

# Youth and friendship in a brave new social world

As we get older, friends become harder to make and keep, while notions of costs and benefits increasingly pervade social relationships in our lives.



**Ng Chia Wee**

When I was a child, I could not wait to grow up – to live the life I often daydreamed about and to build a future I could call my own.

But what I had failed to consider – and what no adult had ever really told me – was just how much I would have to leave behind.

As we move further into our 20s, my peers and I are seeing our lives undergo seismic shifts, forcing us to leave behind the comforts of childhood and adolescence and

take on more responsibilities.

Some say that this is what growing up entails – just move on, they advise. However, a healthy process of coming of age should involve us confronting these changes head-on, and articulating any discomfort we may feel so that we can move forward – and not just move on.

As today is Youth Day, I would like to examine one particular change which is not talked about enough but is intertwined with some of the most important things we have had to leave behind.

Writing directly to my generation of youth, I would like to confront the changes taking place in our friendships and social lives – and how we can navigate the brave new social world we find ourselves in.

## END OF FRIENDSHIP AS WE KNEW IT

When we were younger, our social lives were really just our friendships. In fact, our life in general revolved around friendships.

Growing up, what made many of the rites of passage – such as the first day of school, getting through major examinations – meaningful were often the friends we made along the way.

The friendships made in school were integral to our growing-up years, as they gifted us with a sense of belonging and meant the world to us at a time when our worlds were small and limited.

But then our worlds expanded drastically as we stepped into higher education and/or work life.

In the past, friendships were easy to make – the kid who always came to the playground at 6pm, the classmate who had the seat beside us in class, and the students we spent countless hours with in a co-curricular activity.

These days, to build a friendship is to defy the odds – odds imposed by the sheer structure of our lives. The New York Times' Alex Williams, citing sociologist and gerontologist Rebecca G. Adams, wrote in a 2012 article that getting older makes it harder to “meet the three conditions that sociologists

since the 1950s have considered crucial to making close friends: proximity; repeated, unplanned interactions; and a setting that encourages people to let their guard down and confide in each other”.

Coming of age in the 2020s merely heightens this challenge. The restrictions brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic have arguably been a circuit breaker for social activities, hindering the development of many friendships that could have been.

Furthermore, we are forced to choose who within our circles we wish to interact with in this time of diminished social interactions. Inevitably, we prioritise those we are already close to, rather than those with whom friendship remains an open question.

As Kate Murphy, author of *You're Not Listening: What You're Missing And Why It Matters*, wrote in *The New York Times* earlier this year, “when every interpersonal interaction becomes a risk-benefit analysis, you discover pretty quickly how committed you and the other person are to the relationship”.

## COSTS AND BENEFITS

It is unfortunate, but also unsurprising, that we are now in a situation where human interactions are subject to something as impersonal as “risk-benefit analysis”.

Looking at social relationships through the lens of costs and benefits has been a growing feature of our social lives as we came of age, even before the pandemic hit. And I believe our generation has not fully come to terms with this.

But this is a shift which underpins many of the social decisions we have either made or been on the receiving end of: when we try our best to maintain a friendship, only for such efforts to be unreciprocated; when saying “let's catch up some time” increasingly becomes a form of lip service; and when we make the choice to de-prioritise our friendships so that we can devote time to career and romantic pursuits.

And yet, the relationships which have begun to displace the

friendships in our social lives are even more deeply infused with the notions of costs and benefits.

This is clear for acquaintanceship. For example, professional connections formed through networking are built on a promise of mutual benefit.

Separately, while work relationships can develop into friendships, they are often constrained by the professional setting and its limitations.

Romantic relationships are also not spared. While love runs deeper than friendship, romantic relationships are deeply conditional by necessity since they concern both parties' long-term happiness.

The rapid rise of dating apps has also arguably contributed to a “transactional culture” of romance, with such platforms serving as online marketplaces where love begins with swiping rather than serendipity.

Taken together, the increasing

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pervasiveness of “cost-benefit analysis” in our social relationships, coupled with the changing structures of social interaction, means that we have entered a whole new social world.

## COURAGE FOR NEW WORLD

How can we make the best of this new reality? First, with social relationships becoming more uncertain or conditional in nature, we must look to the only constant: ourselves. As the people in our lives come and go, we must have the resilience to weather these changes, and recognise that ultimately the source of our own happiness is within us.

Second, we must have the courage to fight for the friendships we want to make or keep. We should let acquaintances know if we wish to build a friendship and try to prevent drifting apart from friends by being upfront about the possibility of this happening.

Third, be prepared to let go of acquaintances or friends who no longer cherish the relationship. Know your worth and be ready to walk away from those who cannot see it.

Of course it will be hard to let go, and although I wish that we could go back to a time when friendships were simpler, those days remain a privilege of the past.

Disappointing as it may be, it is part of what it means to come of age – to not just have the confidence to move forward, but also the courage to accept some things are never coming back, and to embrace new and different experiences.

It is courage that will not always be easy to muster in the face of challenges and disappointments in our changing social lives, but in this brave new world, it may be the only choice we have.

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• We welcome contributions to the Sunday Views column. Write to us at [stopinion@sph.com.sg](mailto:stopinion@sph.com.sg)