

THE ART OF FRIENDSHIP

FRIENDSHIP DOESN'T SIMPLY HAPPEN TO US – IT'S SOMETHING PRECIOUS WE NEED TO NURTURE AND CULTIVATE. AND IT IS ESSENTIAL FOR OUR WELL-BEING AND LONGEVITY, AS **DANIELA MASSENZ** DISCOVERED.

illustrations **LIÉZEL ELS**

HUMAN BEINGS, LIKE other primates, are social creatures. We depend on our social networks for companionship, safety and survival. These relationships create coalitions that buffer us against the stresses of social living, and the connectedness we require is played out through social 'grooming' rituals.

Monkeys and apes like gorillas and chimps do this through hours of literal grooming, but we humans prefer to groom one another through hugging, putting an arm around each other and laughing together. So says Robin Dunbar, the celebrated emeritus professor of evolutionary psychology at the University of Oxford. And the strength of our relationships depends on how much grooming we do.

His new book, *Friends: Understanding the Power of our Most Important Relationships* (Little, Brown), couldn't be more timely in this Covid era, in which we've been forced to isolate from our nearest and dearest. Studies show that friendship and connection is what we've missed most of all in our constrained lives.

The book is well worth a read as it rounds up new and established thoughts and scientific research about the importance of friendship, as well as confirming in essence what we all know instinctively.

SOCIAL GROOMING MAKES US FEEL GOOD...

In an interview for YouTube channel The Innovation Show, Prof Dunbar explains that a number of virtual grooming behaviours – 'laughter shared, singing, dancing, rituals of religion, feasting (eating socially), drinking alcohol socially ... telling stories' – trigger our bodies to release its natural opiates called endorphins. '[Grooming] creates a sense of relaxation, warmth, trustingness, contentedness with whoever you are doing social core activities,' he says.

... AND LIVE LONGER

Probably the most important research to emerge in the past decade is that the number and quality of our friendships aren't only necessary for our happiness – they are also vital for our psychological well-being, physical health and longevity.

Robin Dunbar says they're the strongest indicator of how long we will live. 'This finding has really caught everyone completely by surprise,' he emphasises in an interview with *The Guardian*.

'A positive tsunami of publications shows that the best predictor of how happy you are, how physically healthy you are, your ability to recover from

major surgery – even your risk of dying – are affected by the number and quality of your friendships,' he says on The Innovation Show.

Having friends has an effect on 'your mental well-being, your risk of dementia in the future, as well as risk of physical diseases, particularly long, slow diseases like heart conditions,' he continues. 'In the studies ... the number and quality of friendships you have ... is the best indicator of surviving the next 12 months after having that first heart attack.'

He says it's a bit more impactful than giving up smoking, and far more impactful than 'the pills you're on, whether you're overweight, exercise, diet, air quality'. Some serious food for thought.

'The difficulty is that you can't just magic friends up out of nowhere. You have to have those friendships already before the heart attack,' he cautions.

LONELINESS IS A KILLER

'Loneliness is turning out to be the modern killer disease and the most common underlying factor behind death,' Prof Dunbar explains.

Jean Wheeler, a South African counselling psychologist, concurs. In a sense, she says, loneliness is the opposite of friendship as it constitutes disconnec-



**'Life has no pleasure higher
or nobler than that of friendship.'**

– Samuel Johnson



tion and isolation and has deleterious effects on our physical health and emotional and mental well-being.

'If we look contextually, Covid has really highlighted the "epidemic of loneliness", which is a relatively new phenomenon in the modern world, affecting around 47% of adults in the USA. This has relevance because of its increased risk for early mortality, similar to those for obesity and smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Loneliness and emotional well-being have become major public health concerns. This emphasises the importance of social connection.'

YOUR INNER CIRCLE

Ever heard of Dunbar's number? The number of people we have in our wider friendship circle – people we know on sight, who have shared history with us – is 150, as Robin Dunbar determined in his well-known 1990s research.

He says most of us have an inner 'sympathy group' of about 15 people. However, our most intimate friends, which he dubs our 'support clique', number about five friends.

