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Can Men Make Friends After 50? Yes – Here's How

Loneliness can have a dire impact on men's health and well-being



By Matt Alderton, AARP

EN ESPAÑOL | March 14, 2023

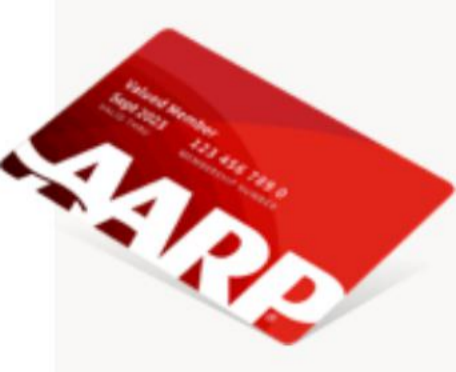
American men are suffering through a friendship drought that is making life a lot more lonely.

But it doesn't have to stay that way. After age 50 it might feel challenging to make connections, but the right sentiments and strategies can help men unlock [new friendships](#) and deepen those



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It often just takes practice. Todd Adams, 50, of Elmhurst, Ill., has been making male friendships a priority for 20 years – ever since he realized a decade into their friendships that he didn't know much that was personal about his college buddies. Back then, Adams decided he wanted deeper friendships and launched a men's group in his living room about connecting in ways that didn't focus on sports or alcohol. Now known as [MenLiving](#), the group hosts approximately 400 virtual and in-person gatherings a year for a growing community of some 1,600 men.



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"There is a desperate need for friendships for men of all ages, but more specifically for men who are retired," Adams says. "I've heard from so many men that when their 'identity' of being an income producer goes away, so does their value of themselves. That can feel very isolating and lonely."

Male friendships wane after retirement

American men are suffering from a "[friendship recession](#)," according to the American Enterprise Institute's Survey Center on American Life. The survey found that the percentage of men with at least six close friends fell by half in the last 30 years, from 55 percent in 1990 to 27 percent in 2021. In the same period, the percentage of men with no close friends at all jumped fivefold, from 3 percent to 15 percent.

Even the most social men are struggling, according to the survey. Asked to reflect on their most recent social interactions, only 30 percent of men said they'd had a private conversation with a friend during which they shared personal feelings, and just 21 percent said they'd received emotional support from a friend.

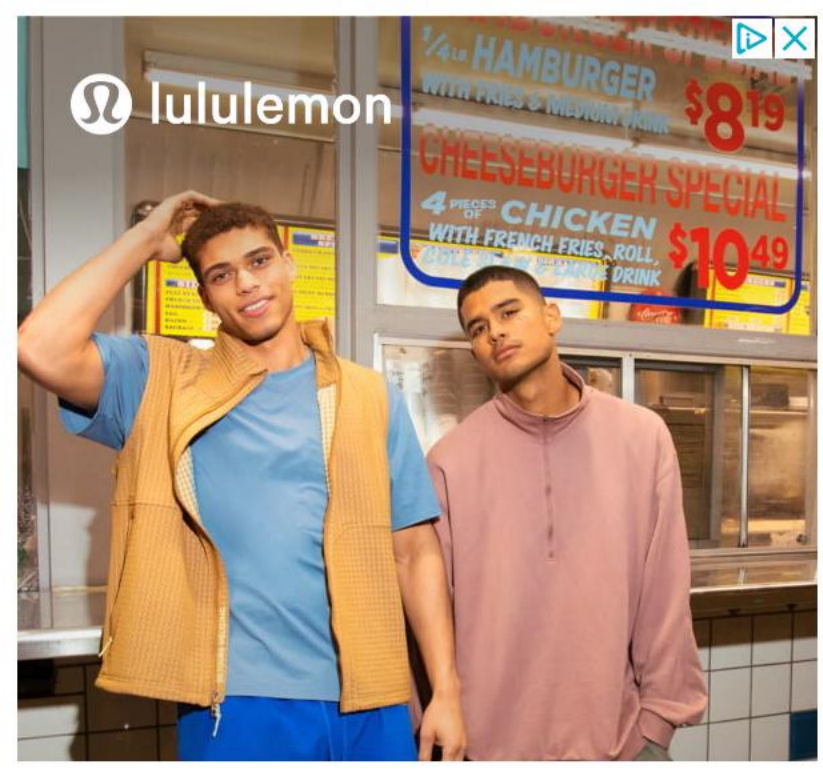
There's a lot to lose in lacking friends, and a lot to gain from having them, says clinical psychologist Marc Schulz, associate director of the Harvard Study of Adult Development. Established in 1938, the study has spent 84 years following the lives of more than 700 men as they age to determine the biological and social determinants of happiness.

