

# **FRIENDSHIP PATTERNS AMONG THE ELDERLY**

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## **OPSOMMING: VRIENDSKAPSPATRONE BY BEJAARDES**

**Sleutelwoorde:** Vriendskap, bejaarde, geslagsverskille, langafstandkontak met kinders; positiewe sielkunde.

Tydens bejaardes se lewe is daar verskeie struikelblokke wat hulle moet oorkom. Hierdie uitdagings behels onder meer dat die bejaarde moet aanpas by 'n afname in liggaamlike vermoëns, verminderde intellektuele vermoëns, die verlies van 'n eggenoot en die verlies van vriende, die aanpassing by nuwe rolle en aktiwiteite, 'n verandering in inkomste, 'n verandering in lewensomstandighede asook aftrede. As gevolg van gevorderde tegnologie en meer gesofistikeerde mediese dienste, het die lewensverwagting van die mens drasties verander. Dit impliseer dat mense nou oor die algemeen ouer word en moet cope met lewensoorname en daaglikse eise. Een aspek wat mense help om beter met hierdie veranderinge en eise te cope, is vriendskappe. Baie min navorsing is egter beskikbaar oor die vriendskapspatrone van bejaardes. 'n Kwantitatiewe, dwarsdeursnit opnamestudie is onderneem waartydens onderhoude deur middel van 'n semi-gestruktureerde vraelys met 200 bejaardes in Suid-Afrika gevoer is. Die doel van die navorsing was om vriendskapspatrone onder bejaardes te ondersoek, en om vas te stel of vriendskappe afneem namate mense ouer word. Die data is statisties deur middel van frekwensies geanaliseer. Resultate het getoon dat vriendskappe wel afneem namate mense ouer word en hierdie afname kan toegeskryf word aan die afsterwe van vriende, vervoerprobleme, siekte en die feit dat vriende verhuis. Daar is ook bevind dat alhoewel bejaardes minder vriende het, vriendskap steeds as baie belangrik beskou word. Daar word ook voorstelle gemaak aangaande die waarde van verskillende tipe vriendskappe wat veerkragtigheid kan verhoog en meer sosiale bronne sal skep wat weer kan meehelp dat bejaardes beter met die lewensoorname kan cope.

## **SUMMARY: FRIENDSHIP PATTERNS AMONG THE ELDERLY**

**Keywords:** Friendship, elderly, gender differences, long distance contact with children, positive psychology.

During old age there are many challenges that the elderly have to meet. These challenges can include adapting to diminished bodily abilities, decreased intellectual vitality, the death of a spouse and the loss of friends, adapting to new roles and activities, a change in income, a change of housing conditions and retirement. Due to advanced technology and to more sophisticated medical services, life expectancy has changed significantly, which implies that generally speaking people could grow older and that they have to deal with life transitions and daily demands. Friendships enable people to cope better with life transitions and challenges. Very little research, however, is available on the friendship patterns of the elderly. A quantitative, single cross-sectional survey study was conducted where 200 elderly people in South Africa were interviewed by means of a semi-structured questionnaire. The purpose of the research was to investigate friendship patterns among the elderly, and to confirm whether or not people have fewer friendships as they grow older. Data has been statistically analysed by means of frequencies. Results indicate that as people age, they indeed have fewer friendships due to the death of friends, transport problems, illness and the fact that friends moved away. It was also found that although the number of friends becomes fewer, friendship is still regarded as an important aspect. Suggestions are made regarding the value of having different kinds of friendships, which will promote resilience and create more social resources to deal with challenging life transitions.

## **PREFACE**

The candidate opted to propose an article, which she completed with the support of her tutors.

Prof V. Roos

Dr A.W. Nienaber

## CONSENT

We, the co-authors, Prof V. Roos and Dr A.W. Nienaber, hereby declare that the information specified by Samantha Rossouw in this article is valid, and a true reflection of her efforts and hard work. We hereby grant permission that she may submit this article for examination purposes in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Magister Artium in Psychology.

Signed on this day ----- Potchefstroom, North-West University

Prof V. Roos  
Supervisor

Dr A.W. Nienaber  
Assistant-supervisor

## **INTENDED JOURNAL AND GUIDELINES FOR AUTHORS**

The article will be proposed to the “Social Work Practitioner – researcher” for publication.

The Social Work Practitioner-Researcher is an interdisciplinary journal devoted to the publication of research concerning the methods and practice of helping individuals, families, small groups, organizations and communities. The practice of professional helping is broadly interpreted to refer to the application of intentionally designed intervention programmes and processes to problems of societal and/or interpersonal importance, inclusive of the implementation and evaluation of social policies.

The journal will serve as an outlet for the publication of original reports of quantitatively oriented evaluation studies: reports on the development of validation of new methods of assessment for us in practice; empirically-based reviews of the practice literature that provide direct application to practice; theoretical or conceptual papers that have direct relevance to practice; qualitative inquiries that inform practice and new developments in the field of organised research. All empirical research articles must conform to accepted standards of scientific inquiry and meet relevant expectations related to validity or credibility, reliability or dependability and objectivity or confirmability.