This inner circle of best friends 'is defined as the group of people you would go to for emotional, social, financial support if your life falls apart. How many people you feel you can count on, who would bail you out at the drop of a hat,' he explains. We invest very heavily in them, maintaining daily or weekly interactions.

For introverts, this close group may number three or four. For extroverts, it's five to six.

Some of these may include partners and family members, and 'if we have any spare slots left, we set about filling them with unrelated friends,' he explains in *The Guardian*.

FRIENDSHIP DECONSTRUCTED

❁ QUALITIES

Jean Wheeler says certain qualities are needed for a good friendship: 'Honesty, dependability, loyalty, empathy, being nonjudgmental, a matching sense of humour, mutual respect and especially reciprocity – the give and take of mutual support.'

❁ FACTORS

Models of friendship show that there are two main categories of factors that influence our choice and pursuit of potential friends.

Individual factors include approachability, social skills, self-disclosure, similarity and closeness.

Environmental factors include influences such as proximity, geography, activities and life events.

❁ ROLES

'Friends can play four different roles, or a combination of these, in our lives,' she explains.

The Cheerleader is the one who gives us affirmation, who's supportive and listens to us.

The Prophet is the friend who tells us what we need to hear, however painful. (We don't often get that.)

The Harassers and Motivators are those friends who encourage us always to be the best version of ourselves.

The Spiritual Guide is a special kind of friendship in which we can truly reveal our deepest, innermost self. The beautiful Gaelic term *anam cara* refers to soul friends, those with whom we share the innermost workings of our heart, mind and self – thus imbuing the deepest possible meaning of the word 'friendship'. It's been suggested that in order to have an *anam cara*, you need to have complete integrity of intention, which is what sets this soul friend apart from 'casual' friends or acquaintances.

It is important that we maintain our circle of five, though, as no one person

can give us everything. If this is what is expected of a friend, it could place a huge amount of possibly unsustainable pressure on the relationship.

❁ CATEGORIES

We have three categories of friendship, Jean says:

Active friendships are the ones we are actively and regularly in touch with, and that we put effort into.

Dormant ones are the ones we have history with, and we know we can pick up the phone and chat or send a message, but the connection is not that frequent.

Commemorative friendship is a relationship that was important at a time in our lives, but is no longer active.

WAXING AND WANING

Of course, friendships are dynamic entities and levels of commitment tend to vary during a lifetime. We may drift away from some friends, and other more superficial friendships may become more important as we go through different phases of our life. This may be caused by a practical thing like distance, we may become very busy with work and family, or it may simply be that our paths diverge in terms of interest and commonality.

And then some friendships no longer serve us – they become toxic or indifferent. A telltale sign is leaving an interaction feeling worse than before, when the friendship feels unsupportive and drains your energy. If this is continuous, it may be best to allow that relationship to fade.

IT'S A SEX THING

Men and women live in very different social worlds. Women have more friends. There's a shocker. And their relationships are more intense.

Robin Dunbar says women are far more likely than men to have a BFF (best

friend forever). This is largely because they are generally more socially skilled, and have deeper, more meaningful relationships. They spend longer on the phone and use tech more to connect with friends.

'Men,' he points out, 'have very casual relationships. Here today, gone tomorrow. With blokes, it's actually about doing stuff together. Going to the pub, climbing a mountain, stamp collecting', rather than communicating our deepest, innermost thoughts and feelings.

FRIENDSHIPS CHANGE AS WE AGE

Most of us would agree that our friendship circle shrinks once we've left our 20s and 30s. Young people are much more connected generally. There's more openness, flexibility and spontaneity. 'As we get older, our friendships increasingly become relegated to the commemorative and dormant categories. The friendship circle gets smaller, so we get lonely,' Jean says.

Various factors contribute to this shrinkage – illness, death, relocation, loss of mobility, as well as the high rate of dissolution of partnerships and marriages. Who gets the friends in the divorce?

'People get busier, we have less time to put into friendships.'

On one level, social media and the internet do make the world smaller and connectivity much easier (you can pick up old friendships, send a quick text message, or even make a video call). The downside is that online connection is often just not the same as being with someone in person.