"On days when people spent more time with others, including friends and acquaintances, they were happier," says Schulz, coauthor of *The Good Life: Lessons from the World's Longest Scientific Study of Happiness*.

Happiness – or lack of it – impacts physical health too. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), [social isolation](#) significantly increases a person's risk of premature death and is associated with increased risks of dementia, heart disease, [stroke](#) and depression. It can even be deadly. Men aged 50 and older account for over one-third of all deaths by suicide, and men aged 75 and older have a higher rate of suicide than any other age or gender group, according to the CDC.



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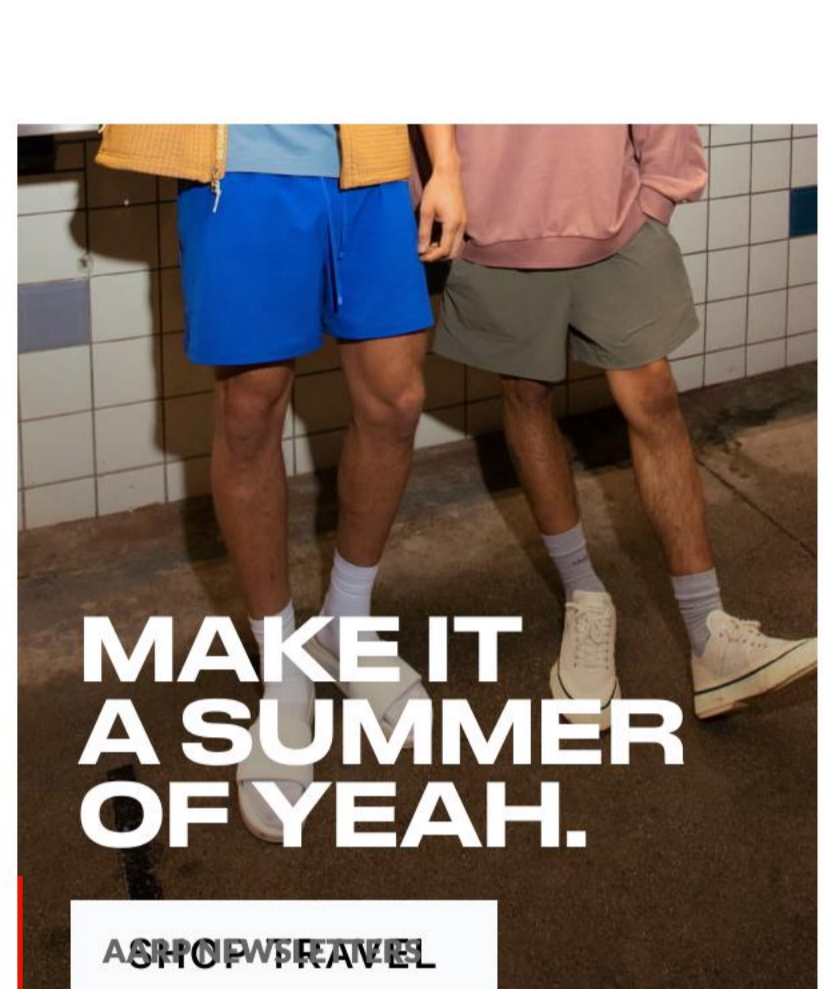
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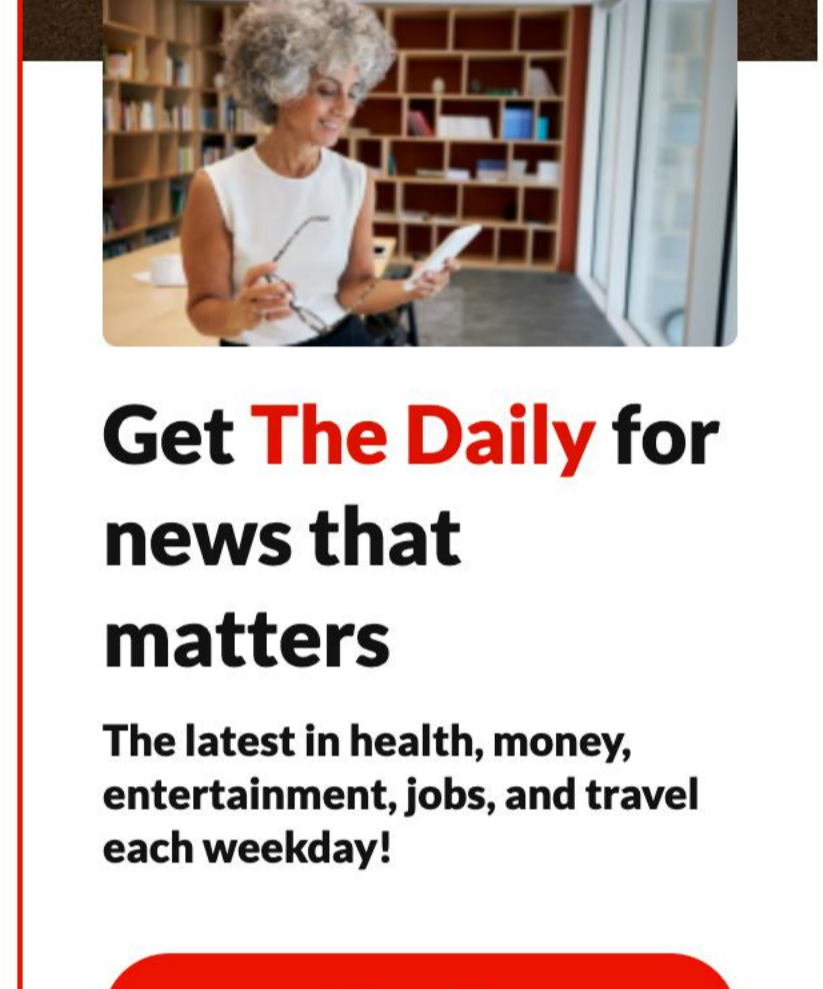
