Regaining a satisfying social life after a significant illness

When we are in the midst of illness, we usually have more things to worry about than our social life or lack of thereof. As we move into the recovery stage, however, we often begin to realize that we've become

t family and may start to feel cut off from life.

Social isolation can be a problem for patients and caregivers alike, and it's a key contributing cause to depression. Even if the effects of illness mean you can't return to exactly the same lifestyle that you previously enjoyed, it's important to find ways to reconnect with other people.

Many of your friends may be keeping away for fear of intruding. Be prepared to take the initiative in welcoming both old and new friends into your life again. Here are a few tips to get you going:

Start gradually

- Begin inviting friends for short visits of 15 to 30 minutes.
- Start with one visitor at a time.
- Gradually lengthen the visits and number of visitors as your strength returns.
- Caregivers can use these opportunities for short visits with their own friends.
- Use the phone to begin reconnecting with friends and with close colleagues from your work environment.
- If you have access to the Internet, connect with distant friends via e-mail or messaging.

Focus on others

During an illness, we naturally focus on ourselves. Now it's time to start turning the focus outwards.

- Show interest in your friends' lives and the challenges they may face.
- Remember birthdays and other special events in your friends' lives—send a card or call to let them know you're thinking of them.
- Keep up with current affairs—you are part of a bigger world again!
- If returning to the workplace is likely, keep in touch with colleagues and consider asking to be added to the e-mail list for staff memos.

Making new connections

If you are unable to return to your old lifestyle—and particularly the work environment—it's important to find new ways to feel meaningful and stay connected with people.

- Many support groups provide an excellent forum for both patients and caregivers.
- Resume old hobbies and look into new ones. Now may be the perfect time to take art lessons, meet up with fellow gardeners, take up yoga, join a book club or learn to play a musical instrument.
- With your doctor's permission, walk or exercise daily for short periods; many shopping malls offer walking programs before or after store hours.
- Again, with your doctor's permission, consider volunteer work. Many non-profit organizations need volunteers for phone work or similar "physically gentle" duties.

While your illness has likely taken up most of your attention and energy in recent times, it may now be time to re-engage with people and experiences that you enjoy. What better way to feel alive than to reconnect with people who matter to you, be inspired by new friends, and get reacquainted with activities you take pleasure in!