

The Great London Friendship Project: Building Connections that Last

How regular community meetups have helped lonely Londoners in their 20s and 30s make meaningful friendships in the city



Photo: David Gradon (2023) Sunday Social Walk with The Great London Friendship Project

On the 15th of September 2023, 25-year-old Oscar Rothwell attended his first Friday Night Social with [The Great London Friendship Project](#) (TGLFP). “There was a drinking Jenga night with TGLFP,” Oscar says. “I turned up, alone, and was completely terrified”. Having adjusted to a life where he “always” or “often” felt lonely, Oscar felt extremely anxious about the prospect of socialising, let alone meeting new people. “In the hours leading up to that first event, I was in cold sweats and vomiting out of anxiety,” he says.

Six years ago, 25-year-old Oscar moved to London with a friend from home, *Tom, to study Music Production at university. As an introvert, Oscar saw moving in with a friend as an excuse not to put himself out there and meet new people in the city. “Throughout my life, I haven’t appreciated the value of friendship, community and togetherness, I was always very introverted growing up and had this mindset of not needing other people,” he says.

After graduating, Oscar became self-employed as he pursued a career in Music Production, which he could do from the comfort of his own home. Oscar's social life shrank to only seeing his girlfriend *Jenny, and close friend Tom. As the years passed, he felt increasingly dissatisfied with his lack of meaningful friendships; but felt too anxious about doing anything about it.

Earlier this year, Oscar's small inner circle crumbled as Jenny broke up with him and Tom moved away. "I felt completely broken and lost," he says. With not so much as an acquaintance in the city, "that's when I finally started to think about the possibility of going out and meeting new people," he adds. The thought of being completely bare of social interaction was the push he needed to step out of his comfort zone.

After googling "How do you make friends in London in your twenties?", TGLFP was one of the first groups that popped up. "I saw events taking place three times a week and that they were free. It was exactly what I needed," Oscar says. It was now or never.

The Great London Friendship Project: Where It All Began

The Great London Friendship Project is the birthchild of 29-year-old David Gradon, based in Wandsworth, London. Gradon had been experiencing feelings of loneliness since he left university and moved to London in 2014. During the pandemic, Gradon endured a break-up with his long-term girlfriend of 4.5 years whom he lived with, whilst struggling with the remoteness of his work as a Community Manager for the social operating system Pally.

Desperate for his feelings of loneliness to subside, once restrictions eased, Gradon turned to dating apps to fill the void of disconnection. However, he quickly realised how incompatible his needs were with this surface-level form of modern matchmaking. It felt "wrong" to put so much pressure on meeting a romantic partner who'd fulfil his need for connection; being so fresh out of a break-up. So, he turned to Google to make platonic friendships instead.

In a [survey](#) conducted last year by Campaign to End Loneliness, 700,000 Londoners reported "often" or "always" feeling lonely. The report that followed noted five key characteristics that were closely associated with severely lonely people, two of which include being single or living alone; and going through significant life changes. Therefore, although he didn't feel it at the time, Gradon was very much not alone.

His question – “How do I make friends as an adult?” – shifted into months of him trying everything from running clubs to single life drawing to friendship apps. Nothing worked. Much like dating apps, none of these search-engine-advised activities satisfied the itch of meaningful connection that Gradon desired. He experienced a series of failed attempts at sustaining new friendships and longed for a sense of community.

“I had amazing chats with people in their 40s and 50s,” Gradon tells me on a call. “But I quickly realised these weren’t going to be the people I hang out with regularly”. Whether it was that they had kids to get home to, their wife to meet for a date night or work to wake up early for, Gradon had no luck in meeting people his age to enjoy life in the city with. With having a large proportion of friends of a similar age, in the local area being [linked to reduced feelings of loneliness](#); it’s no wonder Gradon felt lonely in the city.

The First Sunday Social Walk

In November 2021, Gradon took it upon himself to find like-minded, similarly-aged people to hang out with. He set up a Facebook group for people in their 20s and 30s to meet for a walk around Hampstead Heath on a Sunday afternoon. A dozen people showed up. Gradon had prepared a few games in advance to break the ice between strangers. Hours later, exceeding expectations, the group ended up in a pub where they talked deep into the autumnal evening.

