Friendship is a voluntary relationship that entails companionship, reciprocity, mutual support, trust, and affection. For most, the benefits of friendship are clear: The vast majority of adults (90%) agree that friends are an essential part of a happy and healthy life. But how are opposite sex friendships different from same sex friendships? Do men and women view them differently?

Women are less likely than men to have opposite sex friendships.

Little more than one in ten women (14%) report an opposite sex friendship compared to about one fifth of men (22%), much lower than same sex friendships (91% among women and 82% among men). For women, the incidence of an opposite sex friendship is highest among Millennials (22%) and lowest among Boomers (11%). In contrast, among men, incidence of an opposite sex friendship is relatively consistent across generations.

Perhaps related to this lower tendency to have male friends, women’s same sex friendships tend to be longer-standing ones (average: 16 years) than their opposite sex friendships (13 years).

Men and women make opposite sex friendships in different ways.

While most people meet their opposite sex friends in school, men are more likely to do so (42% men vs. 30% women). Meeting in school is strongest among Millennials, due in part to their younger age, but is still highest among men (58% men vs. 44% women).

At least one-fifth of adults meet opposite sex friends through work, but work connections are far higher among Gen Xers (33%) and Boomers (28%) than among Millennials (15%), again, likely because Gen Xers and Boomers have been in the workforce longer.

Often, opposite sex friendships morph from a previously romantic connection. About a third of women (34%) and men (31%) have had a past romantic or sexual relationship with their opposite sex friend. Among those who are married, however, more than a third of women (38%) and nearly half of men (47%) say their spouse or significant other also considers this opposite sex friend as one of their closest friends, too.

Although the majority of women (63%) and men (60%) say that they don’t see a difference between opposite and same sex friendships, Boomer men (27%) are more than twice as likely as Gen Xers (10%) to rate opposite sex friendships as more difficult.

Conversation topics, level of openness, and preferred methods of communication are unique for opposite sex friendships.

Among same sex friends, women are most likely to discuss topics related to their children, family, and friends (48%), their past (32%), and hobbies and interests (25%). However, with their opposite sex friends, women are less likely to discuss topics related to children, family, and friends (23%), and more likely to discuss music (17%), sports (13%), politics (11%), and sex (11%).

A similar trend exists among men. With their same sex friends, men are most likely to discuss their past (29%), hobbies and interests (29%), sports (29%), politics (20%). But with their opposite sex friends, men are more likely to discuss their past (38%), children, family, and friends (26%), and sex (11%), and less likely to discuss sports (6%) and politics (11%). Perhaps men change the topic when they talk to women to the topics women most often discuss.
Women are more open than men to discussing any topic: Almost half of women (49%) say no topics are off limits, compared to just over a third of men (38%). Almost half of women (49%) are also more likely to say “I hide nothing, I’m an open book” with their opposite sex friends, compared to under four in ten men (39%).

Gen Xer (67%) women are far more likely to be an “open book” with their opposite sex friends than Millennials (49%) and Boomers (44%). Among same sex friends a similar relationship exists, with more women (46%) saying they are an “open book” with their friends than men (37%), suggesting that that friendships among women or involving women may have a greater level of intimacy.

Regarding communication with opposite sex friends, women don’t have a strong preference between communicating by phone (35%) or in-person (34%), whereas men are more likely to prefer to communicate in-person (43%) rather than over the phone (21%).

For same sex friends, Boomer women (35%) are more likely to prefer communicating by phone than Gen Xers (26%) or Millennials (22%). Among men, Boomers (28%) and Gen Xers (30%) are more likely to prefer communicating by phone than Millennials (20%).
Implications

The results of this research reveal that about one-third of both women and men have had a past relationship and/or romantic feelings for their opposite sex friend. However, few report that this past relationship has had an adverse effect on their opposite sex friendship and/or their relationship with their current partner, demonstrating that it is, in fact, possible to remain friends with your ex.

In addition, opposite sex friendships may push people out of their comfort zones, evidenced by the more diverse range of topics discussed by opposite sex friends than by same sex friends and demonstrating that many adults want diversity in their friendships, to discuss a variety of topics, and to hear multiple points of view. Although women in general are more open than men to discussing any topic, both Millennials and Boomers could learn from Gen Xer women, who are far more likely to be an “open book” with their opposite sex friend and to discuss any topic.

Source: Friendship: Attitudes and Behaviors Across the Ages, 2019. For more information, contact Vicki Levy, vlevy@aarp.org, or Colette Thayer, PhD cthayer@aarp.org. For media inquiries, contact media@aarp.org.