our perception of people. Scrolling through carefully curated stories of group outings and celebrations create the illusion that everyone has found their people. The visibility of connection does not reflect its depth. It should make us reflect: are we appreciating meaningful bonds or chasing surface-level connections?

I have a friend complaining endlessly about her friends, yet her Instagram feed tells a different story. It reveals the truth about how we present our relationships—not always as they are, but as we want them to be seen. There is a certain comfort in belonging in something that's visible and validating, even when the reality behind it is more complicated.

There's nothing inherently wrong with wanting a sense of safety, but it doesn't always lead to fulfilling

relationships. Across different stages in life, one experience remains universal: the ability to enjoy one's own company. No matter how much we run away from solitude, it catches up at some point in time. Whether you were a social butterfly in school or a wallflower blending into the background, there often comes a time in life when being alone is unavoidable.

Learning to sit with solitude is a skill that takes time and patience to develop, yet it can be deeply rewarding for those who manage it. Without it, we risk falling into the cycles of comparison and performance rather than recognising that most relationships arrive when the time is right and there's no linear path to them.

In the end, friendships in adulthood rarely resemble the ones we once imagined, but that doesn't make them any less real. They become less about constant presence and more about connections that don't need constant reassurance. Some connections fade, others stretch, and a few evolve in ways that are harder to define but still meaningful in their own right.

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