All reviews will be conducted using blind peer-review procedures. Authors can expect an editorial decision within three months of submission, manuscripts and an abstract should be submitted in quad duplicate to the Editor, The Social Work Practitioner-Researcher, P.O. Box 524, Auckland Park, 2006.

Articles should be typewritten in double spacing in the Publication manual of the American Psychological Association, 4<sup>th</sup> edition. Abstracts are compulsory.

A copy of the final revised manuscript saved on an IBM compatible disk and formatted in WordPerfect or MSWord or in ASC11 format should be included with the final revised

hard copy, or e-mailed to [wa@lw.rau.ac.za](mailto:wa@lw.rau.ac.za). All tables and figures must be submitted on bromide. Authors submitting manuscripts to the journal should not simultaneously submit them to another journal, not should manuscripts have been published elsewhere in substantially similar form or with substantially similar content. A publication fee is payable by authors prior publication.

**MANUSCRIPT FOR EXAMINATION**

## *FRIENDS OF THE ELDERLY*

**B**lessed are those who do understand,  
If I move slowly, stumbling with a shaking hand.  
Those who know that I cannot hear what they say,  
I can easily lose the story halfway.

**B**lessed are those who know, but do not regret,  
That my eyesight is bad and I easily forget.  
Blessed are those who pretend as if they do not see,  
When I spill the coffee they bring to me.

**B**lessed are those who patiently listen to what I say,  
If I tell them about my pains, sorrows and my boring day.  
Those who never will anger or walk away in despite,  
Even if I tell them the same story of the previous night.

**B**lessed are those who through the mist of time,  
Can bring me again the good memories of mine.  
Blessed are those who in my old age, I go through,  
Let me know that their love and respect are honest and true.

**T**hose who understand if my powers fail and I ask,  
Why is the cross that I carry such a heavy burden and task?  
Those who help me to make my burden light,  
To guide me to my heavenly home through the long lonely night.

Original author  
unknown adapted  
and freely translated -

**TITLE OF MANUSCRIPT, AUTHORS AND CONTACT ADDRESS**

Friendship patterns among the elderly

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## **FRIENDSHIP PATTERNS AMONG THE ELDERLY**

### **ABSTRACT**

During old age there are many challenges that the elderly have to meet. These challenges can include adapting to diminished bodily abilities, decreased intellectual vitality, the death of a spouse and the loss of friends, adapting to new roles and activities, a change in income, a change of housing conditions and retirement. Due to advanced technology and more sophisticated medical services, life expectancy has changed significantly, which implies that generally speaking people grow older and that they have to deal with life transitions and daily demands. Friendships enable people to cope better with life transitions and challenges. Very little research, however, is available on the friendship patterns of the elderly person. A quantitative, single cross-sectional survey study was conducted where 200 elderly people in South Africa were interviewed by means of a semi-structured questionnaire. The purpose of the research was to investigate friendship patterns among the elderly in South Africa. Data has been statistically analysed by means of frequencies. Results indicate that as people age, they have fewer friendships due to the death of friends, transport problems, illness and the fact that friends moved away. It was also found that although the number of friends becomes fewer, friendship is still regarded as an important aspect. Suggestions are made regarding the value of having different kinds of friendships, which will promote resilience and create more social resources to deal with challenging life transitions.

### **INTRODUCTION**

According to the Aged Persons Act of 1967, women above the age of 60 and men above 65 in South Africa are seen as elderly. Different criteria can however determine age. Psychological age, for instance, refers to how old the person feels, while social age is defined by social roles and customs of the person, and physical age refers to physical signs of ageing (Louw, 1998).

Growing older places a lot of limitations on the living of the elderly and reduces the ties that bind them to other people (Kaplan, 1998). According to research (Cavanaugh, 2002), the life satisfaction of older adults is significantly related to the quality of time spent with friends. As people grow older, they will narrow their contacts with people and withdraw from social interaction, which implies a decline in active behaviour towards passive behaviour. They also tend to become more secluded, less socially active, and introspective (Kaplan, 1998).

Friendship is a valuable part of people's lives; it's a relationship which takes time to form. It grows with time and continues throughout life (Cavanaugh, 2002). "Friendship can be described as a relationship in which two or more people spend a great deal of time together, interact in a variety of situations, exclude others from the relationship, and provide emotional support to each other" (Baron & Byrne, 2000, p. 312). Friendships can be regarded as enjoyable by all people because these are relationships that embrace love and that are vital to the elderly person's continued happiness (Cavanaugh, 2002). Therefore, this research focuses on a description of the patterns of friendship among the elderly.

