

# Find friends online: Interview with Ronak Shah from Serendip

Loneliness is a hidden pandemic amongst millennials; one in five in the UK say they have zero friends. But companionship is an essential part of being alive, and new app Serendip is hoping to topple the barriers standing in the way of meaningful connection.

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Serendip follows in the footsteps of now popular dating apps; it's busting stigma and helping people meet people, facilitated by the world wide web. The one difference is that it's mates – not dates – this program will help you accumulate.

*Maddyness* spoke to Ronak Shah, Serendip's founder, about how hard it is to make friends after university, helping the unlucky people who moved city just before lockdown started, and young people's new willingness to reach beyond their social class and circumstance in search of those with similar values.

[Maddyness] Can you tell me about your background and the road up to founding

# Serendip, and then explain what it does in your own words?

[Ronak] I'm born and raised in London and I am a mathematician and scientist by nature. I studied Mathematics at Imperial College London and went off to have a career as a trader at Citi Group. I left late last year to found Serendip.

Ultimately, I saw that loneliness was growing; that young adults were having significant difficulty transitioning into the work stage of life from education – that it was a sincere difficulty to meet new people without an agenda and to form genuine new friendships.

If you Google it, you simply find blog after blog telling you to either call up old friends (assuming you had them), reconnect with yourself through meditation, or join a local book club.

*For me, it seemed archaic in 2020 for this to be the prime advice for something so fundamental to someone's life: their close friends.*

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I thought maybe it's just me, but then I spoke to more and more people – especially older people – and there seemed to be a common understanding that over time you only shed friends. You don't grow your circle massively as you do when you're at university. And there was a wider problem – if you look at it statistically, one in five millennials across the UK have zero friends.

My personal story on that front is that, born and raised in London, I went to a really international university and afterwards found that so many of my friends went back home – across Europe, across the USA. I still had some friends here, but I could count my really close friends on one hand.

# Why do you think loneliness is bad amongst millennials?

If we just zoom out for a moment... we're really busy, we're doing our own things, we're all working, and so forth. I think lockdown itself has been a blessing in disguise; we've been able to introspect and reflect. If you do strip everything away, what remains is often just the people in your life. If you strip away your home, your material possessions, everything, as long as you're sharing your life with others – who understand you, value you and vice versa – that really makes all the difference.

Feeling a sense of belonging has a dramatic impact on your fulfillment and happiness. There was a great study out of Harvard – the longest study of adult development in history – that said the strength of your social connections is responsible for 70% of your happiness. Especially during this period, having a support network is vital.

So that's zooming out. And I know you mention loneliness and millennials specifically, but I'd say loneliness is actually a consequence of the issue. Loneliness stems from the lack of ability to connect with new people – which is what we try to solve. Millennials is interesting. There's a common misconception that it mostly affects the elderly; and yes, they are the second loneliest generation, but millennials are the most.

To answer your question very succinctly: it's because we go through so many transitions. We leave school; we go to university for the first time; we leave the family home for the very first time. Then we're at university, and then we leave for the world of work – which is a different lifestyle completely.

*You're shapeshifting your identity – which means that the way you form and approach new relationships changes.*

# What kind of people do you see using Serendip? Do you have any testimonials from people who have found Serendip to be really useful?

That's the best part of the job; it's so emboldening to see the lives you're touching. Something like this is actually transformational for these people. There was someone who was able to speak to the first new person in a year, facilitated by Serendip. There was someone who suffers deeply with social anxiety.

But, to give you the common demographic, the average age of our user is 27 years old. It's 50/50 male female, primarily in London – which is the world's loneliest city. It has a lot of diversity, which often makes it difficult to have immediate common ground, based on social constructs. It's also very densely populated, and there's this weird paradox where the more densely populated an area becomes, the more isolated and less intimate it becomes.

Another example user: a woman who just arrived in London in February, started a new job, and is living alone. Within two weeks we'd gone into lockdown and now she's working from home. She has no support network in London; she's working in a new role remotely. So many things to deal with at once – and you have no wind down time either, to have a glass of wine with a friend, for example.

We have a variety of users – all the way from socially anxious to really socially extroverted, people who really do want to meet people but are finding it difficult to meet people. We knock the barriers down for people.

## I imagine that there's a bit of a stigma surrounding the idea of using an app to make new friends. Do you have to think about ways to empower your users and take away any shame?

There is a massive stigma. You could contrast what we're doing with dating – literally ten years ago, you'd ask someone where they found their life partner and they would have said 'through a friend, introduced, met them at school,

university or work'. If you ask someone today, you see that 45% of all heterosexual relationships are formed online and that nearly 90% of all homosexual relationships are formed online. If you look at friendship, that's close to 0% across the board. If you ask someone today where they met their closest friends, they're going to tell you that it was a product of chance and circumstance.

*It's very archaic, and it seems to be one of the only things we do today where we still rely on serendipity – or do offline.*

That's why we're called Serendip, by the way, because it's that serendipity exactly we're trying to engineer. You don't have to rely on serendipity; you can rely on Serendip.

We are completely redefining the very fabric from which you form your close social connections. You're no longer relying on living in the same town, being the same age, going to the same school, and sharing the same class. Now, we're connecting people based on their values and not on their social constructs.

If you group the nation by their friendships, you're going to notice incredible patterns on social class, wealth/income, religion, ethnicity, nationality. We defy all social constructs and instead connect you based on your intrinsic values: how open you are, how conscientious you are, your humility. I'm able to connect with people I would never be able to connect with in ordinary society.

And then specifically regarding stigma, we can draw parallels with different industries. I think Headspace and Calm are great ones. Just five years ago, to meditate was considered a bit woo-woo. They have – not inevitably, they've done it consciously – redefined the language, the rhetoric and the feeling and experience around it, to make it cool, sexy, modern and sleek.

Now, if you meditate and engage in mindfulness, you're taking control of your life and your path. They've put the power back in the individual to take control of their own experience. We're very much doing the same thing for friendship – something traditionally we never saw as a priority, never consciously formed, we're starting to do deliberately.

*You can see the people flocking to our platform, and it's clear the demand has always been there, and that we're finally fulfilling it. People are wanting to experience new things, new schools of thought and new people.*

That's a really key part of our messaging as well: if you look at our social media feeds, if you look at our brand marketing, it's all about making friendship a priority and not relying on chance. But yeah, there's complete stigma around it, and it's going to be a long haul to redefine it over the next ten years.

**How has COVID impacted your business?  
Are people struggling to make those  
same meaningful connections now that  
they're not able to meet offline?**

Regarding overall change in the landscape, there's an increasing focus on mental health, there's growing awareness and levels of loneliness.

In terms of growth, we launched six months ago and have been growing at 10% per week for the last 20/25 weeks in a row. You also see every aspect of engagement within the platform growing even faster – everything from conversations started to messages sent. COVID could be a massive driver of that, but it's not a one-hit-wonder.

COVID has shifted consumer behaviour; it's made us look for alternative solutions for existing problems. People are working from home and traditional methods of socialising after work have vanished. There's remote studying as well. We're providing solutions in a very uncompetitive space.

**How are you getting through COVID?  
What are the rules you're living by, and**

# what's your daily routine?

I try to encourage myself to get out as much as possible. We have a local forest and I spend around an hour there everyday, going for a walk and listening to music. I call friends every evening to maintain that social connection, and I spend an unbelievable amount of time on FaceTime. Routine is super key in general, but that's about it really!

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Article by RONA K SHAH