



Five intimate friendships is the optimal number – I scrape two

Research tells us living near our loved ones makes us happier and strengthens our relationships. But is that possible, and how can we be better friends if not?

Emma Beddington. 09 April, 2023

I had a little twitch of unease recently, listening to Elizabeth Day talking on the radio about her new book *Friendaholic* and the problems that having too many friends has caused her. It's the same twitch I get reading psychologist Robin Dunbar's famous research on how many relationships we can maintain. Five intimate friendships is the optimal number – I scrape two – and Dunbar posited that we can maintain a network of 150 people close enough that it wouldn't be awkward to have a drink with them. That's Dunbar's number: 150! I'd have to include everyone who walks their dog on my route, my whole pilates class and half the street to get there, and not knowing most of their names would surely push it over the awkwardness line. I mean, I can be awkward with my two intimate friends on bad days.

It's easy to feel inadequate about friendships, and I haven't, historically, been a good friend. I don't mean I steal boyfriends or betray confidences, but I'm chaotic, bad at prioritising and time slips through my fingers like water. I lived for a long time in a transient city – Brussels – where friendships seemed to be easily formed and then easily forgotten and it gave me bad habits, I think, which make me seem thoughtless and careless. I suppose I have been thoughtless and careless.

I'm trying to be better because I really like the few friends I have managed not to lose and am keen to be a bigger part of their lives. But how? My best friend currently lives four-plus hours and a minimum of two trains away in the best-case scenario. I have a good friend in the US and several scattered across the UK and Europe. I don't think that makes me particularly cosmopolitan, just a person living at a time and in a country where housing costs, the catastrophic state of childcare and

social care plus career constraints mean we mainly settle wherever makes financial and practical sense, rather than where we might ideally choose.

And it's not ideal. We became friends because we like each other's company and we're ending up not getting much of that. Meeting up requires planning and expense, possibly an encounter with Southern Rail. There's no dropping in or spontaneity, and that puts pressure on meet-ups: you can't just slump on a sofa with a bag of crisps each in silence, scrolling, occasionally showing each other stupid stuff. Well, you can, of course: my best friend and I do – we even did it when we lived in different countries – but there's an anxious tendency to feel crisps won't cut it.

That's silly because friendships thrive on regular side-by-side slumping and simple proximity. Dunbar's research has also explored how friendship formation and maintenance are partly underpinned by the endorphin system, activated when you spend time together. Endorphin-firing activities include eating, drinking, laughing and telling stories. I don't think anyone has researched parallel sofabased scrolling yet, but I'm hopeful that gets endorphins flowing too.

It tallies with what I'm realizing about friendship as I try to improve my own – stuff I think most people know instinctively or learned decades ago. That, like parenting, much of the important stuff happens in small, ordinary moments. That cumulative time is more important than some strained notion of “quality” time. That showing up is an act of love.

It's hard to show up for each other when we're miles away. If being near our friends makes us happier, why don't we all just try to do it? That's what a recent article in The Atlantic argued, and it has provoked a lot of soul-searching – mine and more widely. I don't know how on earth we make it happen – see jobs, homes, kids, parents, above – and I'm not even sure many of us have a monolithic friendship group à la Central Perk to herd into an idyllic commune. But it's an interesting thought experiment. Could we try to reverse the Aussie soap theme song and make good friends neighbours? I'd probably manage to ruin it somehow, but it would be wonderful to have the chance to try.

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