## **BACKGROUND**

The core meaning of health, according to Ryff and Singer (1998), includes having meaningful connections including features such as "having warm, trusting, loving, interpersonal relations and a sense of belongingness" (p. 69). Positive relations with others, such as friendships, imply an ability to be concerned about the welfare of others, empathy, affections and intimacy which contribute to the well-being of people (Ryff, 1995).

Friendships, as social support, are essential for the well-being and happiness of the elderly, since it can be associated with lowered rates of depression, enhanced physical health, and reduced loneliness. People with high levels of social support are believed to have higher levels of well-being (Kahn, Hessler, & Russell, 2003). Well-being is

predicted by aspects such as fulfilment and contentment in interpersonal friendship relationships; it can include the receipt of support, a supportive social environment, but most importantly the perception that social support is available (Elovainio & Kivimaki, 2000; Kahn et al., 2003). The way in which people interpret things that happen to them determine happiness, while the quality of life is determined by those significant happy and unhappy moments, as well as the strengths and virtues that they display (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Friendship can be used as a foundation to encourage independence, good adjustment, happiness and positive self-image (Cavanaugh, 2002; Kaplan, 1998). Four different personal traits contribute to positive psychology, namely subjective well-being, contentment, self-determination, and hopefulness (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Older people are seen as enthusiastic agents in determining their idiosyncratic quality of life (Ranzijn, 2002). People whose social support systems consisted of friends of the same marital status and equal power, proved to be much happier (Blieszner, 2001). In contrast to people who are depressed, happy people display more positive characteristics like being less self-focused, less aggressive and violent, and less at risk to disease. Happy people also tend to be more caring, reliable, gullible, energetic, decisive, tolerant, inventive, and sociable. They are likely to employ more tactics in order to sustain their significant friendships (Blieszner, 2001; Myers, 2000). Being attached to friends with whom you can share personal thoughts has two distinct advantages: It intensifies joys and reduces grieves (Myers, 2000).

Social support is especially essential for the elderly, as ordinary life events such as the death of friends, illnesses and retirement may endanger their support networks (Kahn et al., 2003; Kaplan, 1998). Research indicated that elderly people who had close friends reported to cope better with everyday life challenges, and reported better health (De Vries, 1996; Myers, 2000).

Emotions play an important role in positive psychology, because negative emotions often reveal problems or hazards. On the other hand, when people are well-adjusted in the

world they will experience better emotions and reflect positivity (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive emotions are important to enjoy sociability and can be seen as a motivation in fulfilling one's goals and may even improve the immune system. When social ties shatter, immune defences fade and disease and death rates increase (Myers, 2000).

Very little research has been conducted regarding the differences of friendship patterns among men and women. According to Cavanaugh (2002), friendship among men and women tend to vary during the course of adulthood. Women's friendships are based on intimacy, as well as personal and emotional sharing and they use friendship as a means to disclose. Women are likely to have more friends and more frequent interaction with these friends than men, and they also tend to receive more psychological support from their friendships (Cavanaugh, 2002; Kaplan, 1998). Women tend to have closer relationships with friends in whom they can confide, whereas men rather choose friends with whom they can share recreational pursuits. Men's friendships are mainly based on joint activities and although competition forms an integral part of their friendships, social interaction is emphasized. Shared interests are more important for men, whereas women tend to base their friendships on support and understanding (Cavanaugh, 2002; Kaplan, 1998). Studies revealed that elderly people are more likely to have fewer friendships as they grow older and that, in contrast with people in midlife or in young adulthood, no attempt is made to initiate new friendships because there is a greater likelihood that they might lose these friends to death (Cavanaugh, 2002).

Friends cannot serve as a substitute for the family in times of predicament (Kaplan, 1998). Relationships with family members are not always a positive experience, but friends can be selected according to a person's preferences (Cavanaugh, 2002). The elderly also tend to disclose more to friends rather than to family members, because age peers are more prone than others to share related familiarity and needs (Blieszner, 2001).

The question resulting from the above discussion is whether or not friendship patterns change as people grow older. The aim of this study is therefore to describe friendship patterns among the elderly.

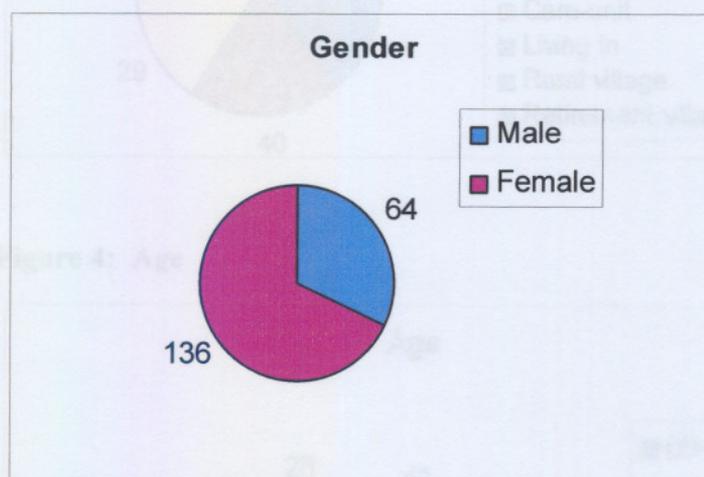
## METHODOLOGY

A cross-sectional survey design was used in this quantitative study to investigate the friendship patterns among the elderly (Gravetter & Forzano, 2003).

