

# all partied out

While life's never been busier, we're hosting and attending fewer and fewer events. Is it time to reclaim the art of celebrating, asks *Amy Molloy*.

On Friday afternoons, my husband and I have an “open house party” at our home. From 4pm, all our neighbours are welcome; no pressure, just an open invitation. We started the tradition after COVID-19 lockdowns, when we realised how many people our age – with young kids and no social life – were feeling isolated.

It's wonderful chaos: people are cooking dinner, there are kids asleep on the couch, and it can go on until 7pm and sometimes 2am. We've named our social group “Sippers” and we even have a logo for it: an illustration of a kid's juice box next to a flagon of beer. Yes, there's some drinking involved, but that's not the drawcard. (I'm 15 years sober, so alcohol isn't my incentive.)

Our Friday night parties have become a place where barriers are broken down and bonds are formed, where the conversation veers between funny YouTube videos and a cancer diagnosis. The kids are there – always there – in the tapestry, either on the skate ramp in our garden, watching a movie or playing poker with the grown-ups. And it's far from an echo chamber. The guest list is our street, so it's not curated by backgrounds or interests.

During a debate about medical misinformation, my friend, a nurse, observed, “If I'd met you anywhere but here, I'd have so many preconceptions about you – and I'd have been wrong about all of them.”

Our friendship wasn't instant. It happened over time because we gathered, and gathered, and

gathered again – with the type of social determination most of us lose after high school.

For my husband, our open-door policy comes naturally; he comes from a family of “celebrators” who embrace the Aussie culture of barbecues and intergenerational beach hangs. For me, as a millennial with social anxiety raised in the closed-door culture of middle-class England, this type of “togetherness” has terrified me at times – but it's also been a revelation.

The spirit of hospitality extends beyond the party. Whether you need a babysitter or someone to lift something heavy, or there's a real emergency, our guest list will always come running. In many ways, our open-door policy has improved my mental health more than therapy and years of meditation. It's given me a sense of purpose and belonging and softened my self-consciousness. I used to curate the Post-It notes on my fridge before people came over. Now, I leave the reminders to “take UTI medication”. The same with our messy bathroom.

Research shows that parties offering food, drink and a chance to celebrate – even small wins – are linked to longer lifespans, lower anxiety and depression, and better sleep and heart health. Yet it's easy to let socialising slip down – or off – our to-do list. For many of us, the party is over, and we don't even realise what we're missing.

New data from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics found Americans are spending less time “socialising and communicating” than 10 years ago.

For individuals, an average weekday in 2024 included just 26 minutes of “face-to-face social communication, or hosting or attending social functions”. On the weekend, that rose to 56 minutes. This was trumped by watching television and housework.

In Australia, it's a similar story. A survey by the website Finder found Aussies are reducing the size of their friendship groups and attending fewer events to cope with the cost of living. Then there's the housing crisis. I have the privilege of being able to throw a party because we live in a large house. But a UK survey by the home interiors group Hilarys found one in four people are embarrassed to invite others over because of “home shame”, from houses they think are too small or messy.

There's also the COVID effect. During lockdown, we stopped strengthening our social muscle. As a result, we've forgotten the gains of hosting and can only remember the pain points.

So how can we ease our fear of gathering, and not just accept that it's closing time on our social life? Julie Tenner is an intimacy and relationship coach, and a reformed party fearer. For her 40th birthday, she threw herself a party – the first she'd ever hosted for herself. “It was right at the end of a COVID lockdown, so initially nobody wanted to come,” she says. “I was full of anxiety, but then I thought, ‘What does it matter? I'll just open my house and fill it with my favourite things.’”

Her all-day event included flower crown-making in the garden, a gin

station and a fairy-floss machine. Her guest list was lengthy. “I just invited whoever,” she says with a laugh. In the end, people came – and they didn't leave. “I was looking around thinking, ‘What is happening here?’” she recalls. “It felt like people remembered how much they love hanging out with humans.”

Her hosting didn't stop there. In 2022, she threw a “non-politically-correct hysterectomy party” to “celebrate, honour and process” her surgery – complete with themed games and activities. “It was super fun and crude, and a little wild,” she says. “But there was a huge amount of intention behind it all; it involved all the aspects of fear and shame I wanted to process.”

As a therapist, she believes parties are an important modern-day ritual – and it's not only about big milestones. “I host games nights and weaving circles, and, recently, a celebration for a friend who is five years post-cancer,” she says. “It's about food, connection and community. That's the interesting thing about opening your house – you have to be ready to receive love.”

For many women – myself included – having children offers permission to party. As a mum of three, I am still uncomfortable celebrating myself, but my kids' parties are elaborate, 10-hour affairs. I don't worry about people showing up, and I don't feel guilty about the money because we're making core memories.

To be able to celebrate my kids, I've had to heal my own “hosting wound”: the emotional pain of my past-party



memories. The childhood party that felt awkward and lonely. The parties in my twenties where I felt like I lost control or let myself down. To be able to celebrate our life now, I had to revisit my morning-after shame – and forgive it. The biggest lesson I've learnt is to lean into imperfection.

When our house flooded two weeks before my daughter's fifth birthday, I wanted to cancel her party, but my husband wouldn't let me. Instead, he decorated the construction site – and it was our best party yet.

There is a reason that millions of people tune into comedian Hamish Blake's "cake night" on social media, watching him stay up all night making a cake for his son's or daughter's birthday. It's always elaborate, but also messy and imperfect. One year, the family cat was seen eating part of the cake. Who wouldn't want an invite?

To embrace parties in a post-COVID, shaky economy, we need to lower our standards and tear up the rule book of old-school social etiquette. Don't have enough cutlery? Tell your guests to bring their own. Feeling tired? Go to bed early and let the party continue without you – even as the hostess.

Most of all, make it comfy. The most common reason Aussies cancel on a social event is "to relax on the couch", according to research by McCrindle. This is followed by "to sleep", so don't force people to stay past midnight.

There's a reason "holistic event planner" is now a real job title – because people want events that feel good, as well as look good. Less pretension, more cosy cushions, warm lighting and clear boundaries.

As a mum of four, Tenner has hope for the next generation – and their social lives. "Our children are creating

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social environments that allow for different needs, especially [for peers] with neurodivergence," she says. "When you and I were young, that didn't exist; at a party you had to be involved, and you couldn't leave, and you just had to brace yourself. Our kids don't do that any more, and I think it's amazing."

When her teenage daughter has friends over, every two hours they have an hour of "solo time": noise-cancelling headphones on, doing their own activity, away from each other. It's a time for recharging without the need for guilt or apology.

"I love hearing my kids talk to their friends about their 'social batteries'," says Tenner. "Whether it's needing to be home by 9pm because they've had a big week or not doing sleepovers because they like their own bed, they're upfront about it." •