

Five intimate friendships is the optimal number – I scrape two

Level 3: Advanced

1 Warmer

a. Discuss these questions.

1. What is your definition of friendship?
2. What are the key ingredients of a friendship?
3. How many “close” or “intimate” friends do you have? What is the ideal number of intimate friendships?
4. What can we do to feel closer to our friends?

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.

catastrophic	confidence	cumulative	cut it	inadequate
slips	slumps	spontaneity	tally	thoughtless
transient	twitch	underpinned		

1. A _____ is a sudden slight uncontrolled movement of your body.
Irritation within nerve cells can cause jerky muscles and eyelid _____.
2. If someone feels _____, they don't think that they are good enough for a particular purpose.
Everyone in my family has high-powered jobs, but I just work in a shop. It makes me feel really _____.
3. When you have _____ in someone or something, you believe that they are good and you can trust them.
The politician lost the _____ of the people that had voted for him.
4. If something _____ through your fingers, you fail to get it or to take advantage of it.
Don't let this chance _____ through your fingers.
5. If something is _____, it exists, happens, or stays somewhere for a short period only.
Some people believe going shopping has a calming effect, but it is only _____.

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6. If someone is _____, they are not thinking about what other people want or need.
I hope she apologises for her _____ comments.
7. _____ is used for describing something that is very bad or causes much damage.
Hurricane Harry caused _____ damage to hundreds of buildings.
8. _____ is behaviour that is natural and not planned or thought about.
Beth was attracted to Paul's _____ and his fun-loving attitude.
9. When someone _____, they suddenly fall or sit because of they are very tired or unconscious.
Her body suddenly _____ to the floor, and we all rushed over to help.
10. When something _____, it is satisfactory or successful.
I don't think a text message will _____ – we will need to meet in person to discuss the situation.
11. To _____ means to be an essential basic part of something, allowing it to succeed or continue to exist.
Research and developing new technology _____ their clean-energy strategy.
12. If two things _____, they match each other.
The witnesses' separate accounts _____ and provided strong evidence.
13. _____ means developing or increasing gradually as a result of more and more additions.
While most of us can cope with one bad night, the _____ effects of sleep deprivation can be devastating.

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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

- 1 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.
- 2 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.
- 3 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.

- 4 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.
- 5 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 sofa-based scrolling yet, but I'm hopeful that gets endorphins flowing too.
- 6 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.
- 7 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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3 Comprehension check

a. Which of the following statements represent the experiences and opinions of the author?

1. "I can relate to the issues Elizabeth Day describes in her book."
2. "It would be awkward to have a drink with acquaintances that make up my Dunbar number."
3. "Time management is the biggest hurdle in most of my friendships."
4. "Living in Brussels badly influenced my relational habits."
5. "The fact that I have friends all over the world reflects a certain cosmopolitan lifestyle I aspire to."
6. "It's a pity that we can't just meet up when we feel like it."
7. "I bet sitting on the sofa with a friend is also an endorphin-firing activity."
8. "Simply spending time together is not what makes a friendship."
9. "If one of my friends moved in next door, our friendship might be doomed, but I would love to see what happens."

4 Key language

a. Place the words in the correct column to form new words from the text. In some cases, you have to modify the root word.

adequate

care

ease

form

idyll

maintain

thought

in-	-less	un-
<i>inadequate</i>		
-ation	-ance / -ence	-ic

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b. Now complete the sentences with some of the new words from task A.

1. It was utterly _____ of him to refer to Sarah as his best friend right in front of Harry.
2. As I walked into the crowded room, there was an awkward silence, which made me feel a great sense of _____.
3. Seeing my best friend only once a year is hardly _____. I would see her more if I had the means!
4. I always welcome a challenge but felt out of place at the luncheon and at a loss for words. I felt completely _____.
5. I would like my friendships to grow organically, but the reality is that most require some level of effort and _____.

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements.

- “Friendship is simply not a priority in my busy life.”
- “Quality trumps quantity when it comes to friendship.”
- “Five intimate friendships is optimal.”
- “Cultivating friendships is crucial 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.