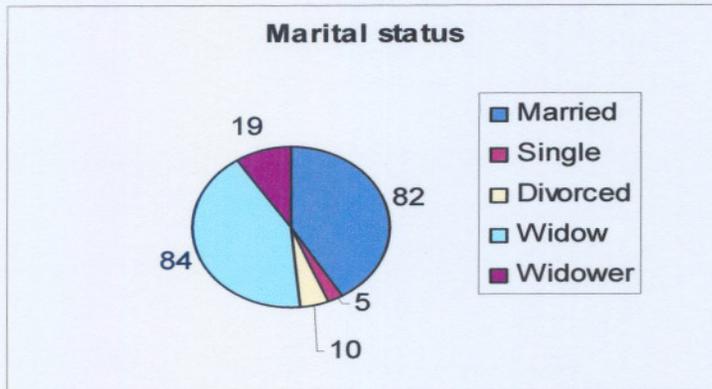
## PARTICIPANTS

Field workers obtained information from 200 (136 females and 64 males) elderly people of different genders and ethnical groupings, coming from rural and urban areas all over South Africa. The elderly people had different marital statuses and lived in different environments including living alone, with other people and in old-age homes. These aspects are illustrated in the following graphs:

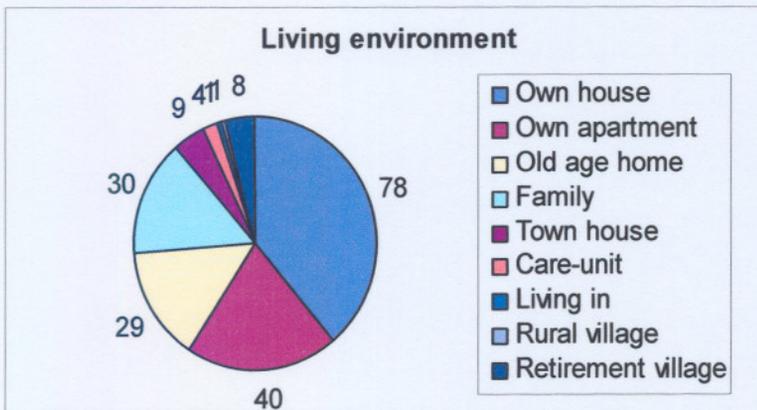
**Figure 1: Gender**



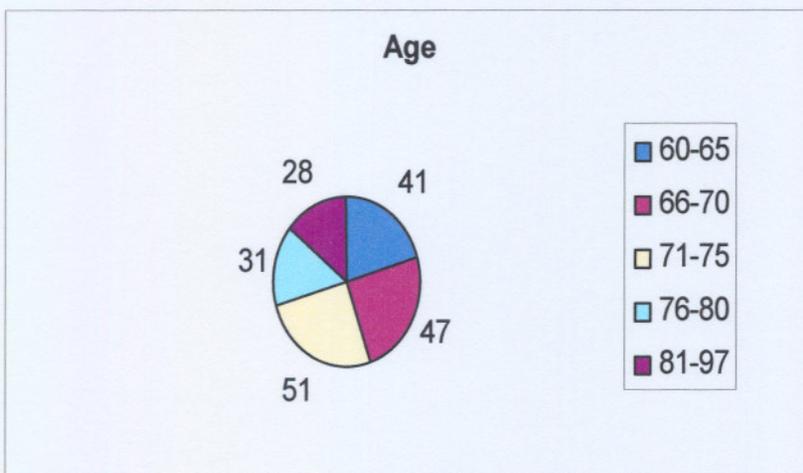
**Figure 2: Marital status**



**Figure 3: Living environment**



**Figure 4: Age**



## **PROCEDURE**

This research was based on a convenience sample where field workers, who were registered for an undergraduate module in psychology, were recruited to establish contact with elderly people. The aim thereof was to obtain information regarding people's perceptions and to participate in individual contact with an elderly person. Every field worker was required to conduct only one structured interview with an elderly person (60+) whom they knew, in order to collect information regarding the friendship patterns among the elderly.

## **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Informed consent was obtained from the elderly prior to their participation in the research. The elderly people were asked to participate in the study on a voluntarily basis. They were furthermore informed that they could withdraw at any time and that all information obtained would be handled with confidentiality.

## **MEASURING INSTRUMENT**

A questionnaire was developed based on literature regarding the developmental profile, social interactions and friendships of the elderly. The questionnaires were completed by means of semi-structured interviews. The advantages of semi-structured interviews include the highest response rate of all types of questionnaires; the ability to use longer, more comprehensive questionnaires; and non-verbal communication that can be observed. A disadvantage of structured interviews is that high costs are involved due to the training of field workers (Neuman, 2000).