34-year-old Researcher, Christian, was one of the twelve who attended Gradon’s first event back in November 2021. “For most of 2020 and 2021, the pandemic had made it more difficult to socialise than before,” he tells me. David’s first ‘Social Walk’ came at a great time for Christian as “it offered the opportunity to meet new people and explore a nice part of London together. I remember that it was a special experience for us”.

Gradon purposely wanted to create a community of people with like-minded responsibilities, routines, and social needs. For example, how regularly they want to meet up and how long they want to hang out for. “This age group generally don’t have a family to look after or, if they’re students, a strict 9-5 to structure their day around,” Gradon says. Over the next few weeks and months, the group quadrupled in numbers, with young members bringing their friends and housemates to experience the project, too.

Since then, Gradon has arranged weekly Sunday Social walks all over the city – from the canals of Little Venice to the marshes of Hackney Wick. The high demand for the event required Gradon to cap the walks at 100 per week while hosting two more events during the

week – usually a board game night on a Wednesday and a Friday Night Social at the end of the working week.

Young people between the ages of 16 and 34 in the UK are [disproportionately at risk of feelings of chronic loneliness](#) - that's "always" or "often" feeling lonely, along with disabled people, the LGBTQ+ community and those on a low income. With research showing this age group are at five times greater risk of chronic loneliness than those aged 65 or older, they're on a widespread quest for friendship. As a result, TGLFP is now made up of over [30,000 members in their 20s and 30s worldwide](#), who are supporting the project and participating in events when they're in the city.

Deciding to Show Up Is the Hardest Part

Despite how anxious he felt before the first Friday Night Social back in September, Oscar persevered. "I had to remind myself that I'm doing this because I want some friends and I need some human connection". He turned up, sat down at a table of strangers, and introduced himself to a group of new people in their 20s and 30s. "I was surprised at how comfortable I felt for the entire time I was there," Oscar says. "I remember seeing David, walking around almost like a warden, and I felt quite safe because of that".

Oscar remembers one pivotal moment during the game of Jenga he was playing with the group at his table: "There were these forfeits where if you knocked the Jenga blocks down then you'd have to go downstairs and take a selfie with a group of people sitting at a table," he says. "For me, being very introverted and shy, it felt terrifying".

In the heat of the moment, he decided to fully embrace the experience. "I ended up being the only one who knocked the Jenga blocks down throughout the whole night, which resulted in me doing the forfeit three times," Oscar says with a laugh. "The other people at the table were quite impressed by my dedication to the game. It all just made me feel quite valued as a member of just that little group of people who were playing Jenga; I felt like part of a team," he says. "Afterwards I felt so invigorated and hopeful in a way that I hadn't felt ever before".

To Combat Loneliness, Persistence is Key

After the first event, Oscar was sold. Since then, he's been attending almost all the events for the last three months. "I kept telling myself that if I keep on going, at least a couple of times a week, then inevitably I am going to make friends and I'm going to meet people that I'm going

to have deeper connections with". Each time Oscar has attended an event, he's felt a deeper sense of community and belonging. This has boosted his sense of well-being and chipped away at his feelings of loneliness. "I've wanted to soak up as much of it as I possibly could," Oscar says. Oscar's experience highlights significant research showing how impactful community interventions, like TGLFP, can be in [reducing feelings of loneliness](#) and enhancing an individual's well-being and sense of belonging within a community.

Even though TGLFP welcomes people who attend one-off events, the more you attend the events, the deeper this sense of belonging becomes. "There's maybe twenty or so regulars who I always expect to see at the events," Oscar says. This enhances his ability to connect meaningfully with the more regular members of the community, gravitating towards the people to whom he relates. "It's just that feeling of familiarity and dedication - I see that these people are also coming a lot too, and are enjoying it, therefore it feels just as right for them as it does for me; so, we must have something in common," Oscar says.

In a [recent partnership](#) as part of the "You've Got a Friend in Philly" campaign for the cheese-spread brand, Philadelphia - Friendship Expert and Evolutionary Psychologist at Oxford University, Robin Dunbar, revealed a formula to maintain a close friendship: nine minutes of connection a day – online or offline - or just over an hour a week. For every nine minutes missed, the quality of the friendship diminishes by 1%. This formula might sound easy, but Dunbar stresses that this habit needs to be sustained over 100 days to reap the benefits. Think about it: when was the last time you spoke to a friend every day for 100 days?