IT'S A LIFELONG INVESTMENT

Eighteenth century man of letters Samuel Johnson, known for his pithy insights, said, 'If a man does not make

'It's multiple little acts of friendship and connection that accumulate over time to create deep, complex relationships.'

– Jean Wheeler

new acquaintances as he advances through life, he will soon find himself left alone. A man, sir, should keep his friendship in a constant repair.' Wise man, that Dr Johnson. Both Professor Dunbar and Jean Wheeler would agree.

Jean says, 'It's vital to understand that friendship is not just an abstract concept, but rather a practice that requires discipline and an investment of time. It's multiple little acts of friendship and connection that accumulate over time to create deep, complex relationships.'

'I think this is essential as we age, because it's much harder for adults to make friends,' she advises. 'The big thing I see in my practice, over and over again, is the struggle for adults – divorced, widowed or single – to find and make new friends. The lament being, "Where do I meet people?"'

HOW TO NURTURE YOUR FRIENDSHIPS

'Quality counts more than quantity,' Jean says. 'While it's good to cultivate a diverse network of friends and acquaintances, you also want to nurture your circle of truly close friends who will be there for you through thick and thin.' Research shows that sense of humour is one of the things that really keeps friends together. We need to have fun, relax and do activities with one another.

FIND TIME TO CONNECT This is important even in Covid times, when physical proximity and opportunities to meet are curtailed. Plan a weekend away and share experiences like retreats or cooking lessons.

MAKE YOURSELF AVAILABLE Extend and accept invitations. Invite a friend to coffee or lunch. Make an effort to see new friends regularly. Accept invitations to social gatherings. Contact someone who invited you to an activity and return the favour.

SHOW THAT YOU CAN BE TRUSTED Being reliable, responsible and dependable are key to forming strong friendships. Keep your engagements and arrive on time. Follow through on commitments you've made to your friends. When they share confidential information, keep it private.

RESIST THE URGE TO HUNKER DOWN Don't give in to 'I don't drive after five o'clock' and the temptation of your duvet and Netflix. Plan an activity and make yourself go when the time comes. You'll have fun, we promise.

Friendship apps, similar to dating apps like Tinder, do exist. Do your research to find the one that suits you best. VINA and Patook are available in South Africa. These help you match with people who have similar interests, either near you or virtually. Or do a Google search using terms such as {your city} + social network or {your neighbourhood} + meet ups. As always, remember to exercise caution when sharing personal information or arranging an activity with someone you've only met online.

VIRTUAL EVENTS OR GATHERINGS Attend talks, online groups and community events. Look for them in newspapers, on Facebook, Instagram or on community bulletin boards. Sign up your friend group for an online quiz. Arrange cocktail hour where you take

turns to choose new recipes and try them out together.

TAKE UP A NEW INTEREST OR PURSUE YOUR HOBBIES Join a hiking or sports club. Find a knitting or sewing circle. Take an art or yoga class, or sign up for a short educational course.

JOIN A FAITH COMMUNITY Take advantage of special activities and get-to-know-you events for new members.

TAKE A WALK Grab your pet or kids and head outside. Chat to any neighbours who may also be out and about. Head to a popular park where there may be possible opportunities for striking up conversations.

ABOVE ALL, BE KIND This most basic behaviour, emphasised during childhood, remains the core for successful adult relationships. Think of friendship as an emotional bank account; it's the acts of kindness and care, large and small, the positive and supportive interactions and the gratitude you demonstrate which enhance friendships and your well-being.

FIND OUT MORE

- Dunbar, Robin (2021). *Friends: Understanding the Power of our Most Important Relationships*. London. Little, Brown
- 'Robin Dunbar – *Friends: Understanding the Power of our Most Important Relationships*', on The Innovation Show with Aidan McCullen, on youtube.com.
- 'Friends by Robin Dunbar review – why it pays to be sociable', by Steven Poole, on theguardian.com
- 'The pandemic shrank our social circles. Let's keep it that way.', by Kate Murphy, on nytimes.com