The following questions were included in the questionnaire:

↳ **Biographical information:**

Age, gender, marital status, occupation and living environment.

✚ Information regarding friendship patterns:

1. How do you maintain contact with your friends and family?
2. Describe the relationship between you and your best friend.
3. What is the difference in the number of friends you have made over the course of the past 20 years?
4. Which aspects play a role in the amount of time you spend with your friends?
5. How did your visiting patterns change? Do you still visit your family and friends as often as you use to do?
6. What do you regard as the most important aspect of a friendship?
7. How do you view friendship in the different phases of a person's life?

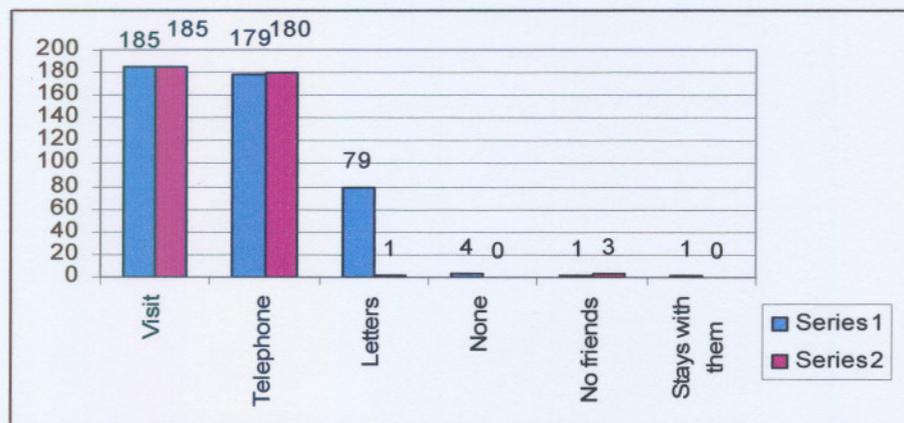
### DATA ANALYSIS

The data was entered into an Excel worksheet and frequencies were determined.

### RESULTS

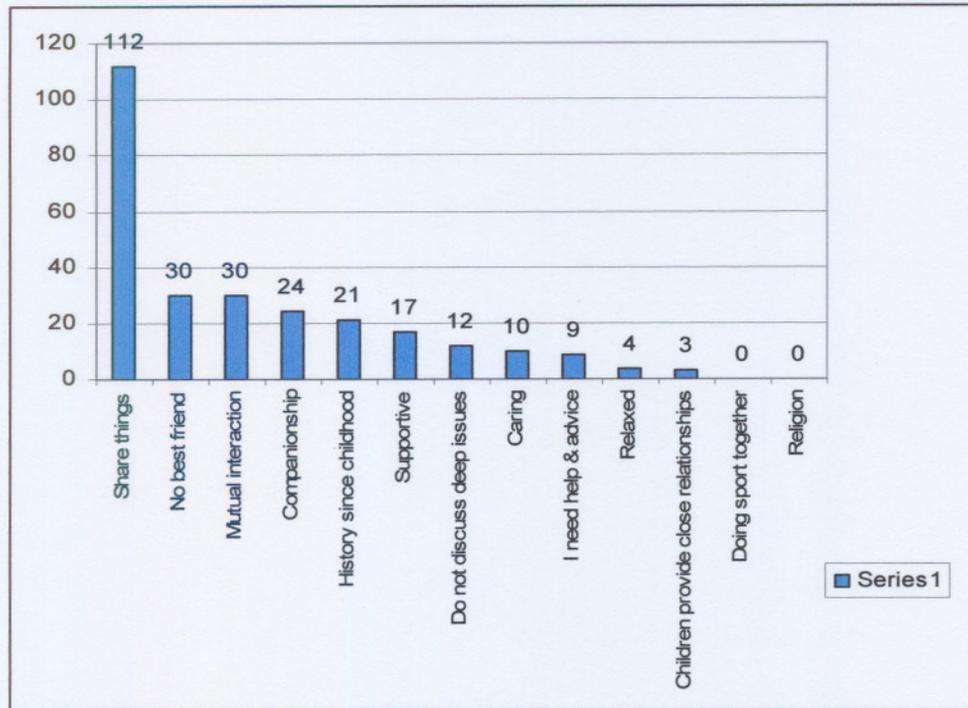
The following results illustrated the friendship patterns of the elderly:

