Feeling like the fifth wheel?

You wouldn't think you would need new friends in your 20's and 30's. After all, you have a number of friends from elementary school, high school, your neighbourhood and university or college. You may have shared accommodations with them, travelled with them, gone out on weekends with them and spent hours sharing your problems with work, relationships and finances with them.



But then a new phenomenon began: your friends started to fall in love. They may now spend all of their free time with their significant others. They may have moved in together or gotten married and some may have even started having children. Suddenly you feel like you are the only single person left in your group and "a night out with the girls" or "guys' night" is a thing of the past. On the rare occasions when you do get together with old friends, partners may often come along and you may feel like a third wheel to a bike, or a fifth wheel to a car. The feeling of being the extra, "unneeded" person can become overwhelming to many people. You may feel that your friends have moved into a new phase of life without you. You may feel out of place, disconnected and suddenly all alone.

Although the shortest month of the year, February may now seem like the longest month of the year, as you're surrounded by Valentine's Day advertising. It can certainly feel lonely. If you are feeling disconnected from those around you, there are a few things you can do to change this. But where can you begin?

Coping with loneliness

First, realize that you are not alone. Everyone feels lonely from time to time, particularly during major life transitions. Then take a deep breath and try the following:

- **Join a sports team or take a class.** Look for book clubs, faith groups, language or dance classes, and do not let anxiety stop you from trying new things.
- **Volunteer in your community.** This is a great way to meet people with similar social and political interests.
- **Attend functions alone.** This can be hard, but remember that it is quite common for people to attend events solo today. Try to go with no expectations of meeting people and just enjoy yourself. Look for activities that interest you such as concerts, sporting events, and art exhibitions.
- **Consider getting a pet.** If you are truly struggling without companionship, consider adopting a dog or cat from your local animal shelter. Meeting other pet owners at an off-leash area is a great stress-free way to meet new people.
- **Challenge yourself to take the initiative in social relationships.** Do not wait for people to approach you; approach them. Ask someone you want to get to know better if they want to grab a coffee or lunch.
- **Organize get-togethers.** It can be a book club, a work bowling league, or even a regular movie night. Ask people from various areas of your life if they would like to join in. You can also organize smaller get-togethers with a mixture of single friends and couples. You may be pleasantly surprised – even friends who may be in relationships could use a break from their partner or spouse for the night, to spend time with the girls or guys they haven't seen in some time!
- **Join an online community.** Share your thoughts and experiences with people going through similar experiences. Online forums and social media sites often allow you to help others while you help yourself. In addition, sites such as Facebook are a great way to reconnect with long lost friends, find new friends and stay in touch with friends near and far.

Remember that it is not the *quantity* but the *quality* of friends you have that counts. Two or three really good buddies whom you can truly depend on are better than many acquaintances. But developing close relationships takes time, so be patient and continue to stay as active and involved as you can. Finally, do not give up on your coupled-up friends. You may not see them as much as you would like, but they probably still care about you, regardless of their marital status.