TGLFP events make this formula accessible, as all you need to do is show up consistently. "As I've kept going, I've started meeting people who I feel like I could be friends with," Oscar says. "They've just started inviting me to things externally, outside of TGLFP events, like seeing fireworks or going to a party," he says. The structure of events throughout the week makes it easier for members to get into the rhythm of attending regularly, which is critical to developing strong friendships, Gradon adds. "On a Wednesday night, you look forward to the Friday Social, then the Sunday walks kind of feel like a wholesome debrief after the Friday nights," Oscar affirms.

Gradon compares the fast-paced and transient lifestyles that young people in London are living to a fast food diet. Like a takeaway coffee or a McDonald's wrap of the day, "attending one event and never going back can give you a kick of satisfaction, but it doesn't feed a deeper desire to connect and find belonging," he says. "The strongest communities are made up of people who stay, who you recognise and have those shared memories with".

A Fun Place to Find Friendship

TGLFP is indirectly tackling the loneliness epidemic in the UK by focusing on fun and friendship. “What’s very special about TGLFP is that it’s a very welcoming environment and a nice group of people in their 20s and 30s,” Christian says. “The ice-breaker games at the start of the walk get everyone talking and having a good time – and this vibe continues until you leave the meetup. I keep coming back because I enjoy being outdoors, walking through areas with plenty of green spaces and chatting with friendly, like-minded people”.

Making the events a place where the community feels instantly “at home”, safe and able to be fully themselves is Gradon’s core value. “We often provide activities where people can express their creative and silly side - whether it’s through the games we play, the taskmaster-style and photo hunt events or the icebreakers we run at walks,” Gradon says. Just as Oscar felt at his first ever Jenga night, “the more people feel comfortable with each other and within the community, the more they’re able to be themselves at events,” Gradon notes.

The heavy stigma towards feeling lonely as a young adult makes the playful approach to these events especially important. Even though [young people in the UK are five times more at risk than those 65 and over to experience feelings of chronic loneliness](#), loneliness can be seen as a weakness, or personal failure, which can prevent young adults from seeking help. “[The stigma] may be particularly powerful among young people where high value is commonly placed on sociability and social success,” Dr Helen MacIntyre, Head of Evidence at [Campaign To End Loneliness](#) comments. “This provides a challenge for targeting support at those young people who need it - meaning that short-term loneliness can become chronic”.

The way Gradon tiptoes mindfully around the topic of loneliness makes the meetups less intimidating than say, a group workshop aimed to combat loneliness in your twenties and thirties. Gradon notes that “this is why [TGLFP] works: By joining TGLFP, you’re not labelling yourself as lonely. The reverse of feeling lonely is building friendships, which is what we’re focusing on in every event”.

The Future of The Project

Gradon wants TGLFP to provide young adults with a straightforward answer of where to go when they’re feeling lonely and want to make friends. It’s for this exact reason that Gradon emphasises the importance that the walks, activities and events are free for whoever signs

up. “We shouldn’t be putting up more barriers to connection,” he says. “As soon as you start charging, people become customers rather than community members”.

After working what essentially felt like two full-time jobs, Gradon quit his role at Pally in May 2023. Since then, he’s been working full-time - earning just enough money to keep him afloat - to grow the TGLFP community through partnerships and funding he raises during the weekdays. Ultimately, he’s sacrificing the stability of a 9-5 income to keep events, taking place on evenings and weekends, free. To assist with his workload, Gradon has a team of six organisers who help him host events throughout the week. However, as the only full-timer, Gradon does most of the hosting of events and daily admin; hoping the widespread social impact of the project will eventually enable him to employ more staff.

As a result of David’s efforts, the way Oscar felt in September, and how he feels now, are as different as night and day. TGLFP has been transformational in Oscar’s self-confidence over the past few months and, recently, he has started working with David to help make sure others feel safe and welcome at TGLFP events. “I noticed how much it comes naturally to me when I’m in a social setting with a group of new people to take on a prominent role making sure everyone feels included and asking everyone how they are,” he says. The regular, age-appropriate meetups have not only enabled Oscar to conquer his feelings of loneliness but have inspired him to use his experience to help others. He’s come away with more than just friendship, but a sense of belonging and purpose. In a city where loneliness is more common than we like to think, TGLFP acts as an anchor for young adults to make meaningful connections - and keep them, too.

*name has been changed to protect their identity.