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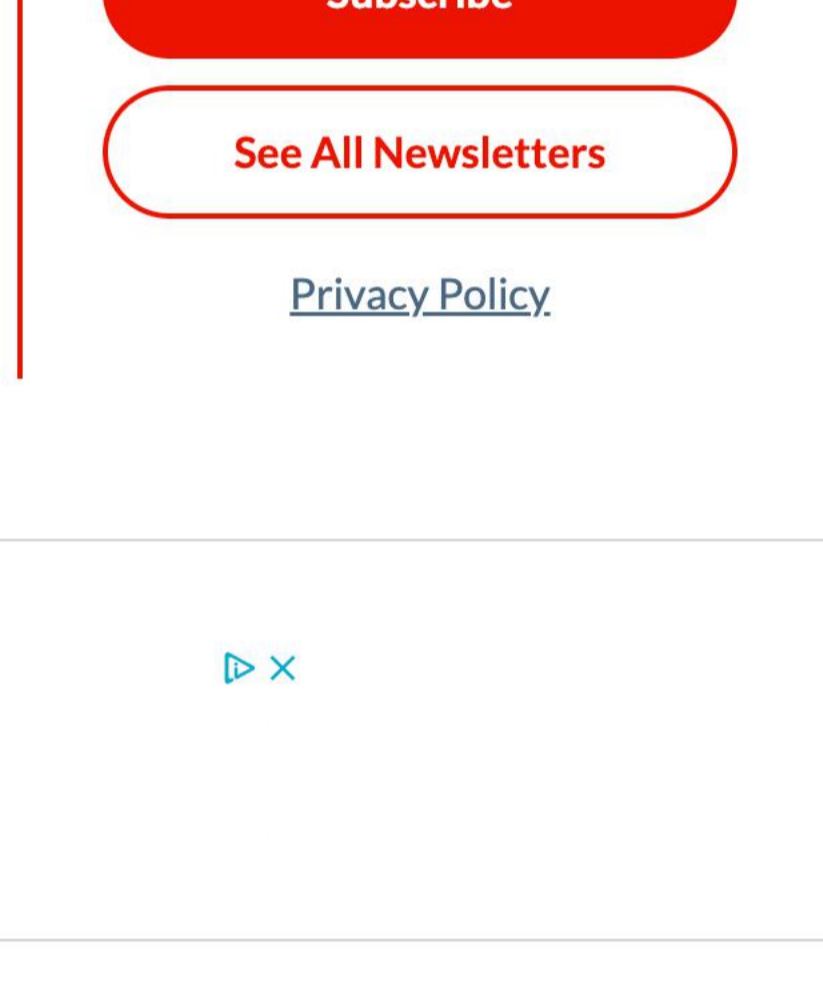
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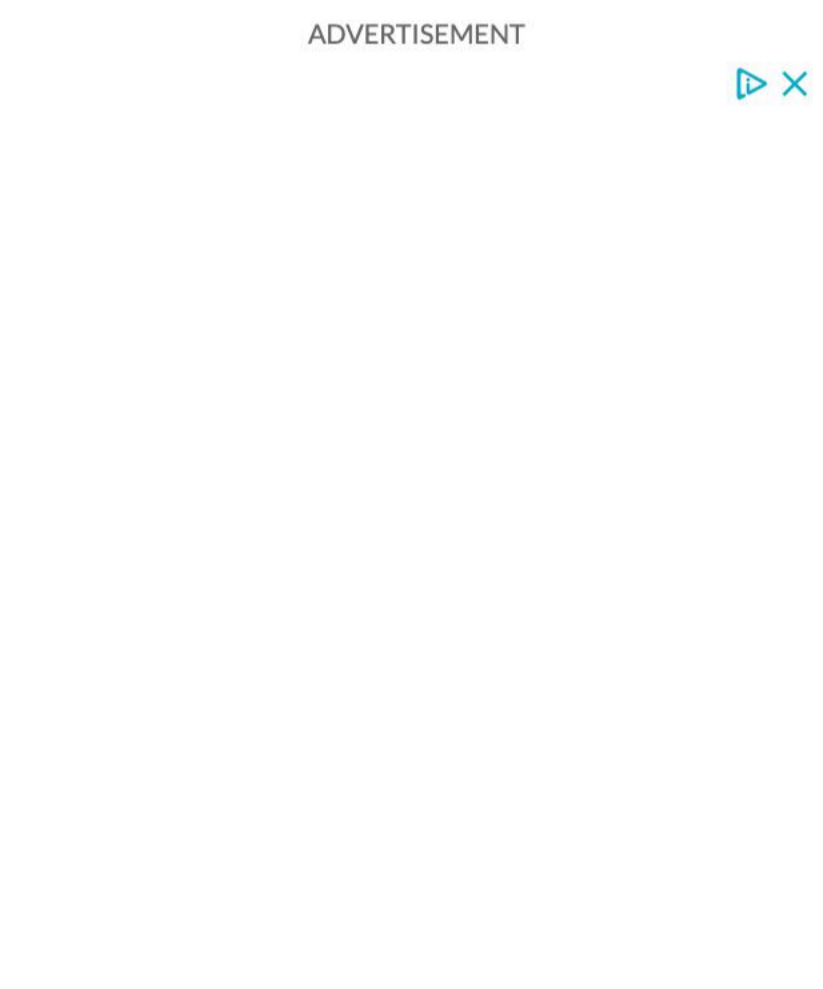
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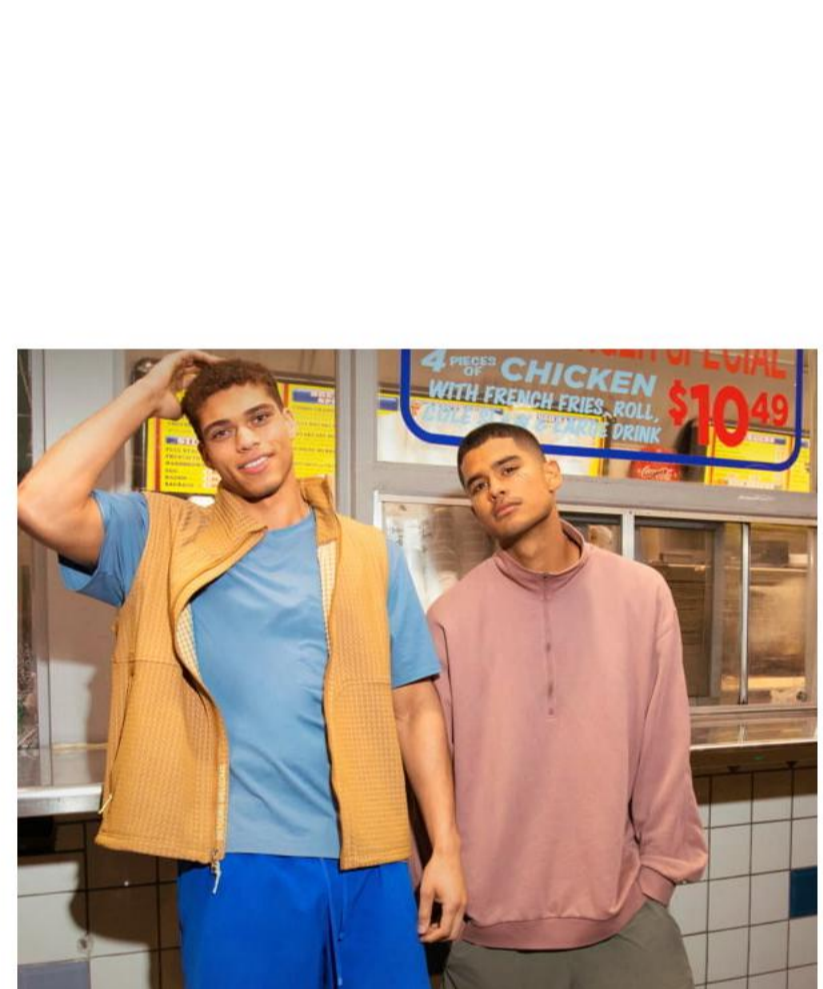
