

Cultivating good friends creates good longevity.

Americans more than ever have no friends. We evolved to live in small groups — not just with blood-related kin, but with friends. Friends worked together to secure resources, seek justice, and protect each other. The more cooperative and supportive the group was, the more likely it was to survive and pass on its bond-seeking genes. The result is that we are wired to want close, enduring friendships.

- The number of friends people have peaks around age 25, but then substantially drops around age 30, when work and the nuclear family take over.
- Working longer hours and we are more likely to move for work than ever before.
- The last decade has seen a startling further fall in the number and quality of friendships.

We have fewer close friends. According to the May 2021 American Perspectives Survey of over 2,000 adults,

- under 3% in the 1990s now up to 12% of Americans report having no friends.
- In UK the number of young adults who report having only one or no close friends jumped from 7% to nearly 20% between 2012 and 2021.

We are not nourishing our friendships

We are spending substantially less time with the few friends we have.

- prior to 2013 people spent just under 7 hours per week with friends, now we are spending less than 3 hours per week with close friends.

Loneliness is deadly

58% of the US are considered lonely a recent study by Cigna

People without good friends die younger.

- Loneliness reduced longevity as much as severe obesity or smoking 15 cigarettes a day.
- Those without close friends were nearly four times more likely to die from their cancer. (A study of over 2,800 nurses diagnosed with breast cancer)

Finally, being lonely just feels bad. When around friends, your brain releases “feel-good” neurotransmitters like dopamine and serotonin. When you feel lonely, your brain pays more attention to negative things, like social threats and rejection. Feeling socially excluded activates the same brain regions involved in physical pain. In fact, loneliness predicts pain, fatigue, and depression.

5 Steps for friendships

First, don't get overwhelmed by thinking that you need dozens of close friends. Around three is probably enough to buffer against stress and improve well-being, and some psychologists suggest that around five is the limit for “shoulder-to-cry-on” closeness.

Second, realize that making friends will take multiple interactions over time. Unlike family relatives, developing and maintaining friendships requires sustained contact. One famous study found that a top predictor of friendship formation was merely how close people lived together (and by extension how

often they saw each other), regardless of shared interests or other personal factors. Another recent study estimates that at least 11 interactions over five months are needed to solidify a friendship.

Third, because repeated contact is important, consider joining an organization or activity that meets regularly. Religious attendance and volunteer work, for example, have been shown to improve well-being, in part because they facilitate social connections.

Fourth, given that this will be a commitment, be a “thoughtful shopper.” Focus on people you really connect with. We are drawn to people like ourselves — that is, those who are of a similar education level, age, and occupation and with whom we have shared interests. But don’t rule out getting to know people outside your typical social circle. A study of Chinese adolescents, for example, found that making friends from different neighborhoods boosted well-being, especially for men.

Fifth as you spend time together, sprinkle in some self-disclosure. Sharing information about your experiences, thoughts, and beliefs boosts perceived empathy and warmth. In turn, this leads potential friends to share more about themselves and to like you more. (Just don’t overdo it: Disclosing highly intimate information early on or constantly referencing yourself can backfire.)

If you are among the millions of adults suffering from a personal friendship recession, don’t fret. There are likely many others also in need of a good friend, and with some effort you can find each other. In the meantime, don’t forget to enjoy your weak ties too. Social interactions with mere acquaintances or even strangers — say, chatting with coworkers at a meeting or random passengers on the bus — can have a surprisingly large positive impact on our well-being.

<https://bigthink.com/neuropsych/americans-no-friends/>