**Table 1: Contact with friends and family**



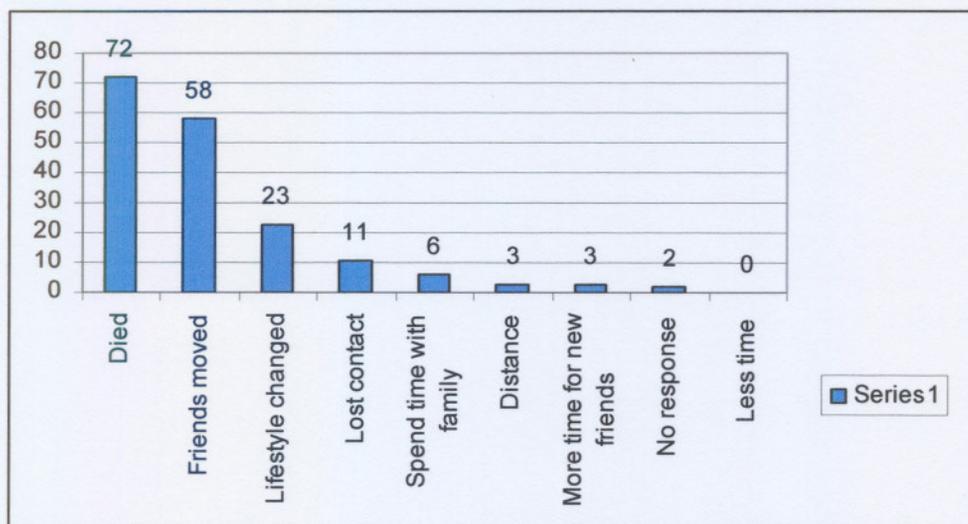
The elderly mainly maintain contact with friends and family by means of telephone contact and visits.

**Table 2: Relationship between the elderly and their best friend**



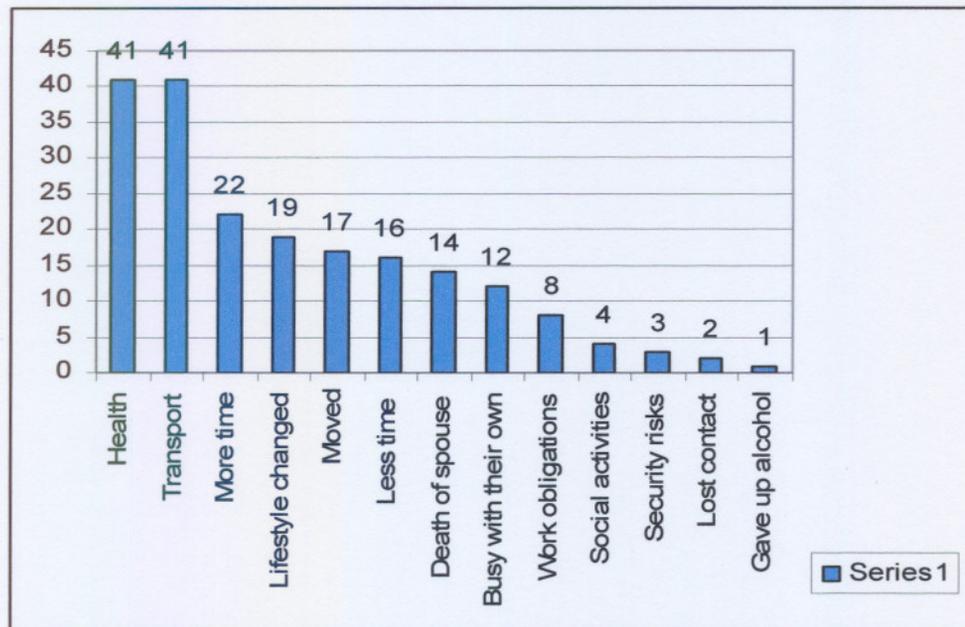
Relationships between the elderly and their friends are built on sharing things, having mutual interaction and having a companion.

**Table 3: Number of friends over the course of the past 20 years**



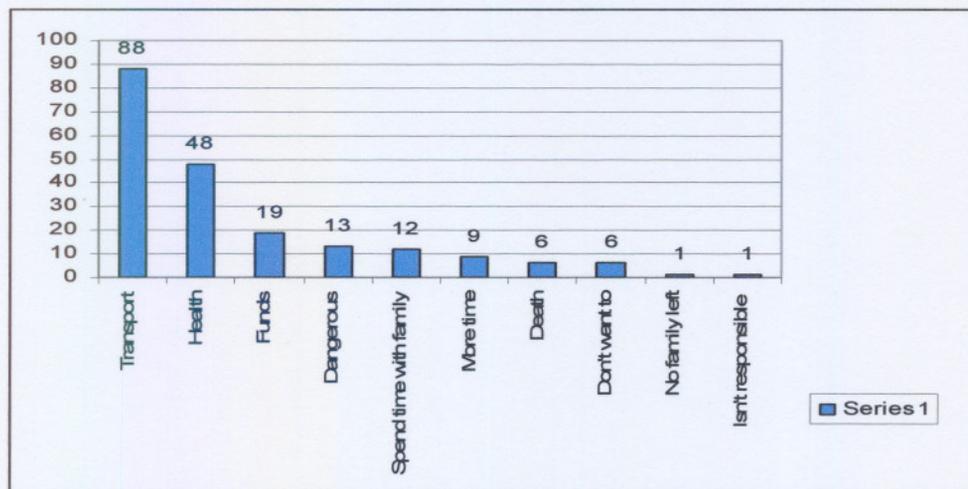
According to the elderly they have fewer friends because of death and friends that have moved away.

