

Five intimate friendships is the optimal number – I scrape two

Level 2: Intermediate

1 Warmer

a. Discuss these questions.

1. How important is friendship to you?
2. How many close friends do you have?
3. What is the most important in a friendship?
4. How can we improve our friendships?

2 Key words

a. Fill the gaps in the sentences using these key words from the text. Then complete each example sentence with the same word – you may have to change the form of the word.

awkward
proximity

betray
sensation

disorganised
slump

ideal
spontaneous

inadequate
thoughtless

1. A _____ is a feeling, especially a strange one, caused by a particular experience.
The medicine caused a burning _____ at the back of my throat.
2. If something is _____, it is the best or most suitable.
The hotel provides an _____ opportunity for children to be active on the beach and parents to relax.
3. If something is _____, it is difficult to deal with and embarrassing; when this word is used to describe a person, it means they are not comfortable, relaxed, or confident.
I met a childhood friend for coffee, but we didn't know what to say to each other, and it was just _____.
4. Someone who is _____ does not feel confident that they can deal with the situation they are in.
He can keep a whole room of adults entertained, but when in charge of babysitting his niece, he feels completely _____.
5. If you _____ someone, you do harm to them after they have trusted you.
They felt that Suki _____ them by joining another lunch table.

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6. Someone who is _____ does not deal with things in a clear or sensible way.
I am a very _____ student; I can never find all the notes I need before an exam.
7. When you are _____, you don't think about what other people want or need.
Parking on the pavement is not only _____ – you can be fined up to £100.
8. When something happens naturally without being planned or thought about, it is _____.
The party wasn't planned – it was just a _____ gathering.
9. When someone _____, they suddenly fall or sit because of they are very tired or unconscious.
She _____ onto the couch after a long day on her feet.
10. _____ is how near something is to another thing, especially in distance or time.
Since we live in different countries, our _____ is measured in the number of minutes we talk every day.

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- 1 I felt really uneasy recently. I was 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 sensation I get reading psychologist Robin Dunbar's famous research on how many relationships we can maintain. Five intimate friendships is the ideal number – I scrape two – and Dunbar said that we can maintain a network of 150 people close enough that it wouldn't be awkward to have a drink with them.
- 2 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 reach that number, and not knowing most of their names would surely make it awkward. I mean, I can be awkward with my two intimate friends on bad days.
- 3 It's easy to feel inadequate about friendships, and I haven't always been a good friend. I don't mean I steal boyfriends or betray trust, but I'm disorganised and bad at prioritising. I lived for a long time in Brussels, where friendships seemed to be easily formed and quickly forgotten. It gave me bad habits, I think. It has made me thoughtless and careless.
- 4 I'm trying to be better because I 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 more than four hours and a minimum of two trains away. I have a good friend in the US and several in the UK and Europe.
- 5 It's not ideal. We became friends because we liked each other's company and ended up not seeing each other much. Meeting up requires planning and expense. There are no spontaneous visits, and that puts pressure on meet-ups: you can't just sit on a sofa with a bag of crisps in silence. Well, you can, of course: my best friend and I do – but there's a tendency to feel it's not enough.
- 6 That's silly because friendships grow on regular side-by-side slumping and simple proximity. Dunbar's research has also explored how friendship is supported 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 sofa-based scrolling yet, but I'm hopeful that gets endorphins flowing too.
- 7 It matches what I'm realising about friendship as I try to improve my own – that, like parenting, much of the important stuff happens in small, ordinary moments. That more time is more important than "quality" time. That showing up is an act of love.
- 8 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 try to do it? I don't know how we make it happen – jobs, homes, kids and parents can make it hard. But it's an interesting thought experiment. Could we try to turn our good friends into our neighbours? I'd probably manage to ruin it somehow, but it would be wonderful to have the chance to try.

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3 Comprehension check

a. Are these statements True (T) or False (F) according to the article? Correct any that are false.

1. In her book, Elizabeth Day describes the problem of not having enough friends.
2. Dunbar said that we can maintain a network of 150 people we know who are not our closest friends.
3. The writer feels that she hasn't been a good friend.
4. Living in Brussels badly influenced the writer's friendship habits.
5. The writer has friends in many different countries.
6. The writer doesn't want to meet friends spontaneously.
7. Dunbar studied how being with friends is an endorphin-firing activity.
8. Simply spending time together is not what makes a friendship.
9. The writer would love to have friends as neighbours, even if it might not work out.

4 Key language

a. Scan the text and find the prepositions that complete the phrasal verbs. Definitions are provided for reference.

1. end _____: be in a particular place or state after doing something or because of doing it
2. meet _____: come together with someone, either unexpectedly or as planned
3. grow _____: be nourished by
4. show _____: be there for someone

b. Now complete the sentences using the verbs in the correct form.

1. I can't believe she _____ uninvited!
2. The best relationships _____ trust and respect.
3. He is such an involved dad – he always _____ to all his daughter's matches.
4. She is going to London next month and is planning to _____ with two friends from college.

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5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements.

- “Not everyone has time for friends, and that is OK.”
- “Quality is more important than quantity when it comes to friendship.”
- “Five intimate friendships is the ideal number.”
- “Maintaining friendship is important for your mental health.”

6 In your own words

a. Create an infographic, short video, or blog post with tips for making and maintaining friendships. Focus your infographic on a specific target audience.

E.g., How to Make New Friends in Your Twenties in Tokyo

b. Present your idea to the class.