

Charlotte Ward moved countries for love... but finding friends in a foreign city proved harder than expected

My potential new friend was halfway through her dinner when she put down her fork and looked at her phone.

"Oh shoot," she announced. "I've gotta take a conference call."

Mate date

I'd met Jacqueline a few weeks earlier at a party hosted by our apartment building in St. Louis, Missouri.

As we chatted by the pool, I'd explained how I'd moved there from Sydney a couple of months earlier to live with my boyfriend (now fiancé), and Jacqueline told me how she too was new to the city.

We'd swapped numbers and a few weeks later I invited her for dinner – my boyfriend teasing me about my enthusiasm to impress.

It was only after I'd handed Jacqueline the rest of her meal "to go" that the reality hit me. Who on earth has to take a conference call at 9pm? On a Sunday night? Had Jacqueline just made an excuse to ditch me – like a bad date?

Something had clearly gone wrong, as when I saw her in the street the next day she walked



"I'm just, er, waiting for a friend..."

STEVEN CHEE/BAUERSYNDICATION.COM.AU

straight past me. When she snubbed me again the following day, I got the message loud and clear.

Prior to moving to the US I'd never had a problem making friends. So why was I now finding myself on par with the snotty-nosed kid no one wants to play with at school?

Although I'd met nice people through my boyfriend, they all had well-established friendship groups and I didn't want to keep harassing them or become a charity case.

Friends online

Working from home as a freelance writer with no office banter hardly helped the loneliness. In fact, often my most meaningful interaction all day was with my dog.

Staying indoors stalking my old friends online wasn't getting me anywhere, so I decided to throw myself into "Project Make Friends".

But how exactly *do* you make friends in a new city?

"Perseverance is the key," says life coach Alex Kingsmill from Upstairs Coaching (upstairs.net.au) "In the beginning you'll make one, then a couple more, and pretty soon you'll have a whole social group."

I began by joining a group I'd found on meetup.com, a website that helps people all over the world meet other people with shared interests.

My local group was called St. Louis Transplants, and was formed to introduce members to their fellow newbies. Arriving at the bar where the latest event was being held I was horrified to discover that I was the first "Transplant" of the evening, and would therefore need to sit at the bar alone with my "loser" name tag nursing a glass of wine.

But after only a few minutes a woman sat down next to me.

"Hi, I'm Paula," she said, a bit embarrassed. "They told me it was

your first time here as well." And as we sipped our cocktails and chatted, the awkwardness of the situation began to disappear.

We agreed to go to the next event together, and it was there we got talking to Natalie, a fun redhead. After that the three of us regularly met up for drinks, a meal and easy conversation... until both of them dropped a bombshell. My new and much appreciated girlfriends were both relocating to California within weeks of each other.

"Whhhhhhy?" I whined to my boyfriend. "It shouldn't be this hard!"

Starting over

My next plan was to join a gym and do yoga classes three times a week.

"We're creatures of habit, so if you keep on going to the same gym class you'll end up seeing the same people, until eventually you strike up conversation," explains Kingsmill.

I had high hopes for meeting some quirky yogalistas, however, as I rolled out my mat on the first day, there wasn't another yogi under 65. But after a week or two I was being greeted with warmth by the retired ladies in my class. They even invited me to go for coffee with them, which definitely beat talking to my dog.

"Connection is the big thing," says life and business coach Lisa Phillips (amazingcoaching.com.au). "If you feel disconnected, it is really easy to sit in and feel isolated."

Feeling spurred on, I joined nextdoor.com – a networking site for the immediate neighbourhood ([Australia hasousenet.com.au](http://Australia.hasousenet.com.au)). I posted a message asking whether anyone would like to meet up for a walk or a cup of tea.

Although I got two replies from girls around my age, and we emailed back and forth, they turned out to be fairly non-committal.

"I'd never had a problem making friends so why was I now like the kid no one wants to play with?"

"You have to learn not to take it personally," adds Phillips. "If you aren't connecting, then maybe you're looking in the wrong places."

I had to do something daring. Could I use Twitter to find a friend?

"So I'm putting it out there," I wrote. "I need some female friends in St. Louis. Can offer good humour and a back catalogue of stories..."

There were a few sympathetic retweets followed by a not-so-helpful reply: "LOL, good luck with that."

After five minutes of pressing refresh and contemplating whether I might need to delete my Twitter account from shame, I spotted a new reply in my newsfeed.

"Hope this isn't creepy but I'm always up for meeting new people," tweeted a blogger named Rebecca.

She agreed to meet at a local restaurant, and as we chatted, there was no mention of late-night calls. I made it to Friend Date Two!

Meanwhile, I'd also swapped numbers with a fellow hound owner on the same dog-walking schedule. We arranged a doggie play date, and bingo! I'd bagged another buddy.

And then, just as I stopped stressing over my friendless state, I began to get texts from friends of friends in my boyfriend's social circle arranging dinners and drinks.

"It just takes a while to get to that familiar point," explains Phillips. "Be yourself and don't try too hard to get people to like you." **COSMO**

NEW CITY,

NO FRIENDS