**Table 4: Time spent with friends**



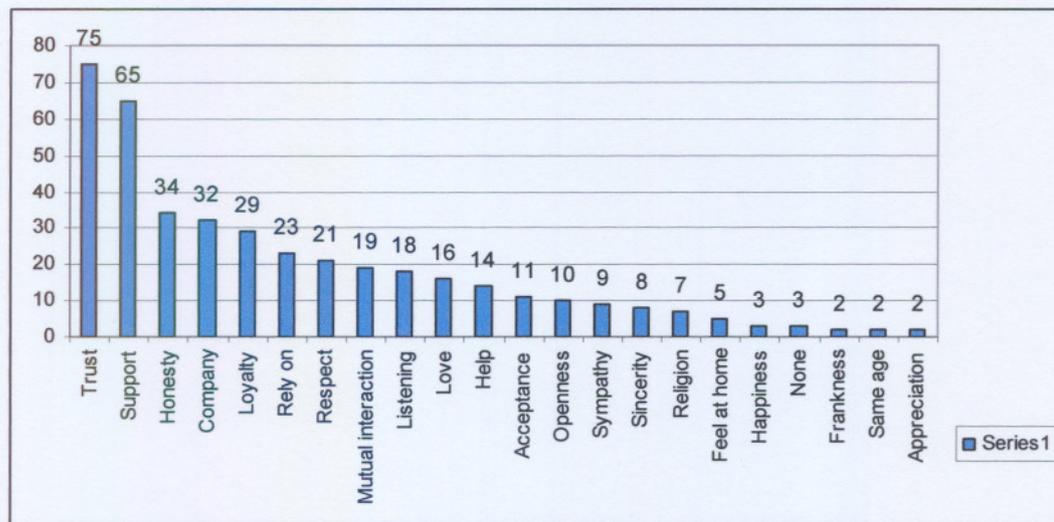
The aspects that played the most important role in the amount of time the elderly spend with their friends include health, transportation problems, having moved away or a change in their lifestyle. Only a small number of respondents indicated that they have more time to spend with friends.

**Table 5: Reasons for changes in visiting patterns**



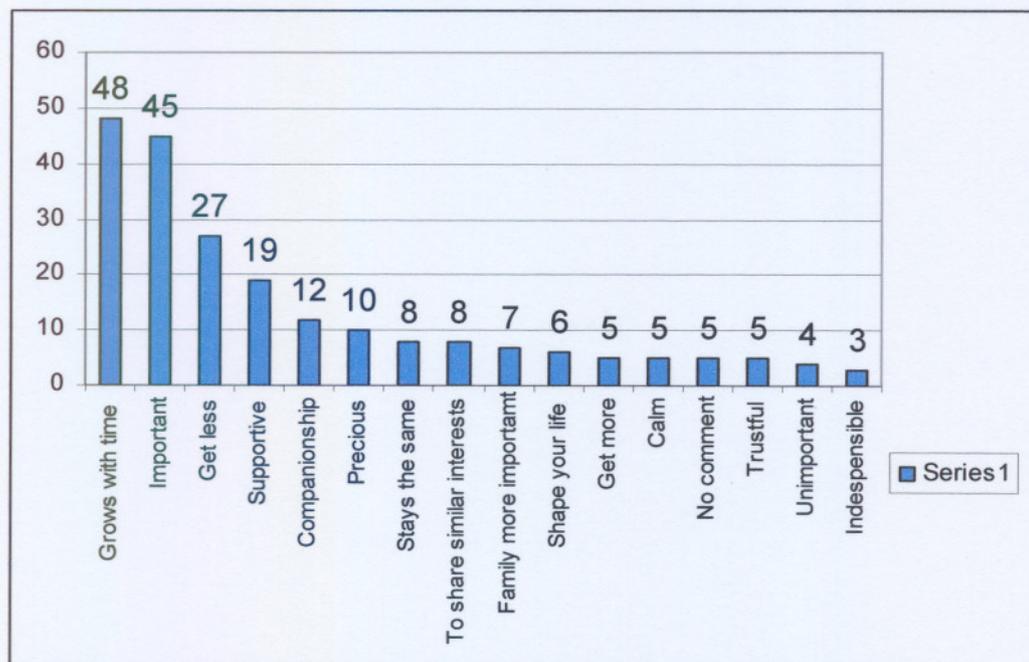
The elderly visit their friends and family less because of transportation difficulties, poor health and funding challenges.

**Table 6: The most important aspect of a friendship**



Various qualities of friendship have been identified. The most important aspects are trust, support, honesty, company and loyalty. Qualities that were also mentioned are appreciation, frankness and that friends should be the same age.

