

Overcoming Shyness and Making Friends

Coming to university is an exciting part of life and it can be a great chance to make some life-long friends. For those of us who are shy, however, making friends can seem difficult and stressful. Below are some quick and easy strategies to help you overcome your shyness and connect with others.

Make friends with your shyness

The first thing to realize is that it's ok to be shy. Lots of people are shy around new people. While you may envy those who can walk into a room and look supremely confident, the fact that you take a while to feel comfortable is not a deficiency or a weakness. If anything, it's something that your future friends will understand and even appreciate about you.

Be upfront about your shyness

You may remember people telling you to 'just be yourself'. Well it turns out that there's wisdom in this advice! If you're feeling shy or uncomfortable in a social situation, then you can simply say 'I'm sorry, I'm a bit shy around new people'. You'll be surprised at how many people relate to this feeling and how many people will go out of their way to then include you and put you at your ease. Remember, if someone is going to be your friend, they need to know you, and giving them this information is a part of this process. Letting them help you to be at ease is also part of being social. As people see your confidence grow, they will give you more space to be yourself when around them.

Face rejection

One of the hardest things to do when you're shy is to reach out to someone or to a group of people. Often we're afraid that others will not want to talk to us, or may not want to be our friend. Remember, if you live to avoid rejection then you will never give yourself the chance to be accepted. It's hard to face your fears, but it's harder still to live a life that's governed by them.

Think realistically

What happens if someone doesn't want to be your friend? It can happen. But it's not life-ending. If someone is not interested in being your friend then it's ok. It doesn't mean that no one else will. Finding your group of friends can be a process and often it can take a while to find those you click with. Understand that it's a process and that it may take a while - don't assume that if you don't make good friends within the first six weeks or six months of university that it will never happen.

Be aware of suitable times to approach people

If you're going to approach someone, try doing it at a time that is likely to suit them. For instance, if they're walking quickly to get to another appointment or lecture, it's likely that they won't want to stop for a long chat. This may seem like common sense, but often when we are shy, it leads us to overly focus on our own anxiety and neglect salient information that's available to us about the other person. Remember that at the start of each trimester, other people are often looking for friends at these transition times and so this may be the right time to try and connect with new people.

Be aware of body language

How you present yourself sends a lot of information to others, so you need to make sure that you are aware of what you're communicating. If your body language is "closed" (e.g. arms folded across your chest, head held low, no eye contact) then the message is that you are also closed to new encounters and people should not approach. If you have "open" body language (e.g. some eye contact, smiling, upright but not stiff posture, arms by your sides), then you will appear more open to being approached and the more likely it is that someone will strike up a conversation with you.

Generate opportunities

To make friends you need to give yourself the chance to do so. Friends won't just appear one day under your bed like dirty laundry. When you receive invitations, you should try and always accept them, even if you're nervous about going or are unfamiliar with the activity in question. It may be that parties make you anxious, you may not want to be in a study group, and you may not like movies featuring animated cats. But the point is that a lot of other shy people say yes to going to parties and study groups and movies featuring animated cats because they, like you, want to make friends. Remember it's not about the activity, but about the chance to meet and get to know other people. Once you know people, you can suggest to them activities that you are interested in. If you do need to decline an invitation, try and do it in a way that lets the other person know that you were pleased to be asked and would like to be asked again.

Work out why you're shy

Sometimes people say that there's no identifiable reason as to why they're shy and that they were just born that way. Often however, shyness is created or worsened by experiencing unpleasant social experiences, such as bullying. If this is true for you, then it's important to remember that bullying occurs for many reasons and often has little to do with the individual being bullied or their personality. Often the victims of bullies are innocent parties picked at random who function as a means of cohering members of the in-crowd or to promote the self-esteem of the bully. These experiences are mostly specific to context (such as one's primary or senior school) or to stages of development and the relative immaturity of the bully. Remind yourself of these facts and try and see that there may be little reason for you to continue to be nervous in social situations.

