



THE OFF LOAD ROOM

Article

Brotherhood by design: cultivating male connection in a lonely world

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The story of men's friendships is often told as one of decline. Fewer close friends. Less emotional intimacy. Longer stretches of isolation. The statistics are sobering, but they only tell half the story. The other half is this: connection does not have to disappear. It can be built, rebuilt, and strengthened when men choose to design it into their lives.

Loneliness is not just uncomfortable — it is dangerous. Global studies show that chronic isolation increases the risk of early death by more than **30%**, placing it in the same league as smoking or obesity. In South Africa, surveys reveal that over **37%** of older adults feel lonely at least weekly, with black African men reporting the highest levels despite often living in extended households. The numbers remind us: proximity is not the same as connection.

The ingredients of brotherhood

The encouraging truth is that men do not need to accept this erosion as inevitable. Friendships thrive when three conditions are present: time, **trust, and shared action**.

- **Time** is the first barrier. Too many men wait for connection to happen rather than carving out space for it.
- **Trust** grows when vulnerability is offered and received, even in small doses.
- **Shared action** — sports, walking, building, problem-solving — creates the conditions where conversation and closeness follow naturally.

When these three come together, friendships stop fading into the background and start becoming anchors again.

Models that work

Across the world, examples already exist. In Zimbabwe, the *Friendship Bench* has created simple community spaces where men can speak openly and be heard — reducing isolation and depression rates. In Cape Town, peer-support networks for older men show that even regular one-to-one visits can reduce loneliness scores. Internationally, the men's

sheds model — community workshops where men gather side by side — has shown how activity can be the doorway to belonging.

The lesson is clear: when friendship is left to chance, it withers. When it is designed, it flourishes. Brotherhood is not an accident. It is a structure.

Designing connection in South Africa

South Africa needs more of these structures. In a context where stress runs high, economic uncertainty is constant, and cultural change has thinned traditional bonds, men cannot be left to navigate alone. By creating intentional spaces — in communities, workplaces, and beyond — we invest in the human infrastructure that sustains resilience.

The return is immediate: lighter loads, stronger health, deeper belonging.

The truth is simple: connection does not just happen — it is cultivated. For men, this means choosing brotherhood not as a nostalgic sentiment, but as a deliberate design. When we build these spaces deliberately, we rediscover what was always there: that life is lighter, better, and far less lonely when it is carried together.