**Table 7: Value of friendship patterns in different phases of life**



The elderly indicated that friendship is something that should grow. It is regarded as important and something that can provide support.

## **INTEGRATED DISCUSSION OF RESULTS**

Results from this study clearly support other research findings stating that as people grow older, they have fewer friendships (Kaplan, 1998). From the findings of the present study it is clear that many of the elderly do not have a best friend, due to a lack of trust and the perception that it is not worth the trouble. Most of the elderly communicate less with friends and family and make contact either by visiting them or communicating by telephone. The literature suggests that happy people will use more strategies to maintain their friendships than others, thereby positively improving their feelings and becoming more loving and sociable (Blieszner, 2001).

The findings also confirm that although people actually have fewer friends during old age, the importance of friends increase. Friends will contribute to basic life satisfaction and play a role in the way people cope with life's stresses (Kaplan, 1998). Since friendship promotes happiness, it is regarded as an important aspect of people's well-being (Cavanaugh, 2002; Myers, 2000). People that are happy also tend to be high in optimism; they experience greater physical/psychological health, which implies having better moods (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

The importance of friendships is manifested in the fact that friendships endure in spite of challenges such as transportation problems, friends that move away, death amongst the elderly as well as health that deteriorates. Friendship is regarded as something that should not stagnate, which requires continuous growth and forms an essential part of the lives of the elderly. Most of the friendships that have been indicated in the research focus on trust, support and companionship, qualities that contribute to positive relations with others and general well-being (Ryff, 1995). The elderly will also choose friends with whom they can share things and have mutual interaction. This finding is also confirmed in the literature by Kaplan (1998), although it is more applicable to women, who prefer to share their interests and problems.

The manner in which friendship patterns are described in this study is determined mainly by the focus on familiar, close friends. From the findings it is clear that the traditional interpretation of friendships limits the different possibilities and expectations of relationships that can develop in deeper, more meaningful relationships. Elderly people are very selective in their friendship relationships to conserve physical energy and regulate their experiences. According to Kaplan (1998), the change to being more selective takes place gradually and is based upon preferences of the elderly.

Creative and innovative ways should be introduced by health care workers to counteract trends of most elderly people spending more time alone, turning inwards and neglecting relationships that can promote happiness and optimism. For example, engaging with unfamiliar people could provide opportunities for developing mutual support and companionship. These relationships with acquaintances and casual friends could have the potential to eventually develop into trusting relationships.

Finding new and alternative perspectives on how friendships develop could imply that the traditional perception of friendship should be transformed to allow new friendship patterns to develop. For example, the phases of friendship development, as described by Cavanaugh (2002), namely mutual awareness, surface contact and self-disclosure, could simultaneously also be present in interpersonal contact with the exciting possibilities of finding common grounds for sharing life's stories.

On a personal level it is imperative to encourage the elderly to develop personality characteristics that will enhance their potential. For example outreach projects can be initiated to assist the elderly to reach out to other people by means of various activities. These activities can include aspects like involving volunteers in the activities of the elderly so that they can visit the elderly more often and accompany them on outings. Roos (2004) investigated the significance of biologically unrelated students' involvement with the elderly. Old-age homes and health care workers must also create opportunities whereby the elderly can reach out and meet new people through, for instance occasional social activities. Despite transport, health and or other challenges, elderly people can

utilise and benefit from daily human interactions to contribute to new relationships which have the unknown potential of exciting discoveries.

Friendship is a buffer against stress that not only reduces loneliness and deterioration; it also provides sources of fun and promotes well-being (Kaplan, 1998; Cavanaugh, 2002). Assisting the elderly to initiate new friendships could practically mean to have daily contact with people close to the elderly person, such as the cleaning staff or engaging in recreational activities. Interactions like these can offer elderly people opportunities to have meaningful interpersonal contact with other people (Kotze, 1996). A different definition of friendship could possibly facilitate different possibilities of social connectedness.

### **Reflections of critique**

The study comprised a relatively small sample and the participants were selected through the snow-ball effect.

### **Considerations for future research**

Future research can make use of comparative studies of bigger groups that are focused on qualitative as well as quantitative studies. Furthermore, gender and cultural differences could be included as another focus area. Recommendations for future research could include a focus on the role of the community in providing friendship opportunities in the life of the elderly.

### **CONCLUSION**

Although people have fewer friendships as they age, friendship still plays an important role in the life of the elderly. Finding new and challenging alternatives to promote and

enhance social support also imply different attributions to the meaning of friendship. To develop new and alternative friendship patterns implies that set ways have to be challenged. However, if people realise the enabling potential, it might be easier to consider alternative ways of engaging with different kinds of friends. Adjustments that are regarded as obstacles limit the potential and opportunities to make new friends and to explore possibilities of meaningful relationships, which in turn will have a reciprocal effect on their health and life satisfaction.

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