

Script – Print – Why male friendships matter

Whenever Paul Engelman's wife left the house to join friends at their monthly book club gathering, the Rockford resident found himself looking for something to do. With all their children grown and out of the house, he could watch a sporting event or knock out some items from his honey-do list. But what he really was looking for was a social outlet of his own.

Over the years, Engelman has had plenty of male friends. Guys he grew up with, attended school with or served with in the military. But now in his 60s, he has few friends he would consider close knit.

"There wasn't anybody I thought of if I needed to call somebody for some help," says Engelman, who works as a defense contractor. "If I'm in a pinch, who would I call around here? The list was short. So, the No Book Book Club (NBBC) was born."

For the past four years, members of the NBBC meet on a regular basis, much like their wives do with their book club. Anywhere from five to 10 guys get together to simply hang out. It might be at Engelman's house to watch a football game, or a visit to a neighborhood establishment for trivia night. Some of the members have even joined an indoor golf league. The only thing the group doesn't do is read books.

"I put out the call to put together the No Book Book Club, and the response was energetic," Engelman says. "There are guys who are in our age group, are late in their work life, or retired, have children out of the house, or who have a gap when it comes to male friends."

Engelman isn't alone in that sense. According to a [survey](#) by the Survey Center on American Life, fewer than half of the men responding are happy with their friendships. Only about one in five said they had received emotional support from a friend in the last week, compared with four in 10 women.

In 2021, 15% of U.S. men admitted to having no close friends, which was five times more than 1990. And men with six or more good friends dropped from 55% to 27% during that same period.

Forming a bond

Male friendships are important for many reasons, according to experts. Friendships foster bonding, connection, support and even validation. Friendships give men not only social outlets, but opportunities to bond over things that consume our lives, such as family, health, work and financial issues.

Travis Swink, DO, is a primary care provider for OSF HealthCare. He talks about the need for relationships with many of his male patients.

"You have to have some outlet outside of your family that you connect with, because connection is very important," says Dr. Swink. "Where I see the most depression and the most issues are with people who isolate. Finding some outside source of entertainment and activity is important."

Victor Mendoza is a behavioral health provider with OSF HealthCare. He says friendships usually call for some emotional vulnerability which may make some men uncomfortable.

"I think one of the barriers that men have is that we have a hard time opening up, because that has been seen as a weakness," says Mendoza. "That affects them from communicating with other men about their feelings, and what they have going on. That just creates more isolation, which leads to depression or anxiety."

Mendoza says male friends often connect over real life situations. It could be marital problems or work-life balance issues. How much you want to unload on your male friends is up to you. Mendoza adds that you could save your problems for another day and simply decide to catch a baseball game and enjoy a hot dog and your favorite beverage.

"Not every single interaction that you have has to be deep," Mendoza says. "It could also be spending time with other people and having a good time."

Where to start

Mendoza says there's nothing wrong with hanging out with a male sibling or cousin. But if you're seeking friendship outside of your family circle, he recommends connecting with community resources such as church, fitness centers or other social gathering places.

"Having a good support system can help with your self-esteem," Mendoza says. "It could help with your productivity at work, at home. You know, being a better father, a better husband or a better partner. You feel happier and just enjoy life better, in general."

Engelman says forming his men's group has been extremely rewarding. He adds that the camaraderie he gets from his male friends provides the balance he was looking for in life.

While members have come and gone, including one who died from cancer, the men have become closer on an individual basis. Engelman is always looking for new members who he thinks might 'vibe' with the rest of the group.

"I've found in talking about the No Book Book Club that everyone I've talked to has said, 'That's a great idea.' So, we're going to continue and keep going."