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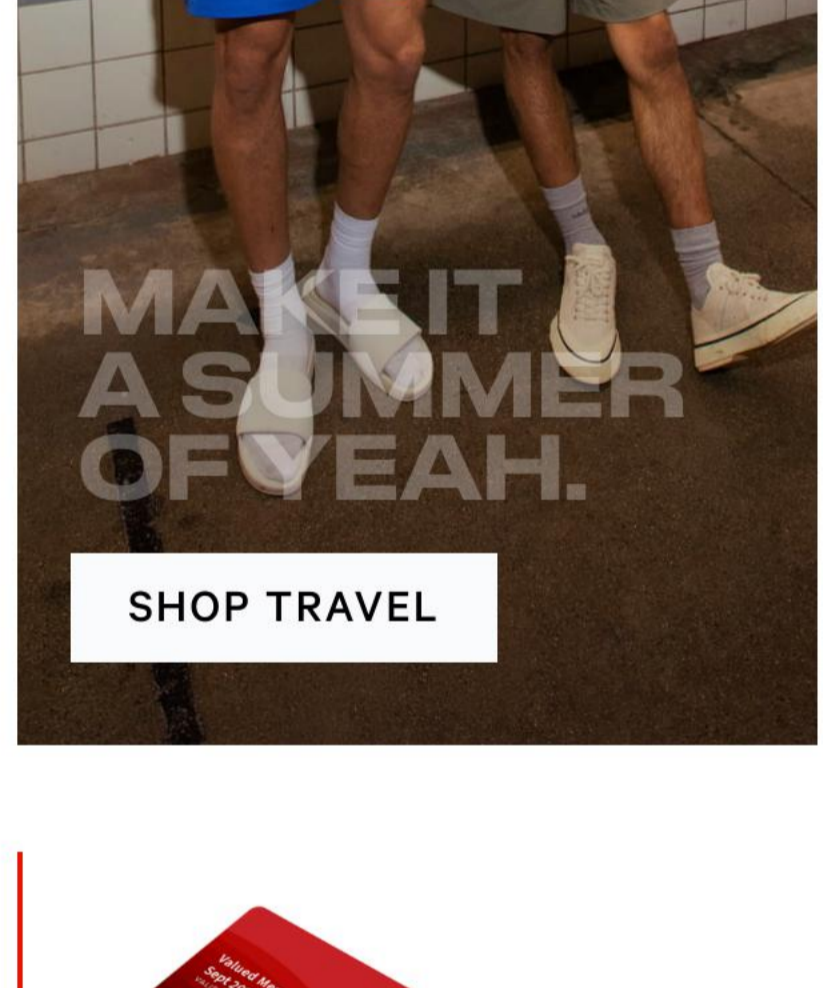
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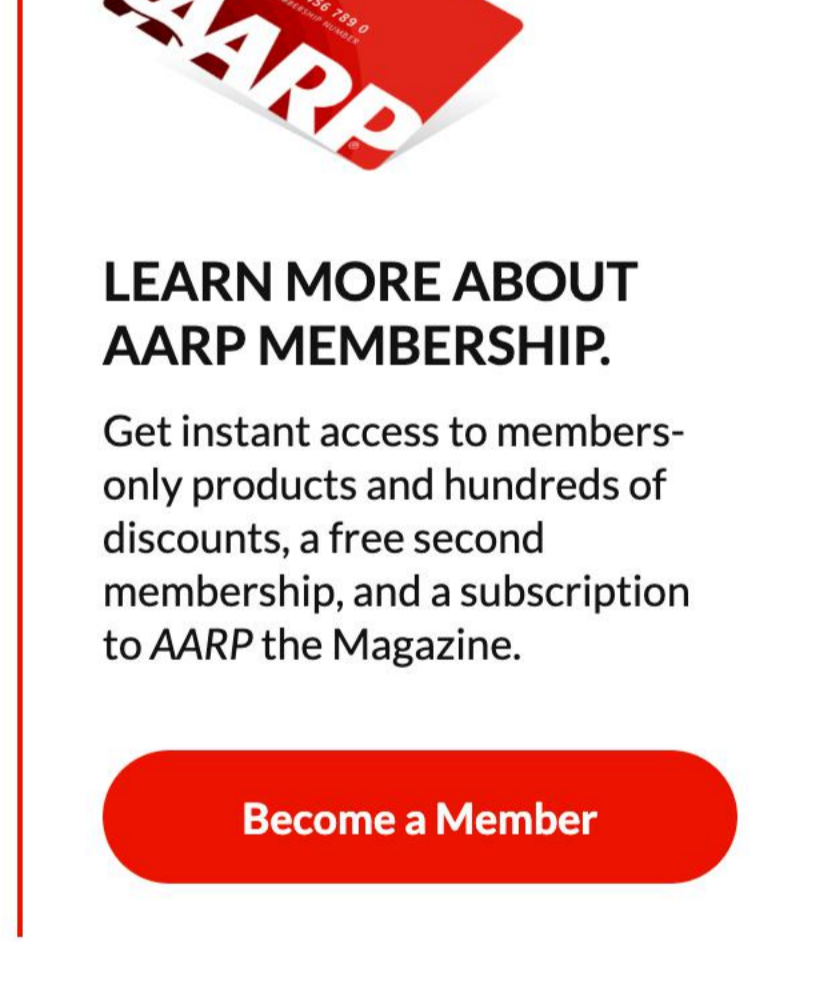
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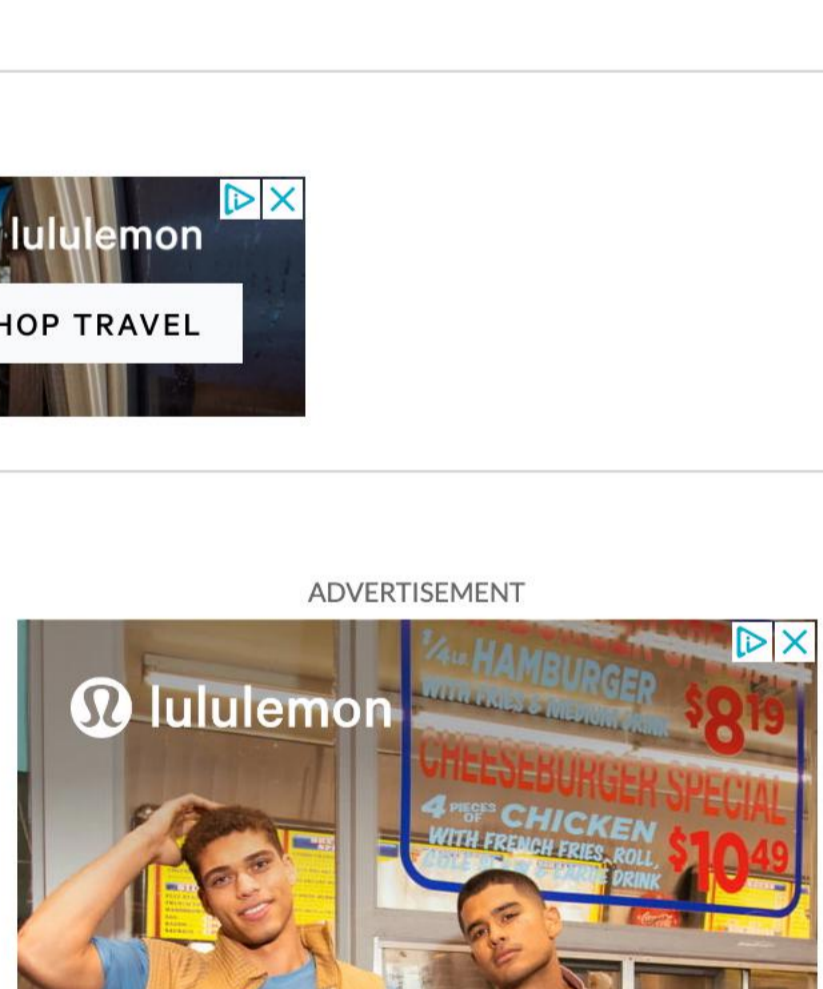
