Reach Out First

What the Research Says About Friendship, Loneliness and Making Contact

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2026 Edition | Free chapters 1 to 3

Chapter 1: Why Connection Counts

Most of us treat friendships as a nice extra. One of the largest reviews in the field asks whether they are more than that.

WHAT THE REVIEW DID

The authors point out that the quality and quantity of a person's social relationships has been linked to mental health and also to illness and death. They set out to find how far social relationships influence the risk of dying, which aspects of relationships predict it best, and which factors change the risk. They pooled the data from studies that followed people over time (Holt-Lunstad, Smith and Layton, 2010, PLOS Medicine).

WHAT THEY FOUND

Across 148 studies with 308,849 participants, the average effect size was an odds ratio of 1.50 (95 percent confidence interval 1.42 to 1.59). The authors read this as a 50 percent greater likelihood of survival for people with stronger social relationships. The result held across age, sex, initial health status, cause of death and length of follow-up. The authors conclude that the influence of social relationships on the risk of death is comparable with well-established risk factors for death.

WHAT TO TAKE FROM THIS

Three points. First, the pool is very large: 148 studies and over 300,000 people. Second, the link was consistent across groups, not limited to one age or sex. Third, the authors rank it alongside other well-known risk factors. They do not say a friend can replace medical care.

LIMITS

The abstract we read is cut off partway through its results, so we say nothing about which kinds of social measurement predicted best. These studies observed people over time. They show that stronger relationships went with longer survival; they do not by themselves show that adding a friend would extend your life. This book is not medical advice, and nothing here is a promise about health.

HABITS TO TRY

These are practical suggestions, not findings from the review.

Count your contacts. For a week, note who you spoke to, in person or by phone.

Pick one person to keep in touch with. Choose someone you would like to know better.

Schedule it. A standing call or a weekly walk is easier to keep than a vague plan.

Keep it small. One short contact a day is more doable than a big meet-up once a month.

Notice what helps. Write one line on how you felt afterwards.

A WORKED EXAMPLE (INVENTED FOR PRACTICE)

A man who works from home realises he spoke to nobody on three days last week. He puts a ten-minute call with his brother in the diary every Sunday and a coffee with a neighbour once a fortnight. After a month he notes that he looks forward to Sundays. It is his own record and not a research result.

PRACTICE EXERCISE

Write the names of three people you could contact this week. Choose one and send a short message today.

KEY POINTS

A pooled analysis of 148 studies with 308,849 participants found stronger social relationships went with a 50 percent greater likelihood of survival (odds ratio 1.50). The authors compare it with other well-known risk factors. It shows a link, not a guarantee.

Chapter 2: Friendship and Wellbeing

If connection matters, what is it about friendship that counts? A systematic review looked at adult friendship and wellbeing.

WHAT THE REVIEW DID

The authors reviewed 38 research articles published between 2000 and 2019. They used the PERMA theory of wellbeing, which breaks wellbeing into components, so they could look at several parts of it and not only at happiness (Pezirkianidis, Galanaki, Raftopoulou, Moraitou and Stalikas, 2023, Frontiers in Psychology).

WHAT THEY FOUND

In general, adult friendship predicted wellbeing or at least went with it. Friendship quality and socialising with friends predicted wellbeing levels. The number of friends, how friends reacted when someone shared good news, support for a friend's autonomy and efforts to keep the friendship going were also positively linked with wellbeing. The authors report that several things sat in the middle of this link: efforts to maintain the friendship, friendship quality, a personal sense of uniqueness, perceived mattering, satisfaction of basic psychological needs and subjective vitality.

WHAT TO TAKE FROM THIS

The pattern points to quality and effort as well as numbers. Two items stand out for everyday use: how a friend reacts when you share good news, and the effort put into keeping a friendship going. Feeling that you matter to a friend was one of the things that linked friendship to wellbeing.

LIMITS

The authors say there are gaps in the research: for some parts of wellbeing, findings were non-existent, sparse, contradictory, fragmentary, or for specific groups only. The abstract does not give effect sizes or the countries involved. A link between friendship and wellbeing does not show that friendship causes wellbeing, and this review covers research up to 2019.

HABITS TO TRY

These are practical suggestions, not findings from the review.

Respond to good news. When a friend shares something good, ask questions and show interest.

Keep a friendship going on purpose. Send a message, set a date, remember an occasion.

Let a friend decide. Support their choices and do not insist on yours.

Say what they mean to you. Tell a friend why they matter.

Spend time together. The review linked socialising with friends to wellbeing.

A WORKED EXAMPLE (INVENTED FOR PRACTICE)

A friend tells you she has been offered a promotion. You ask three questions: what is the job, what excites her, and how will you celebrate? You do not change the subject to yourself. Later you send a card. The example shows the habit and is not a study.

PRACTICE EXERCISE

Next time a friend tells you something good, ask three questions before you say anything about yourself.

KEY POINTS

A review of 38 articles found adult friendship generally went with wellbeing. Friendship quality, time together, effort to keep the friendship going and feeling that you matter were among the linked factors. The review notes gaps in the research.

Chapter 3: The Power of Weak Ties

Close friends matter, but most people spend most of their day among acquaintances. Does that count? A set of studies tested it.

WHAT THE STUDIES DID

The authors note that psychology had mainly studied interactions with close friends and family. They tested whether wellbeing is also related to interactions with weak ties, meaning acquaintances. Study 1 compared students' wellbeing on days with more and fewer interactions with classmates. In Studies 2A and 2B the authors widened the scope to all daily interactions, with both strong and weak ties (Sandstrom and Dunn, 2014, Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin).

WHAT THEY FOUND

In Study 1, students felt greater happiness and a greater sense of belonging on days when they interacted with more classmates than usual. When all daily interactions were included, weak ties were again related to social and emotional wellbeing. The authors conclude that even interactions with the more peripheral members of our social networks contribute to wellbeing.

WHAT TO TAKE FROM THIS

The finding is about days. On days with more contact with acquaintances, the same person tended to feel happier and to feel they belonged more. That points toward the small interactions: a nod, a chat with a neighbour, a word with a colleague.

LIMITS

The abstract does not give the number of participants or the size of the effects. Study 1 was of students and classmates. The design links days of more contact with better mood; it cannot show that the contact caused the feeling, as a happy person might also chat more. It does not say weak ties replace close friends.

HABITS TO TRY

These are practical suggestions, not findings from the studies.

Greet people. A hello to the barista, a neighbour or a classmate counts as a contact.

Ask one small question. "How was your weekend?"

Use the places you already go. The gym, the shop, the school gate.

Remember a name. Using it shows you noticed.

Count the small contacts. A tally at the end of the day shows how many you had.

A WORKED EXAMPLE (INVENTED FOR PRACTICE)

A student decides to say hello to two classmates he does not know each day and ask one question. At the end of the week he has spoken to nine people. He notes that he felt less out of place on Thursday and Friday. This is a record of one person's week.

PRACTICE EXERCISE

Tomorrow, have three short exchanges with people you do not know well. At night, write how many you had and how you felt.

KEY POINTS

Studies of students' daily lives found more happiness and belonging on days with more interactions with classmates, and weak ties were related to wellbeing across all daily interactions. The abstract gives no sample size or effect sizes.

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