



Lunch Date With ROMEO Gives Guys a Chance to Connect

Social clubs key to promoting emotional health

by: Robert W. Stock | January 4, 2011

The December wind was gusting to 40 miles an hour, the rain descending in torrents, but nothing could keep the ancient foursome from their appointed rounds. One by one — three septuagenarians and an 81-year-old — they made their wet way into Gabriela's, a Mexican restaurant on New York's Upper West Side.

"I wouldn't miss it," a latecomer commented. "I don't know any other two hours of my life when I'm so happy to be in the company of other people."

ROMEO Group Video

What do Retired Old Guys Eating Out talk about? Hit play to find out.

The foursome is part of a widespread phenomenon known as ROMEO, for Retired Old Men Eating Out. The four men, retirees all, have been meeting for a monthly lunch for a few years now. Their conversation tends to be "like a barbell," as one of them put it: "We talk about politics or [new movies](#), what's happening now, and about what we saw and did a half-century ago — and nothing in between. We laugh a lot." There are hundreds of self-proclaimed ROMEO groups across the country, some with a handful of members, some with as many as 80. They meet for lunch or for breakfast, weekly or monthly. They may form spontaneously because of members' common interests or associations, or they may be associated with religious groups, [adult communities](#) or senior centers.

The ROMEO Club of Chicago, for example, is composed of 13 current or former Catholic priests, while the ROMEO Club of Bloomfield, N.J., is all musicians. One of the Gabriela's foursome was a computer programmer, one was an investment banker and the others were lawyers. They have known or known of each other for at least 40 years. Many ROMEOs, though, are geared to attract newcomers to a town and other people with no links to members.

"What's so nice about these groups of men," says Dr. William S. Pollack, a professor of psychology at Harvard Medical School, "is that it helps them discover what women know from the time they enter kindergarten, that a sense of connectedness feels good and is good for your emotional health."

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Like any relationship, the ROMEO connection benefits members' physical health as well. Recent research at Brigham Young University has shown that social interactions improve one's odds of survival by as much as 50 percent. On the other hand, a low rate of interaction, the authors say, is twice as harmful as obesity and comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

The research matched participants' social connections and their health over a seven-year period. Any interaction, whether positive or negative, had a beneficial impact.

[Find a ROMEO club in your area or start your own »](#)

Retired men are particularly at risk of emotional and physical decline, Pollack says: "Once they're put out to pasture, they lose the sense of purpose and structure they had at work. They lose the friends they had there, too. And most men lack any other meaningful connections aside from the romantic."

Male retirees who live alone are especially subject to [loneliness](#), but even those who are [married](#) are often bored with lives limited to browsing the Internet or watching TV. They miss the action and the interactions of their working days. ROMEO members' wives tend to be enthusiastic about the meetings. "It's good for him," said the wife of one of the Gabriela's group. "Whatever gets him out of the house." One of the favorite topics at her husband's ROMEO sessions is the comprehension chasm that has opened up between the members and the younger generations. "It's not just the music and the clothes," said one member at the December session. "It's getting so I don't understand New Yorker cartoons anymore."

How to Find or Start a ROMEO Group



Robert Wright

Manny Alfano, left, Charles Sousa, center, and Gene Antonio of the ROMEO club dine at La Sicilia in Belleville, N.J.

There are ROMEO clubs in most states. Some are listed on [Romeoclub.org](#), and others may be registered with your town's welcoming service or listed in the local newspaper. If you can't find one nearby, or one to your liking, you might consider starting a ROMEO. Here are some things to think about:

1. Start small. Get the club underway with one or two friends so there is an ongoing activity that other people can join.

2. Work out the details beforehand, not just a firm time and place and the frequency of meetings but such matters as how the restaurant bill will be paid, individually or a group split.

3. Make it easy for newcomers to learn about your group. Put up notices on the bulletin board at your church. Spread the word on Facebook and Twitter and in your hometown newspaper.

4. Maintaining a ROMEO is much simpler than it used to be. Instead of making a dozen phone calls, you can ensure that members know about a meeting and plan to attend with a couple of e-mails.