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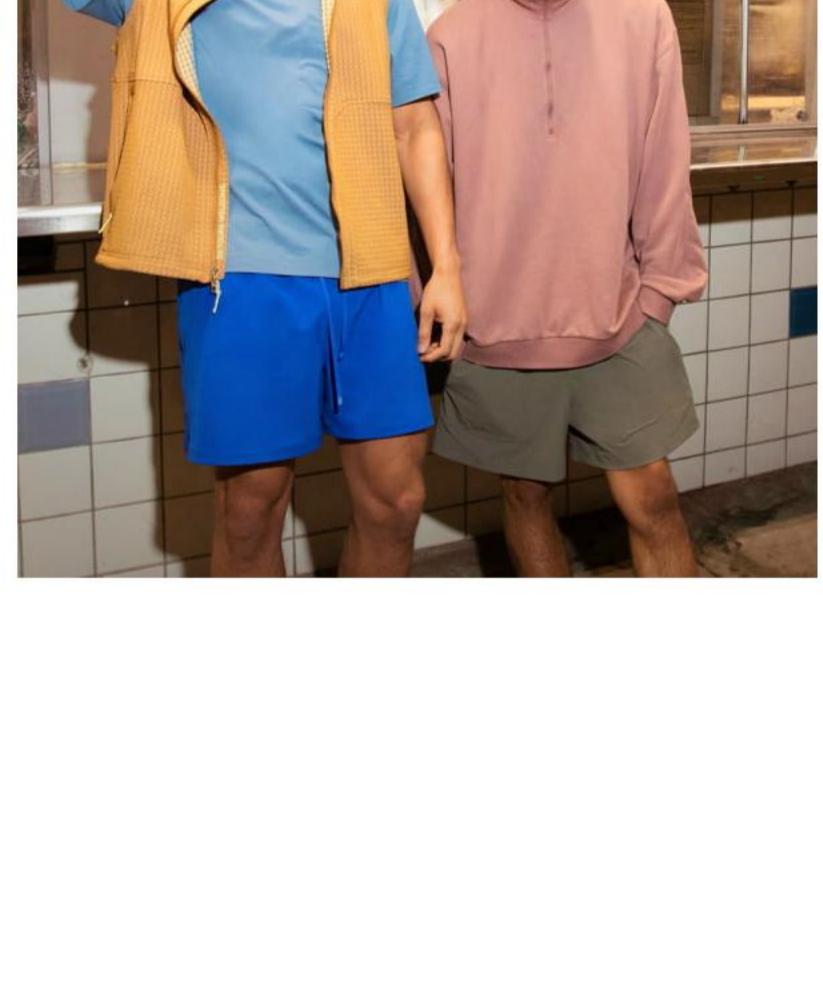
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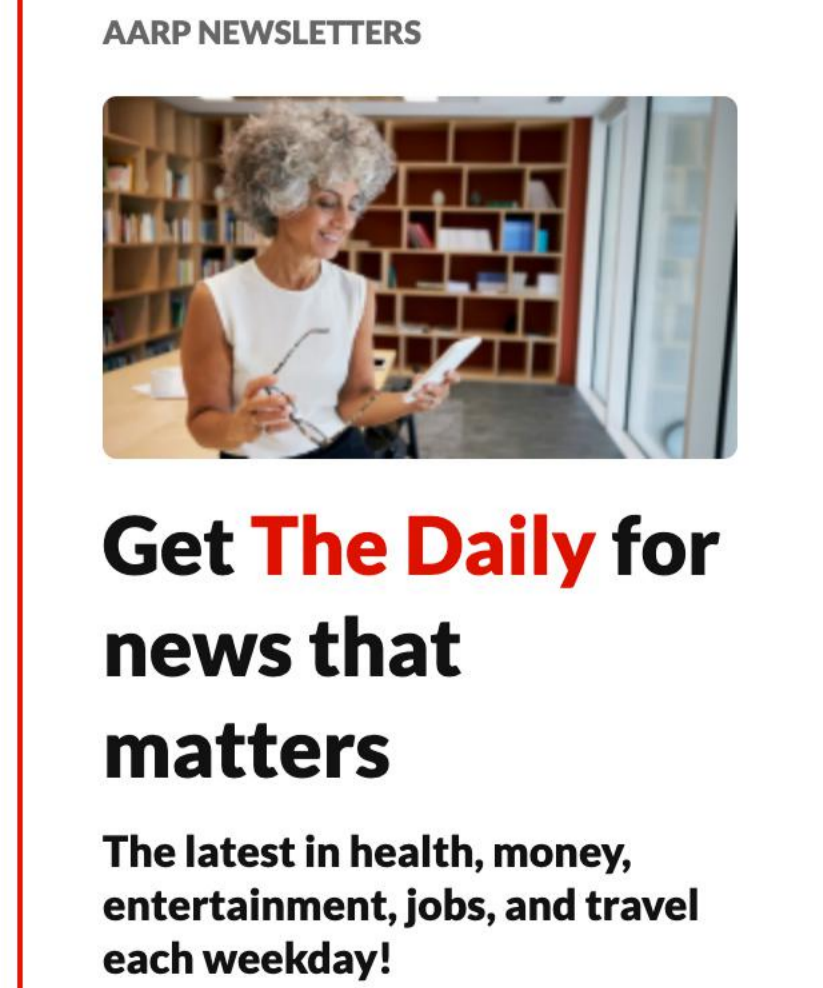
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Notions of traditional masculinity get in the way