How to approach someone

If you're shy, walking up to someone and starting a conversation can feel like facing a firing squad. It's good to remember that most social interactions follow similar "rules", especially at the start. Begin by introducing yourself, maybe comment about something relevant to the moment to "break the ice" (eg music, weather, a lecture, food, news, traffic, etc) and then go on to share information or ask questions, preferably about things you think you may have in common, such as courses you're both enrolled in, or interests that you may share. You'll be surprised at how quickly the conversation will begin to flow. Always remember, the responsibility to have a successful social interaction is only ever 50% yours – so if it does go badly then it's on them as much as you. Approaching unfamiliar people takes practice and it's a skill that will get better the more you do it.

Be careful of over-using alcohol

Alcohol is frequently consumed at informal university social activities. Often alcohol can help you to feel instantly more confident and can drastically lessen your inhibitions. The danger in this however is that these feelings may encourage you to drink too much and this may lead you to feel self-conscious about your behaviour the next day. For shy people, these feelings of self-consciousness can exacerbate future stress in upcoming social interactions. Drinking can also prevent people from getting to know the real you and can mask your personality. This can be a barrier to making long-term friends. Information to help you make an informed choice about drinking is available [here](#).

Whom to approach

Remember that most people want friends. When you're new in a situation, it stands to reason that the people who may want friends the most are those who don't already have them. Seeking out people who are alone or with one or two others can be a good strategy as it may be that they are most receptive to making a new friend.

Connecting with others online

For those who are studying online, it can feel much harder to make friends at university. Despite this, there are several strategies that you can try to help you connect with others. It may be worth posting a message to the moodle chat forums asking if there are any students who live in your area who may be interested in forming a study group.

Pay attention at the start of trimester when people introduce themselves on the discussion forums and make sure you introduce yourself as well. If you identify something that you may have in common with someone, then you can respond to their post. This can develop into an ongoing conversation and may lead to you swapping private email addresses and telephone numbers. It may also mean that if you have an intensive school, then you already have a context and rapport when you do come to meet face to face. As with other situations, the more proactive you can be in contacting others, then the more chance you have of connecting with someone and making a friend.

Living arrangements

Depending on your situation, it may be possible to increase your social network by changing your living arrangements. University colleges have a reputation for fostering life-long friendships. UNE has several options for college accommodation. More information about this can be found [here](#). Alternatively, living in a share house can also be a good opportunity to get to know other students. To find details of share house accommodation, look for signs pinned up on campus or in cafes near where students typically live or simply mention to people who you meet that you may be looking for a room. Or go to [UNE Life’s accommodation page](#).

Navigating cultural differences

If you’re new to living in Australia, it can make you feel very different to those around you and you may perceive these differences as a significant barrier to making friends outside of your culture. It can help to remember that for all our differences, humans are actually quite similar. We all sleep, eat, love and laugh. If you look to see the similarities rather than the differences then you may be pleasantly surprised. To better understand Australian culture, consider opening up a conversation about it with a local student. It’s likely that the person who you discuss it with will also be interested in exploring the differences between your cultures and may be able to give you some clues on cultural practices and how to better adapt to these, while still being mindful of your cultural heritage. In this conversation, you should each endeavour to be respectful and non-judgmental of each other’s culture. Often there are organized clubs or informal groups of students who may be from your cultural or religious background. These can be good to join or even set up - as your shared background and experience is likely to help you to feel immediately included and understood.

Places to connect

It can help to make friends when you have a shared context or are engaged in a shared activity. Joining a club or a society can help to mitigate your feelings of shyness because it instantly gives you an interest that you have in common with other members. It can also help as when you are engaged in an activity it can lessen the pressure of having to make conversation until you are feeling more comfortable. Volunteering can also be a good way to make friends, as these organisations are often particularly keen for new members and are likely to be especially welcoming. A part time job while you are studying can also provide an avenue of social contact. Consider applying for positions in which there may be other employees who are likely to be of a similar age or situation to you. UNE has various clubs and societies that may appeal to you. Information on what’s available can be found [here](#).

Shyness versus anxiety

If you feel that your shyness is having a detrimental impact on your life, then it may be worth seeking out professional help. Serious shyness can potentially indicate the presence of an anxiety disorder. If you are experiencing shyness or issues with anxiety in social situations, then consider contacting a counsellor or psychologist, who will be able to work with you to help you overcome your issues. As a currently enrolled UNE student, you are eligible for free counselling sessions with UNE Student Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS). These sessions can be either in person or over the telephone or via Zoom.

To arrange an appointment please call 02 6773 2897.