So why do men seem to struggle when it comes to friendship? The way society defines gender is at the root, says psychiatrist and family therapist Robert Garfield, M.D., author of *Breaking the Male Code: Unlocking the Power of Friendship* and a board member at The Men's Center for Growth & Change in Philadelphia.

"It has been built into our culture that women are the reachers-outers and men are the soloists," Garfield says. "Men provide and protect, but we don't connect."

Schulz has observed that dynamic in heterosexual married men. "The men in our study...were of a generation in which they gave a lot of the social organizing to their wives," he says. "If they were left to their own devices, they didn't make those connections."

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Men who are single – never married, divorced or widowed – may fare even worse because they lack even those spouse-arranged connections, notes Kristal DeSantis, a licensed marriage and family therapist and author of *Strong: A Relationship Field Guide for the Modern Man*. Regardless of relationship status, she says older men are particularly vulnerable to isolation after retirement.

"When you don't have [work](#) to go to – if you don't have meetings with colleagues, or if you're not networking at conferences – even those touchpoints disappear," DeSantis says.

Exacerbating men's challenges even further are traditional notions of masculinity. "One of the tropes of masculinity is the projection of competence and confidence, and the denial that help is needed," DeSantis continues. "That's the exact opposite of what it requires to have friendships."

Social scientists describe masculine stereotypes as a "man box." "We're not allowed to be afraid or sad or joyful because there's no social capital around those emotions," Adams says. "But those are the emotions we need to be able to express in order to have friendships."

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Exercise your friendship muscle

In spite of all this, older men can establish close friendships. The secret is intentionality, Adams says: "Friends don't just fall into your lap."

Intentionality starts with initiation – taking that first small step to reach out.

"A lot of us have it in our heads that people have their own lives and don't want to be bothered. But all you have to do is open the door," DeSantis says. "When you do that, often you'll find out that other people are in the same boat as you."

She suggests arming yourself with conversation starters about books, podcasts or other interests. Then ask someone to have lunch, take a walk or meet for coffee.

Doing that takes skills [that must be practiced](#) and sharpened, according to Schulz, who likens social fitness to physical fitness. "If you don't exercise those muscles, your relationships can wither," he says.

To help new friendships blossom, Schulz suggests scheduling regular friend dates. "Instead of saying, 'Let's get together sometime,' one of the things I've been doing is taking out my calendar and saying, 'I'm free on this date; let's do it,'" he says. "Seizing the moment is important."

There are also lots of ways to put yourself in spaces where friendships can easily grow: Join a men's group, [volunteer](#), become a mentor or start or join a club – for example, a book club, movie club, poker club, gardening club or [pickleball league](#). Some communities even offer "[men's sheds](#)" where older men can work alongside each other on projects like building furniture or restoring antiques.

Having a hard time taking the first step? Instead of fixating on what you have to lose if you're rejected, focus on what you have to gain if you're accepted. And remember that developing strong connections sometimes means being vulnerable and authentic.

"There's evidence that as people go from middle life to late life, they grow happier, which defies our expectations for the elderly because of all the challenges they face," Schulz says. "It's because people accumulate a kind of emotional wisdom as they age, and part of that emotional wisdom is doubling down on the relationships that give us joy and connection."

Matt Alderton is a contributing writer who specializes in health and wellness, travel and technology. His work has also appeared in USA Today, Forbes and The Washington Post.

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